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Providence Lost: Natural and Urban Landscapes in H. P. Lovecraft's Fiction

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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December 2020  
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## **Abstract**

S. T. Joshi, the preeminent scholar of weird fiction, considers H. P. Lovecraft a “topographical realist,” noting that, in his later fiction, Lovecraft creates realistic and painstakingly detailed settings. In “Providence Lost: Natural and Urban Landscapes in H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction,” I explore the significance of Lovecraft’s topographical realism and trace its evolution through Lovecraft’s career. I argue that Lovecraft’s early fiction, the tales, that is, that he wrote from 1917 to 1924 under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe and Lord Dunsany, pays little attention to the natural landscape, though Lovecraft does, in story after story, allude to fabulous, semi-mythical cities. His method changed, quite suddenly, in 1925 when Lovecraft, impoverished, unemployed, and alone in New York City, started to hate his new home. Painfully aware of his surroundings and the sense of alienation they inspired, Lovecraft wrote three stories about the city, “The Horror at Red Hook,” “He,” and “Cool Air,” all of which feature settings far more detailed than his earlier efforts at landscape description. After he returned to Providence, the city of his birth, Lovecraft ceased describing Dunsanian cityscapes. Instead, he began to write about nightmarish cities located beneath the sea or on alien planets. Lovecraft’s approach to the natural landscape also began to change, resulting in a series of passionate descriptions that would seem to disrupt the mood he was trying to establish. From this, one might be tempted to conclude that Lovecraft’s fiction evolved in a linear direction, becoming increasingly antagonistic to the urban landscape, but his last work of original fiction, “The Haunter of the Dark,” returns to Providence, which it describes in loving terms. Having examined the evolution of Lovecraft’s approach to natural and urban landscapes, I argue that these passages, far from being gratuitous descriptions, change how we think of Lovecraft as a person, how we interpret his fiction, and how we understand his philosophical beliefs.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank S. T. Joshi, whose research into the life and works of H. P. Lovecraft inspires my own, and the members of my thesis committee, whom I can never repay for their mentorship, but whom I will always appreciate.

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## I. Introduction:

### Lovecraftian Description

*I entered, charmed, and from a cobwebbed heap  
Took up the nearest tome and thumbed it through,  
Trembling at curious words that seemed to keep  
Some secret, monstrous if one only knew.<sup>1</sup>*

As H. P. Lovecraft realized, when telling a weird tale, setting matters. That is, if the story is to succeed, if it is to excite “in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers,” it usually needs more than a frightening monster: it needs a frightening *place*.<sup>2</sup> What, after all, is a ghost story without its haunted house or a Gothic novel without its dilapidated castle? These settings, shopworn though they may be, serve a vital purpose in weird fiction, for its practitioners cannot simply bombard their readers with a sudden and unexpected burst of horrific imagery. Taken out of context, the old woman in “Madam Crowl’s Ghost,” who moves “like a thing on wires,” would be ridiculous, the ghost in “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad,” who becomes entangled in a bedsheet, laughable.<sup>3</sup> As Lovecraft argues in “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” writers must carefully and deliberately prepare their readers for the incursion of the weird and the macabre by wearing down their skepticism, their stubborn resistance to the implausible: “Inconceivable events and conditions have a special handicap to overcome, and this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story except that touching on the one

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1. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Book,” in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 80-1.

2. H. P. Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000), 23.

3. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, “Madam Crowl’s Ghost,” in *Madam Crowl’s Ghost and Other Stories*, ed. M. R. James (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 9.

given marvel.”<sup>4</sup> Many writers use realistic settings to accomplish this very goal, to mislead their readers into thinking that their tales occur in the real world, thereby weakening their resistance to the “inconceivable events and conditions” to come. Most of J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s stories, for instance, begin with a lengthy description of the setting, which is often an old but stately manor house surrounded by a dark forest. Similar passages, which both create verisimilitude and foster an atmosphere of dread, an awareness that, at any moment, something awful may happen, appear in the works of M. R. James, E. F. Benson, and H. Russell Wakefield. Indeed, detailed descriptions of familiar but threatening places appear throughout the genre and, to some extent, characterize it. And yet, even more so than Le Fanu or James or Benson or Wakefield or any other writer of weird fiction, Lovecraft relies upon detailed descriptions of the setting to foster verisimilitude and inspire dread, but I would argue that these descriptions also do much, much more.

When reading Lovecraft, one cannot help but notice how detailed these descriptions are.<sup>5</sup> Unlike, say, Ramsey Campbell, whose Liverpool is shrouded in a dreamlike haze, or M. R. James, whose East England is suggested by a few short lines, Lovecraft slowly and methodically limns realistic portraits of natural and urban landscapes, in the process creating unusually lifelike

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4. H. P. Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, *Literary Criticism* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004), 177.

5. Lovecraft himself recognized that his approach to setting, specifically what I call “landscape description,” differed from the approach taken by other writers, including his idol, Edgar Allan Poe: “You’ll notice that although my yarns reach out into the nameless abyss, they always take off from the springboard of a realistic setting. Poe has his haunted regions nameless, and peopled by mysterious beings with unknown pasts—but I make mine minutely typical of old New England, and give my characters (by implication and sometimes in detail) characteristic New England genealogies. I don’t weave dreams absolutely out of nothing, (i.e., out of material wholly in the subconscious) but need the spur of some actual scene or object or incident to set me off.” H. P. Lovecraft to Maurice W. Moe, Providence, March 26, 1932, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and James Turner, vol. 4, 1932-1934 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976), 31-2.

worlds. In *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, for instance, he lovingly recreates his beloved hometown on the printed page:

His home was a great Georgian mansion atop the well-nigh precipitous hill that rises just east of the river; and from the rear windows of its rambling wings he could look dizzily out over all the clustered spires, domes, roofs, and skyscraper summits of the lower town to the purple hills of the countryside beyond. Here he was born, and from the lovely classic porch of the double-bayed brick facade his nurse had first wheeled him in his carriage; past the little white farmhouse of two hundred years before that the town had long ago overtaken, and on toward the stately colleges along the shady, sumptuous street, whose old square brick mansions and smaller wooden houses with narrow, heavy-columned Doric porches dreamed solid and exclusive amidst their generous yards and gardens.<sup>6</sup>

Such descriptions, the one cited above being but one of many, differ fundamentally from those found in other weird tales. Having read *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, one can do more than simply visualize Providence or picture a series of discrete images: Lovecraft provides so much information that the reader can mentally reconstruct the city, creating a three-dimensional model that includes the “old square brick mansions and smaller wooden houses” of College Hill, the “clustered spires, domes, roofs, and skyscraper summits” of downtown, and the “purple hills” of the surrounding countryside. Of course, other weird writers, such as E. F. Benson, sometimes provide lengthy descriptions of their settings, but such descriptions clearly exist, as discussed above, to create the illusion of a believable world or to contribute to an atmosphere of dread. They serve the plot, in other words. Lovecraft’s descriptions, by comparison, do not. From the reader’s perspective, it is as if Lovecraft, who is ostensibly writing a weird tale, has paused to pen a travelogue, an account of a particular place he wants the reader to see and know. At these times, the plot seems secondary, if not wholly forgotten, a state of affairs readers have not failed to notice.

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6. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 221-2.



Many of my own students, who read and commented on three of Lovecraft stories in the spring of 2019, lambasted these descriptions, which they considered flaws, pointless and longwinded digressions of interest only to the author.<sup>7</sup> Tiffany More, for instance, in her written response to “The Haunter of the Dark,” claimed that Lovecraft’s long, detailed descriptions detract from the story itself: “The text was very long and difficult to read. In higher level writing, it is important to be descriptive, but in this case, the writer overdid it.” Rebecca Eaton, who read the same story, concurred, noting that “his style is so dense and descriptive [that] it takes a certain kind of mind and determination to get through it.” In her opinion, by slowing down the pace, Lovecraft’s lengthy descriptions ultimately spoil the story itself and turn the reading experience into a chore: “I didn’t think it was all that worth it to try and spend so much time getting through the descriptions and setting. It dragged on and on for me, and as a storyteller and English major, that says quite a bit.” Another student, this time a young man commenting on “The Colour out of Space,” described Lovecraft’s writing as “too descriptive” and “redundant at times.” Like the others, he viewed these descriptive passages as disruptive and claimed that, as a writer, Lovecraft favors description over plot: “I felt like he spent too much time focusing on some things instead of getting back to the story. . . . I got bored in the beginning when he talked about the heath too much and felt like he should get straight to the point in the story. . . .” Almost every student, at some point, alluded to Lovecraft’s “very descriptive style,” though not

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7. A total of thirty-three students, almost all of whom were freshmen, participated in this study, which, in exchange for extra credit, required them to read one of three randomly assigned short stories: “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Colour out of Space,” or “The Haunter of the Dark.” After reading and annotating the story, students wrote a “personal response essay” in class and answered, in writing, a series of questions about the text and their reaction to it. Although the questionnaires distributed to the class asked for demographic data, such as gender, ethnicity, and age, they did not ask for the students’ names. To avoid confusion when comparing written responses, I have assigned each student a fake name, which reflects that student’s stated gender. The letter from the Institutional Review Board approving this study can be found in the Appendix.

everyone, by any means, perceived it so negatively. Several students, though acknowledging that they were initially bored or confused by Lovecraft's lengthy descriptive passages, argued that they ultimately enhance the story. Anna Lopez, for instance, claimed that "at first, ["The Colour out of Space"] was very boring. It took some time for me to actually get into it. I enjoyed the details because I was able to paint a picture [in] my head which I really like. I feel as though if it wouldn't have been so descriptive, I wouldn't have enjoyed it." Even those, in other words, who learned to appreciate Lovecraft's descriptive approach to storytelling, initially found it dull, disruptive, and unnecessary.<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, critics have been far more appreciative of Lovecraft's writing style, but they, too, seem to regard his descriptions of the setting as interesting, but structurally irrelevant, digressions.<sup>9</sup> In other words, those abnormally detailed descriptions that appear in Lovecraft's later works, specifically *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Colour out of Space," "The Dunwich Horror," "The Whisperer in Darkness," and "The Haunter of the Dark," reflect

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8. When discussing Lovecraft's unusually descriptive style, students did not, and were not asked to, focus specifically on his approach to setting. However, it is the *landscape*, specifically, that Lovecraft describes in detail. In terms of characters, their appearances, their mannerisms, and their backgrounds, Lovecraft is anything but detailed.

9. Too complex to summarize here, the debate over Lovecraft's writing style is far from resolved. Edmund Wilson, one of the first mainstream critics to notice Lovecraft, ridicules his style in his 1947 essay "Tales of the Marvelous and the Ridiculous." In it, he labels Lovecraft's tales "hack-work," claiming that "the only real horror in most of these fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art." More recently, Stephen King has claimed, no doubt correctly, that "most editors regard the style as outdated and bankrupt." And yet, Lovecraft is not without his defenders. S. T. Joshi has written about Lovecraft's style at length, and though he acknowledges the excesses of Lovecraft's early tales, he concludes that "by and large, Lovecraft had by 1924 harnessed his style to the aesthetic purposes he had set for himself—specifically, the creation of atmosphere and the maintenance of a mood of ever-increasing cumulative horror." Wilson, "Tales of the Marvelous and the Ridiculous," in *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980), 47; King, "The Horror Market Writer and the Ten Bears: A True Story," in *Secret Window: Essays and Fiction on the Craft of Writing* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 2000), 16; Joshi, *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Wildside Press, 1999), 251.

Lovecraft's attachment to place and his own unique style, but they do not, in and of themselves, affect how readers interpret the story.<sup>10</sup> They are noteworthy, perhaps even fascinating, but not necessarily important. In his discussion of "The Haunter of the Dark," W. Scott Poole, for instance, simply notes that "the description of place and architecture that plays such a prominent role in the story becomes a love letter to Providence, an altogether fitting final statement of the author's romance with the city."<sup>11</sup> Poole is not wrong, but he does not consider how the inclusion of a "love letter to Providence" might affect the story itself. From his perspective, it is an aside, beautifully written and innately charming, but nothing more. S. T. Joshi, it seems, would concur. In his biography of Lovecraft, he concludes that "The Haunter of the Dark," which contains "only hints of the cosmic," is "notable chiefly for its vivid evocation of Providence."<sup>12</sup> Like Poole, Joshi cannot help but notice how detailed, how precise and realistic, this setting is, but he, too, does not examine how the inclusion of this description changes the text and the meaning readers extract from it. Elsewhere, such as in his introduction to *An Epicure in the Terrible*, Joshi acknowledges Lovecraft's ability to "depict the reality of the mundane landscape," an approach to setting Joshi calls "topographical realism," yet he inadvertently downplays its significance.<sup>13</sup>

A means to an end, Lovecraft's painstakingly detailed recreations of the natural and urban

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10. Elsewhere, I label the unusually long and detailed descriptions of the natural and urban landscape that appear in four of these stories, specifically *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Dunwich Horror," "The Whisperer in Darkness," and "The Haunter of the Dark," Lovecraft's "Gratuitous Descriptions." Though "The Colour out of Space" also contains a lengthy description of the natural landscape, the plot clearly calls for such an approach, and as a result, it does not seem gratuitous.

11. W. Scott Poole, *In the Mountains of Madness: The Life and Extraordinary Afterlife of H. P. Lovecraft* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2016), 177.

12. S. T. Joshi, *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft*, vol. 2 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 960-1.

13. S. T. Joshi, introduction to *An Epicure in the Terrible: A Centennial Anthology of Essays in Honor of H. P. Lovecraft*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 30.

landscape exist merely to facilitate “the perception that ‘something which could not possibly happen’ is actually happening.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Joshi is correct: these descriptions do, without a doubt, foster verisimilitude, but they also deserve a deeper analysis. After all, if they exist for no other reason, why does Lovecraft devote so much time and space to them? Are they no different than the much shorter, much less detailed descriptions penned by other weird writers for the same purpose? If, as Joshi claims, “realism, then, is not a goal but a function,” why does Lovecraft, as my students noted, sometimes make the plot subservient to the setting?<sup>15</sup> Perhaps because literary critics have such long attention spans, they have not noticed what my students detected immediately: the setting matters—inordinately—to Lovecraft. Indeed, as Lovecraft’s career progressed, its creation or re-creation seemed to matter more and more. If that is so, a number of questions arise. How, specifically, is Lovecraft’s approach to landscape description unique? How did it evolve over the course of his career, and what does its evolution tell us about Lovecraft and his beliefs? What purpose, moreover, aside from the obvious, does it serve in his work? How, that is, does it affect how readers understand or feel about his stories? Such questions, I would argue, will ultimately add to our knowledge of Lovecraft, his fiction, and even the environment itself.

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14. Joshi, introduction to *An Epicure in the Terrible*, 30. Rebecca Janicker concurs; she argues that the “use of detailed regionalist writing helps to place the reader firmly within the narrative. The move from realistic to unrealistic space, characteristic of works of the fantastic, helps to explore fundamental fears.” “New England Narratives: Space and Place in the Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft,” *Extrapolation* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 66.

15. Joshi, introduction to *An Epicure in the Terrible*, 30.

## II. Landscape Description:

### A Formalist Approach

*Ten miles from Arkham I had struck the trail  
That rides the cliff-edge over Boynton Beach,  
And hoped that just at sunset I could reach  
The crest that looks on Innsmouth in the vale.*<sup>16</sup>

And yet, some might argue that Lovecraft's approach to setting, which results in his meticulous re-creations of the natural and urban landscape, conforms to well established traditions. Rebecca Janicker, for instance, claims that Lovecraft is a "regionalist," a writer, in other words, whose work "builds up the identity of a rural area such as New England by utilising local geography and landmarks, embracing local values, establishing local ideas about identity and so on."<sup>17</sup> In that sense, Lovecraft's fiction follows in the footsteps of other New England regionalists and, as such, reflects "American Gothic themes of the harshness of the frontier experience."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, according to Janicker, who draws upon the work of Leo Marx and Roderick Frazier Nash, Lovecraft, like his New England forebears, "fears the deep malevolence of the land itself."<sup>19</sup> As thought provoking as Janicker's conclusion is, it overlooks "The Whisperer in Darkness," not to mention a great many of his letters, poems, and travelogues, all of which celebrate the New England landscape. Nor does her thesis account for the radical change observable in Lovecraft's oeuvre over the course of his lifetime. While many of his early works, such as "The Picture in the House," which Lovecraft wrote in 1920, do indeed employ a "number of key American Gothic themes," such as a "fear of the return of past fearful events; events tied specifically to bad spaces in the form of degenerate towns and isolated rural

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16. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Port," in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 83.

17. Janicker, "New England Narratives," 57.

18. Janicker, "New England Narratives," 60.

19. Janicker, "New England Narratives," 69.

communities,” Lovecraft’s depiction of rural communities and their backwoods inhabitants becomes increasingly positive throughout the second half of the 1920s, a trend that peaks in 1930, when he finished “The Whisperer in Darkness.”<sup>20</sup> One can only consider Lovecraft a regional writer in the American Gothic mode, in other words, if one overlooks the vast majority of his early works, which display little interest in the landscape, as well as some of his most characteristic later works.<sup>21</sup> While one may, as Janicker does, form a conclusion based on one or two of Lovecraft’s tales, a comprehensive examination of Lovecraft’s approach to setting, which identifies the stylistic choices underlying Lovecraft’s descriptions of the landscape, demonstrates just how much he differs from his peers.<sup>22</sup>

To distinguish different approaches, we can employ a series of binaries, antithetical pairs which affect a work’s structure, style, or narration. In terms of structure, for instance, descriptions may be either *abbreviated* or *extensive*, short or long. The passage cited above from *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, which Lovecraft wrote in 1927, demonstrates just how extensive Lovecraft’s descriptions can be. Equally long descriptions of the natural landscape appear in many of Lovecraft’s later works, including “The Colour out of Space,” “The Dunwich Horror,” and “The Whisperer in Darkness,” completed in 1927, 1928, and 1930 respectively.

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20. Janicker, “New England Narratives,” 66.

21. Scholars, not surprisingly, differ in how they categorize Lovecraft’s works. In *A Subtler Magick*, Joshi divides Lovecraft’s fiction into five categories: early fiction, Dunsanian tales, regional horror, and major fiction, which he further subdivides into two stages, the first stage beginning with “The Call of Cthulhu” in 1926 and the second with *At the Mountains of Madness* in 1931. For the purposes of this essay, I am adhering to a much simpler schema, which divides Lovecraft’s work into two categories: early and late. The first category covers the years 1917 to 1924, the second 1926 to 1935, the turning point, the transformative year, being 1925, Lovecraft’s first year alone in New York.

22. Janicker examines only two of Lovecraft’s stories: “The Colour out of Space” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth.”

Lovecraft's early works, by comparison, typically contain abbreviated descriptions. In "Polaris," for example, written in 1918, the narrator describes the landscape in passing:

And in the autumn of the year, when the winds from the north curse and whine, and the red-leaved trees of the swamp mutter things to one another in the small hours of the morning under the horned waning moon, I sit by the casement . . . while Charles' Wain lumbers up from behind the vapour-soaked swamp trees that sway in the night wind. . . .<sup>23</sup>

As this example indicates, descriptions may be either *separate* from the narrative or *embedded* in it. That is, the narrator may pause the story to describe the setting, which is what happens in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, or he or she may, while telling the story, occasionally allude to the landscape, dropping details, here and there, while relating information crucial to the plot. Of course, most stories will, to some extent, blend the two, but Lovecraft's later works display a marked preference for separate or distinct descriptions.<sup>24</sup> Our third binary, which is closely related to the first two, concerns relevancy: a description may be either *relevant* to the plot or *gratuitous*. In "The Room in the Tower," for example, E. F. Benson carefully describes the house where the action will take place as well as the garden outside. Without this information, the story itself would be confusing, disorienting. The plot demands that the setting be described. Such descriptions are, in that sense, relevant, which is what we, as readers and critics, would expect them to be. And yet, in this, Lovecraft differs. The descriptions that appear in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Dunwich Horror," "The Whisperer in Darkness," and "The Haunter of the Dark" do not advance the plot in any way and are, therefore, gratuitous—or seem to be.

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23. H. P. Lovecraft, "Polaris," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 65.

24. Lovecraft's preference for "separate" descriptions, which, by nature, pause the narrative, contributes to the motionless quality of his work, a trait that David E. Schultz has noted: "I think Lovecraft's stories are like paintings in that they are static: there's no motion in them, no linear getting from one place to another. At the beginning of the story, you have a pretty sketchy idea of what will happen throughout the story as revealed in the ending." "What Is the Cthulhu Mythos? A Panel Discussion," *Lovecraft Studies* 14 (Spring 1987): 22.

Though the effect may be subtle, other binaries affect the work's style; that is, they can change how readers picture the landscapes being described. Just as Vincent Van Gogh and Peter Bruegel the Elder depict the Dutch countryside in very different ways, authors can also manipulate how readers envision landscapes by using different descriptive tools. Descriptions may, for instance, be either *generalized* or *specific*. An author can, in other words, either convey a general, somewhat vague sense of what a place is like or may describe specific locations. Lovecraft's prose-poem "Nyarlathotep," for instance, which Lovecraft finished in 1920, takes place in a city, "the great, the old, the terrible city of unnumbered crimes," while his "Cool Air," which he wrote six years later, takes place on West Fourteenth Street in Manhattan.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, settings may be either *named* or *nameless*. Edgar Allan Poe quite famously describes the setting for "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a "dreary tract of country." A devotee of Poe, Lovecraft uses nameless settings for many of his early tales, such as "The Tomb," which takes place somewhere in New England, and "The Statement of Randolph Carter," which takes place somewhere in the South, presumably Florida. More importantly perhaps, when describing the setting, a writer, much like a photographer, may either zoom in or out, the resulting image being either a close-up or a long shot, its scope *narrow* or *broad*. Consider, for instance, the following description from Arthur Machen's *The Three Impostors*:

I saw under a grey sky a country that was still all mystery. The long, lovely valley, with the river winding in and out below, crossed in mid-vision by a mediaeval bridge of vaulted and buttressed stone, the clear presence of the rising ground beyond, and the woods that I had only seen in shadow the night before, seemed tinged with enchantment, and the soft breath of air that sighed in at the opened pane was like no other wind.... There was a rugged height crowned with dark firs, and in the distance I saw the white streak of a road that climbed and vanished into some un-imagined country.<sup>26</sup>

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25. H. P. Lovecraft, "Nyarlathotep," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 203.

26. Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007), 54-55.



Since the first-person narrator is looking out over the country, it is only fitting that he use a long lens, so to speak, to describe it. Counter examples appear throughout Lovecraft's later work, "The Haunter of the Dark," for instance, providing a memorable description of the protagonist's house, a "square Georgian house [with] a monitor roof, classic doorway with fan carving, small-paned windows, and all the other earmarks of early nineteenth-century workmanship."<sup>27</sup>

Two more binaries, the first distinguishing between degrees of realism and the second between the number of senses stimulated, also affect style. As befits a "topographical realist," Lovecraft depicts realistic settings in his later, most characteristic works, but many of his earlier tales, specifically those often labeled "Dunsanian," feature surreal or dreamlike settings.<sup>28</sup> The imaginary city of Celephaïs, for instance, with its "scented grasses and brilliant flowers" and its "marble walls," "bronze gates," and "onyx pavements," resembles nothing on Earth.<sup>29</sup> The city of Innsmouth, however, lies on the opposite end of the spectrum. Perhaps the most fully realized of Lovecraft's imaginary cities, it boasts a "grocery of the First National chain," a "dismal restaurant," a "drug store," and a "wholesale fish-dealer's office."<sup>30</sup> In addition to being either *surreal* or *realistic*, descriptions may also appeal to a single sense, usually sight, or to a number of senses. Lovecraft's descriptions, as the following example from "The Whisperer in Darkness" demonstrates, usually consist of a series of vivid images and completely lack sounds, smells, and textures:

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27. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Haunter of the Dark," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 3, 1931-1936 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 453.

28. Joshi, for instance, uses the term "Dunsanian" to describe the stories Lovecraft wrote from 1919 to 1921, though he does so reluctantly, noting that "in spite of Lovecraft's own testimony that his own creativity was completely submerged under the influence of Dunsany—many of his 'borrowings' are in relatively insignificant external details." *A Subtler Magick*, 72.

29. H. P. Lovecraft, "Celephaïs," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 187.

30. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Shadow over Innsmouth," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 3, 1931-1936 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 176.

Now and then I saw the blue Connecticut River gleaming in the sun, and after leaving Northfield we crossed it. Ahead loomed green and cryptical hills, and when the conductor came around I learned that I was at last in Vermont. . . . The train kept close to the river, and across in New Hampshire I could see the approaching slope of steep Wantastiquet, about which singular old legends cluster. Then streets appeared on my left, and a green island shewed in the stream on my right.<sup>31</sup>

The *visual* character of Lovecraft's descriptions becomes obvious when we compare them to one of Ramsey Campbell's *multisensory* passages. In "The Man in the Underpass," for instance, Campbell describes not just how the eponymous setting appears but the sounds and physical sensations associated with it as well: "In the roof [of the underpass] there are long lights like ice chopped up. . . . When you walk through you can hear the traffic overhead, it feels as if your ears are shaking when buses drive over. When we were little we used to stand in the middle so the buses would make our ears tickle."<sup>32</sup>

Our last set of binaries, which affect narration, can influence how perceptive readers view the narrator. When describing the landscape, the narrator's tone may be either *ecstatic* or *naturalistic*. M. R. James, for example, often prefers the latter. As a result, his narrators often seem detached or disinterested. The narrator of "Count Magnus," for instance, describes the manor house at the center of the tale quite simply:

The house itself stood in a park, and was protected—we should say grown up—with large old timber. Near it you found the walled garden, and then entered a close wood fringing one of the small lakes with which the whole country is pitted. Then came the wall of the demesne, and you climbed a steep knoll—a knob of rock lightly covered with soil—and on the top of this stood the church, fenced in with tall dark trees. It was a curious building to English eyes.<sup>33</sup>

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31. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 508.

32. Ramsey Campbell, "The Man in the Underpass," in *Alone with the Horrors: The Great Short Fiction of Ramsey Campbell, 1961-1991* (New York: Tor Books, 2005), 97.

33. M. R. James, "Count Magnus," in *Collected Ghost Stories*, ed. David Stuart Davies (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 55.

Lovecraft's later tales follow suit, but his early tales do not. Indeed, examples like the following, which is taken from "The Hound," display an excess of emotion: "So at last I stood again in that unwholesome churchyard where a pale winter moon cast hideous shadows, and leafless trees drooped sullenly to meet the withered, frosty grass and cracking slabs, and the ivied church pointed a jeering finger at the unfriendly sky. . . ." <sup>34</sup> A closely related binary distinguishes between *conscious* as opposed to *unconscious* descriptions, "conscious" descriptions being those in which the narrator is aware of his or her own sentiments. In *The Three Impostors*, for instance, Dyson describes not just the view from his window but his own reaction to it:

Look out into the street; you can catch a view of it if you crane your neck from that chair of yours. Is it not charming? The double row of lamps growing closer in the distance, the hazy outline of the plane-tree in the square, and the lights of the hansoms swimming to and fro, gliding and vanishing; and above, the sky all clear and blue and shining. <sup>35</sup>

Unlike Dyson, most narrators do not explicitly mention their own reactions, though, of course, readers may usually infer what a narrator's reaction is. When the unnamed narrator of Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space" describes the region west of Arkham as a place where "on the gentler slopes there are farms, ancient and rocky, with squat, moss-coated cottages brooding eternally over old New England secrets," <sup>36</sup> readers may glean his unease from his word choice, but the narrator himself does not comment on his own reaction, being, in a sense, unconscious of it. As the two quotes just mentioned demonstrate, descriptions may be either *verbal* or *literary*. That is, they may or may not be conveyed through dialogue. Lovecraft's work, which features very little dialogue, prefers the latter approach. Indeed, there is not one example in Lovecraft's entire corpus in which the author uses a conversation to describe the setting.

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34. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Hound," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 347.

35. Machen, *The Three Impostors*, 99.

36. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Colour out of Space," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 367.

Lastly, when describing the landscape, the narrator must choose which elements to include. Possible choices include topography, vegetation, wildlife, meteorology, astronomy, architecture, infrastructure, and labor.<sup>37</sup> Consider, for instance, the celebrated opening to “The Dunwich Horror,” which Lovecraft completed in 1928:

When a traveller in north central Massachusetts takes the wrong fork at the junction of the Aylesbury pike just beyond Dean’s Corners he comes upon a lonely and curious country. The ground gets higher, and the brier-bordered stone walls press closer and closer against the ruts of the dusty, curving road. The trees of the frequent forest belts seem too large, and the wild weeds, brambles, and grasses attain a luxuriance not often found in settled regions. At the same time the planted fields appear singularly few and barren; while the sparsely scattered houses wear a surprisingly uniform aspect of age, squalor, and dilapidation. Without knowing why, one hesitates to ask directions from the gnarled, solitary figures spied now and then on crumbling doorsteps or on the sloping, rock-strown meadows. Those figures are so silent and furtive that one feels somehow confronted by forbidden things, with which it would be better to have nothing to do. When a rise in the road brings the mountains in view above the deep woods, the feeling of strange uneasiness is increased. The summits are too rounded and symmetrical to give a sense of comfort and naturalness, and sometimes the sky silhouettes with especial clearness the queer circles of tall stone pillars with which most of them are crowned.

Gorges and ravines of problematical depth intersect the way, and the crude wooden bridges always seem of dubious safety. When the road dips again there are stretches of marshland that one instinctively dislikes, and indeed almost fears at evening when unseen whippoorwills chatter and the fireflies come out in abnormal profusion to dance to the raucous, creepily insistent rhythms of stridently piping bull-frogs. The thin,

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37. In his essay “Literary Composition,” Lovecraft, whose organized mind was well suited to a structuralist approach, touches on this very topic: “Descriptions of places must of course vary with the type of the place. Of natural scenery, the following elements are notable:

1. How beheld—at dawn, noon, evening, or night; by starlight or moonlight.
2. Natural features—flat or hilly; barren or thickly grown; kind of vegetation; trees, mountains, and rivers.
3. Works of man—cultivation, edifices, bridges, modifications of scenery produced by man.
4. Inhabitants and other forms of animal life.
5. Local customs and traditions.
6. Sounds—of water; forest; leaves; birds; barnyards; human beings; machinery.
7. Views—prospect on every side, and the place itself as seen from afar.
8. Analogies to other scenes, especially famous scenes.
9. History and associations.
10. Sensations produced by contemplating it.”

Parenthetically, note how Lovecraft characteristically lumps a region’s human inhabitants and its “other forms of animal life” together. “Literary Composition,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, *Literary Criticism* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004), 42.

shining line of the Miskatonic's upper reaches has an oddly serpent-like suggestion as it winds close to the feet of the domed hills among which it rises.<sup>38</sup>

As long as this description is, it focuses on just a few elements (specifically topography, vegetation, wildlife, and infrastructure) as the narrator's eye follows the road through the mountainous terrain into the forests. At first glance, such a description may seem complete, but on closer inspection, much is missing. The narrator makes no mention of meteorology, the clouds and the sky being wholly absent, nor does he mention the temperature or the climate as a whole. In other tales, Lovecraft pays far more attention to astronomy, to which he had been devoted since childhood, and architecture, but the emphasis here lies elsewhere.

What can we learn from such an approach to landscape description? Aside from giving us a vocabulary that we can use to analyze Lovecraft's descriptions, it reveals that Lovecraft's descriptions of the setting undergo a change over the course of his lifetime, the descriptions in his early works being comparatively abbreviated, embedded, relevant, generalized, unnamed, broad, surreal, and ecstatic. His later works, by comparison, are extensive, separate, gratuitous, specific, named, narrow, realistic, and naturalistic. Not only does his approach to landscape description change, in other words, it changes in almost every way, though, in general, Lovecraft's descriptions remain primarily visual, unconscious, and literary as opposed to multisensory, conscious, and verbal. Furthermore, this change happens surprisingly quickly. The brief description of Exham Priory that appears in "The Rats in the Walls," which Lovecraft completed in September 1923, conforms to the old style, as does "In the Vault," written two years later. And yet, as we will see, Lovecraft's New York tales ("The Horror at Red Hook," "He," and "Cool Air") all of which were written in 1925 or early 1926, contain the seeds of a

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38. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 417-8.

transformation that, in early 1927, would bear fruit, resulting in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and a bold new approach to landscape description.

### III. Gothic and Dunsanian Influences:

#### Lovecraft's Early Fiction (1917-1924)

*While miles below a maze of dome on dome  
And tower on tower beside a sea lies sprawled.  
Once more, he told me, I would stand enthralled  
On those old heights, and hear the far-off foam.*<sup>39</sup>

To fully appreciate the extent of this transformation and what it reveals about Lovecraft's changing perspective, one must first understand just how derivative and impersonal Lovecraft's early approach was. Indeed, Lovecraft's early works pay little attention to the landscape, being, at times, wholly lacking in the topographical realism that readers now associate with Lovecraft. This early period lasts from the summer of 1917 when Lovecraft, now an adult, resumed writing fiction to the fall of 1924.<sup>40</sup> During this time, two literary influences would shape Lovecraft's descriptions and mold his writing in general. Though they inspired Lovecraft, they may also have delayed his maturation, providing him with a voice when he should have been developing his own.

The first of these influences, which we might call the Gothic approach, uses detailed descriptions of nature to create an atmosphere of dread and impending horror. Within this tradition, nature is simply a means to an end, being not so much a theme as a device that serves

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39. H. P. Lovecraft, "Homecoming," in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 82.

40. As a child, Lovecraft wrote voluminously, producing an enormous amount of fiction, nonfiction, and verse, his earliest extant story being "The Little Glass Bottle," which he wrote in 1897, the year he turned seven years old. After 1908, however, he stopped writing fiction and devoted his creative energies to poetry. Encouraged by W. Paul Cook, a friend Lovecraft made through the amateur journalism movement, he resumed writing fiction in the summer of 1917, which marks that start of his adult literary career. Cook calls "Dagon," which Lovecraft wrote that July, "the first story of Howard P. Lovecraft after he found himself, and the first of all his writings undeniably worthy of preservation." "In Memoriam: Howard Phillips Lovecraft: Recollections, Appreciations, Estimates," in *Lovecraft Remembered*, ed. Peter Cannon (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1998), 147.

the narrative. Though the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, focuses solely on the eponymous castle and all but ignores the landscape, the novels of Ann Radcliffe provide abundant examples of this technique. Her influential novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for instance, begins with a detailed sketch of the French countryside:

On the pleasant banks of the Garonne, in the province of Gascony, stood, in the year 1584, the château of Monsieur St. Aubert. From its windows were seen the pastoral landscapes of Guienne and Gascony stretching along the river, gay with luxuriant woods and vine, and plantations of olives. To the south, the view was bounded by the majestic Pyrenees, whose summits, veiled in clouds, or exhibiting awful forms, seen, and lost again, as the partial vapours rolled along, were sometimes barren, and gleamed through the blue tinge of air, and sometimes frowned with forests of gloomy pine, that swept downward to their base.<sup>41</sup>

Her description of the natural landscape, like so many that would follow, both invites and repels. Note how she describes the nearby banks as “pleasant” and the adjacent landscape as “gay” while depicting the mountains to the south as “veiled,” “barren,” and “frowned with forests of gloomy pine.” Having entered into a familiar region of “luxuriant woods” and “plantations of olives,” readers soon find themselves lost in a world that has suddenly become melancholic and menacing. Though Lovecraft could be critical of the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century, he knew them well.<sup>42</sup> In his book-length essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, he compliments Radcliffe on her descriptions of the landscape, noting that her “visual imagination was very strong, and appears as much in her delightful landscape touches—always in broad, glamorously pictorial outline, and never in close detail—as in her weird phantasies.”<sup>43</sup>

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41. Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

42. From Lovecraft’s perspective, the Gothic novel, beginning with Horace Walpole, introduced a series of tools or literary devices, specifically “a novel type of scene, puppet-characters, and incidents,” whose usefulness would only be fully realized by later writers, “the line of actual artists beginning with Poe.” *Supernatural Horror*, 27.

43. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*, 29.



Later on, in the mid-nineteenth century, the pioneers of the Victorian ghost story, who were the heirs of the Gothic novelists, would provide similar sketches, many of which depict the natural landscape as a source of menace and danger. In “The Old Nurse’s Story,” for instance, Elizabeth Gaskell describes Furnivall Manor as “a great and stately house, with many trees close around it, so close that in some places their branches dragged against the walls when the wind blew; and some hung broken down; for no-one seemed to take much charge of the place – to lop the wood, or to keep the moss-covered carriage-way in order.”<sup>44</sup> Such descriptions hint of desolation, but they accomplish more than that: they suggest that, in certain places at least, humanity’s dominion over Nature is tenuous, illusory even. Oblivious to the house’s size and stateliness, the surrounding forest seems poised to overwhelm Furnivall Manor and retake the parkland that was carved from it. Nature, Gaskell suggests, resents humanity’s dominance. Brooding over her losses, she waits to reclaim her own, having already retaken the “little, old-fashioned flower-garden” that “had been scooped out of the thick, dark wood for some old lady Furnivall.”<sup>45</sup> In such passages, Nature appears as an unstoppable and unrelenting force, always ready, when the opportunity presents itself, to reclaim her patrimony.

The ghost stories of J. Sheridan Le Fanu often open with descriptions almost identical to the one above. These passages suggest that humanity’s dominance over the natural world is less secure than it appears. In “Squire Toby’s Will,” Le Fanu describes “the secluded valley of Gylingden . . . in which the crows returning to their roosts among the trees, and the straggling deer who peep from beneath their branches, seem to hold a wild and undisturbed dominion.”<sup>46</sup>

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44. Elizabeth Gaskell, “The Old Nurse’s Story,” in *Tales of Mystery and the Macabre*, ed. David Stuart Davies (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2008), 5.

45. Gaskell, “The Old Nurse’s Story,” 5.

46. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, “Squire Toby’s Will,” in *Madam Crowl’s Ghost and Other Stories*, ed. M. R. James (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 15.

Humanity, Le Fanu claims, is not the master here. The tide of civilization, though rising elsewhere, has already retreated from the region, abandoning it to the crows and the deer. Mother Nature, depicted here as insatiable, even ravenous, is now invading the environs of Gylingden Hall itself and erasing the last vestiges of human civilization: “A wide avenue, now overgrown like a churchyard with grass and weeds, and flanked by double rows of the same dark trees, old and gigantic, with here and there a gap in their solemn files, and sometimes a fallen tree lying across on the avenue, leads up to the hall-door.”<sup>47</sup> Like a churchyard, the park surrounding the house now symbolizes humanity’s impermanence—its fragility. But while the house and its grounds have fallen into disrepair, the trees, now “old and gigantic,” have been growing. It is as if they have been, like vampires or parasites, feeding on the decaying estate.

Lovecraft, whose extensive collection of weird fiction contained works by Radcliffe, Gaskell, and Le Fanu, often incorporated similar passages into his early stories.<sup>48</sup> “The Picture in the House,” for instance, begins with a description that evokes the overgrown parks and decayed manor houses so prevalent in the British tradition:

Most horrible of all sights are the little unpainted wooden houses remote from travelled ways, usually squatted upon some damp, grassy slope or leaning against some gigantic outcropping of rock. Two hundred years and more they have leaned or squatted there, while the vines have crawled and the trees have swelled and spread. They are almost hidden now in lawless luxuriances of green and guardian shrouds of shadow.<sup>49</sup>

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47. Le Fanu, “Squire Toby’s Will,” 15.

48. Lovecraft discusses Radcliffe’s achievements at some length in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, though he only alludes to Le Fanu, whose works he dismisses as belonging to a “romantic, semi-Gothic, quasi-moral tradition.” Gaskell is not mentioned at all, which is hardly surprising considering Lovecraft’s lack of interest in the ghost story. Having said that, Lovecraft did own works by all three, including Le Fanu’s *The House in the Churchyard*, Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story,” and Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. *Supernatural Horror*, 37; S. T. Joshi, *Lovecraft’s Library: A Catalogue*, 3rd ed. (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012), 92, 61, 116.

49. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Picture in the House,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 207.

Though Lovecraft has moved the setting from the Old World to the New, he has changed very little. Just as Le Fanu positions Gylingden Hall against a “dense background of ancient elms,” Lovecraft places his “little unpainted wooded houses” next to a “gigantic outcropping of rock.”<sup>50</sup> In both cases, the contributions humanity has made to the natural landscape appear insignificant and vulnerable while the boundaries it has established between civilization and the wilderness seem suddenly arbitrary and disturbingly flimsy. Ignoring the unwritten laws that restrict her dominion to the forests and the wastes, Mother Nature has overrun humanity’s domain, covering it in “lawless luxuriances of green.” Inert and lifeless, the farmhouses Lovecraft describes can only “squat” or “lean” while the vines and trees around them “crawl” and “swell” and “spread.” Examples like the one above are sprinkled throughout Lovecraft’s early works. In “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” he describes the slabs of an ancient cemetery as “crumbling, moss-grown, and moisture-stained, and partly concealed by the gross luxuriance of the unhealthy vegetation.”<sup>51</sup> Once “lawless,” nature’s “luxuriance” is now “gross” and “unhealthy,” having derived its nutrients from the corpses buried in its soil. No longer preying on abandoned farmhouses, which are, after all, nothing more than symbols of humanity’s dominion, Mother Nature is now violating the human form itself and feeding on the raw elements that comprise it. In death, Lovecraft implies, humans suffer the ultimate indignity: becoming nourishment for weeds. Fascinated by the idea and its disturbing implications, Lovecraft includes a similar passage in “The Unnamable,” which refers to a willow whose giant trunk “has nearly engulfed

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50. Le Fanu, “Squire Toby’s Will,” 15.

51. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 134.

an ancient, illegible slab,” the source of an “unmentionable nourishment which the colossal roots must be sucking in from that hoary, charnel earth.”<sup>52</sup>

And yet, as much as the British branch of the Gothic tradition, which we have traced from Radcliffe through Gaskell and Le Fanu, influenced Lovecraft, its impact on his style pales beside Edgar Allan Poe’s. Described by Lovecraft as his “God of fiction,” Poe would initially influence Lovecraft more than any other writer.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, several of Lovecraft’s early works could be considered pastiches, including “The Tomb” and “The Outsider,” which August Derleth, Lovecraft’s posthumous publisher, claimed “might have been written by Poe.”<sup>54</sup> Even though, with time, Poe’s influence on Lovecraft diminished, Lovecraft’s admiration for Poe hardly wavered. Lovecraft devotes an entire chapter of *Supernatural Horror in Literature* to Poe, an honor he awards to no other individual writer. Indeed, Lovecraft devotes as much space to Poe as he does to the entirety of the Gothic tradition.

Poe’s approach to landscape description, moreover, differs markedly from that tradition. Whereas the British branch depicts nature as menacing, as a threat to humanity and its dominance, it also hints at its beauty and majesty. Most of Poe’s works, however, pay little attention to the natural landscape. Structurally, most of Poe’s most characteristic stories begin not with a detailed setting, as so many of Radcliffe’s, Gaskell’s, and Le Fanu’s works do, but with a hysterical appeal to the reader. “The Black Cat” follows this formula, as do “The Cask of

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52. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Unnamable,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 397. Lovecraft finished “The Unnamable” in 1923, “The Picture in the House” in 1920, and “The Statement of Randolph Carter” in 1919.

53. H. P. Lovecraft to Reinhart Kleiner, Providence, February 2, 1916, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 1 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965), 20.

54. August Derleth, “A Master of the Macabre,” in *A Weird Writer in Our Midst: Early Criticism of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010), 125.

Amontillado,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “Berenice,” though the narrator of “Berenice” is, initially at least, more philosophical than he is hysterical. And yet, Poe’s greatest tale, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” is the exception. Unlike so many of Poe’s works, that story begins with a lengthy description of the house and the surrounding countryside:

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.<sup>55</sup>

Note that, unlike the other examples mentioned, Poe’s description makes no attempt to glamorize the natural landscape. Indeed, Poe describes it as a “singularly dreary tract of country,” the landscape being, apparently, devoid of beauty or charm. The narrator, who recognizes that even the gloomiest of landscapes often possesses a certain melancholy aesthetic, insists that the land surrounding the house lacks even that: looking out over the landscape, he does not even feel that “half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible.”<sup>56</sup> Unlike the haunted manor houses so loved by the Victorians, with their vast estates and wooded parks, the landscape surrounding the House of Usher is a wasteland comprised of nothing more than a “few rank sedges” and a “few white trunks of decayed trees.” Lest readers imagine that there is something sublime about this desolation, Poe assures us that the landscape inspires no positive sentiments whatsoever: it inspires only an “unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime.”<sup>57</sup>

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55. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. David Galloway (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 90.

56. Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” 90.

57. Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” 90.

In their depiction of the natural landscape, Lovecraft's early works mirror "The Fall of the House of Usher."<sup>58</sup> Like Poe, he depicts the landscape as nightmarish and dreamlike, his descriptions at this time being surreal, abbreviated, and embedded in the narrative. Consider, for instance, the following passage from "The Tomb," which Lovecraft wrote in 1917: "Close by my home there lies a singular wooded hollow, in whose twilight deeps I spent most of my time; reading, thinking, and dreaming. Down its moss-covered slopes my first steps of infancy were taken, and around its grotesquely gnarled oak trees my first fancies of boyhood were woven."<sup>59</sup> As lacking in detail as this description is, it hints at the area's isolation, its remoteness, while simultaneously denying it beauty. Indeed, the oaks that populate this "wooded hollow" are "grotesquely gnarled." Their perceived malformity suggests that the narrator's perspective is unhealthy and foreshadows his growing neuroticism. By the end, his psyche will be as "grotesquely gnarled" as the trees around which his "first fancies of boyhood were woven." Similar descriptions appear in "Polaris," which, like "The Tomb" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," depicts the natural landscape as unwholesome:

And in the autumn of the year, when the winds from the north curse and whine, and the red-leaved trees of the swamp mutter things to one another in the small hours of the morning under the horned waning moon, I sit by the casement and watch that star [the Pole Star]. Down from the heights reels the glittering Cassiopeia as the hours wear on, while Charles' Wain lumbers up from behind the vapour-soaked swamp trees that sway in the night-wind.<sup>60</sup>

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58. Lovecraft, like most critics perhaps, considered "The Fall of the House of Usher" Poe's greatest achievement. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, he writes, "it is in two of the less openly poetic tales, 'Ligeia' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'—especially the latter—that one finds those very summits of artistry whereby Poe takes his place at the head of fictional miniaturists." *Supernatural Horror*, 45.

59. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Tomb," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 39.

60. Lovecraft, "Polaris," 65.

Just as one cannot, with any degree of accuracy, imagine the marshy landscape surrounding the House of Usher or the “wooded hollow” described in “The Tomb,” one cannot picture the landscape above, nor does Lovecraft want us to do so. We need not know, in other words, where the house sits in relation to the swamp or to the nearby “cemetery on the low hillock.” We need only imbibe the language, drinking in the “vapour-soaked swamp trees” and the “winds from the north [that] curse and whine.”<sup>61</sup> The natural landscape in such works is a foul place, in which Lovecraft shows little interest. Such passages, which are often exaggerated to the point of unreality, contribute to the story’s atmosphere, but they do not provide it with a theme. They serve a purpose, but they are not about nature or the natural landscape, and they say nothing useful or interesting about it.

And yet, if Lovecraft’s abbreviated and perfunctory depiction of the natural landscape indicates a lack of interest in the theme, his depiction of its rural inhabitants reveals a great deal about how Lovecraft perceived himself and others. In story after story, Lovecraft describes these people as crude, uneducated, and perhaps even subhuman. Consider, for instance, his description of Joe Slater in “Beyond the Wall of Sleep,” written in 1919:

His appearance was that of the typical denizen of the Catskill Mountain region; one of those strange, repellent scions of a primitive colonial peasant stock whose isolation for nearly three centuries in the hilly fastnesses of a little-travelled countryside has caused them to sink to a kind of barbaric degeneracy, rather than advance with their more fortunately placed brethren of the thickly settled districts. Among these odd folk, who correspond exactly to the decadent element of “white trash” in the South, law and morals are non-existent; and their general mental status is probably below that of any other section of the native American people.<sup>62</sup>

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61. One might draw a distinction here between descriptions that are verbal as opposed to visual. Lovecraft’s early work, much like his friend Clark Ashton Smith’s, draws attention to the words themselves, a reflection perhaps of Lovecraft’s (and Smith’s) interest in poetry. Of course, Lovecraft never fully overcame this passion for unusual and memorable words, such as “eldritch,” “Cyclopean,” “foetid,” “gibbous,” and “unutterable,” which appear in all his works, early or late, but as Lovecraft matured as a writer, the emphasis in his work shifted in favor of imagery.

62. H. P. Lovecraft, “Beyond the Wall of Sleep,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 72.

Lovecraft, in other words, perceives these “odd folk” as not merely culturally backwards, but as biologically backwards, their “barbaric degeneracy” being the result, presumably, of generations of inbreeding. Similar references to a “degenerate squatter population inhabiting pitiful hamlets on isolated slopes” appear in “The Lurking Fear.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, biological degeneracy forms a major theme of that story, for the monsters preying on that “degenerate squatter population” are the descendants of the wealthy Martense family, which devolved as a result of inbreeding. No less monstrous, the villain in “The Picture in the House,” an ancient old man who has learned that the secret to immortality consists of eating human flesh, may be the most memorable of Lovecraft’s rural folk. Compared to the narrator, an educated “town man” conducting genealogical research in the Miskatonic Valley, he seems scarcely human, both his appearance and his speech being grotesquely degraded.<sup>64</sup> One can safely assume that Lovecraft, who described his childhood environment as being of the “average American Protestant of urban, civilized type,” associated with the erudite and urbane narrator, who employs a rich vocabulary and can translate Latin, and wholeheartedly shared his loathing of the old man, who lives in such appalling squalor.<sup>65</sup> Much has been written about Lovecraft’s xenophobia, but this divide between the urban and the rural, which in Lovecraft’s early work is always a divide between sophistication and degeneracy, dominates his early fiction, the issue of race being comparatively rare in Lovecraft’s work.<sup>66</sup> At

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63. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Lurking Fear,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 350.

64. Lovecraft, “The Picture in the House,” 213.

65. H. P. Lovecraft, “A Confession of Unfaith,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 5, *Philosophy; Autobiography and Miscellany* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2006), 145.

66. Of course, some scholars would disagree. Michel Houellebecq argues that the themes of race and racism underlie all of Lovecraft’s best work: “Every great passion, be it love or hate, will in the end generate an authentic work. One may deplore it, but one must recognize it: Lovecraft was more on the side of hate; of hate and fear.” *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, trans. Dorna Khazeni (London: Gollancz, 2008), 118.



this point in Lovecraft's life, horror sprung not from repressed feelings about sex or race, but from his loathing of the rural poor, whom he perceived to be a separate caste, an inferior class of subhuman degenerates.

If Lovecraft's early tales indicate a disinterest in the natural landscape and a distaste for its inhabitants, his descriptions of cities reveal an unchecked enthusiasm for the urban landscape, the inspiration for these tales being, ironically, Lord Dunsany, an Anglo-Irish writer with a heartfelt attachment to nature and a passionate dislike of urbanized modernity. Indeed, Dunsany's love of the natural world dominates his fiction to such an extent that one would be hard pressed to find a work of his that does not, at some level, reflect those sentiments. In "The South Wind," for instance, the gods punish the prophet Ord for insisting that the gods are but the pawns of either Fate or Chance; they do so by depriving Ord—not of his health or his property—but of his knowledge of the gods. With this goal in mind, they strip him of his access to nature:

Then out of Ord's Dream of Life the gods plucked the moon and the stars, and in the night-time he only saw black sky and saw the lights no more. Next the gods took from him, for Their vengeance resteth not, the birds and butterflies, flowers and leaves and insects and all small things, and the prophet looked on the world that was strangely altered, yet knew not of the anger of the gods. Then the gods sent away his familiar hills, to be seen no more by him, and all the pleasant woodlands on their summits and the further fields; . . . Lastly, the gods took away the fields and stream and left to the prophet only his house and the larger things that were in it.<sup>67</sup>

Other examples of Dunsany's passion for nature abound—but not necessarily in the form of landscape description. Most of Dunsany's descriptions of the natural landscape are abbreviated and embedded in the narrative. Instead, Dunsany's early works, such as *The Gods of Pegāna* and *Time and the Gods*, which influenced Lovecraft far more than Dunsany's later plays and novels,

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67. Lord Dunsany, "The South Wind," in *Time and the Gods* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 93.

employ a “staggeringly bold use of metaphor” to capture the essence of the natural world.<sup>68</sup> In “A Legend of the Dawn,” for example, Dunsany turns the sun into a child’s golden ball, which is stolen by a succession of villains, including Fog “with his dark brown cloak about him” and the “prowling mists and the rain” which “wrapped it in their tattered cloaks.”<sup>69</sup> Whether directly or indirectly, all of Dunsany’s works, an enormous corpus that includes short stories, novels, and plays, reflect his dissatisfaction with modernity, specifically urbanization and industrialization, and humanity’s separation from nature.<sup>70</sup> Dunsany himself describes his writing not as an attempt to invoke the exotic or the outré, but as a reflection of the emotions conjured up by the natural landscape: “If I thought that I was a gifted individual whose inspiration came sheer from outside earth and transcended common things, I should not write this book; but I believe that the wildest flights of the fancies of any of us have their homes with Mother Earth. . . .”<sup>71</sup>

And yet, the urban is not missing from Dunsany’s early works, though the cities depicted therein are anything but modern. Not unlike the natural landscapes depicted in Dunsany’s fiction, which bring to mind a sort of mythical Arcadia, his cities evoke images of ancient Greece as it might have existed in a dream or a premodern golden age:

In the city’s midst the gleaming marble of a thousand steps climbed to the citadel where arose four pinnacles beckoning to heaven, and midmost between the pinnacles there

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68. S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale: Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, M. R. James, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 66.

69. Lord Dunsany, “A Legend of the Dawn,” in *In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 58, 54.

70. Joshi identifies two major themes in Dunsany’s work: “first, the tragic and increasing separation of human beings from their natural environment; and, second (evidently the cause of the first), the dominance of the machine in modern civilization.” Joshi is specifically discussing Dunsany’s later works, but even his first book, *The Gods of Pegāna*, speaks of a disenchantment with the modern world, its industrial cities, and its rejection of traditional beliefs. *The Weird Tale*, 58.

71. Lord Dunsany, *Patches of Sunlight* (London: William Heinemann, 1938), 9.

stood the dome, vast, as the gods had dreamed it. All around, terrace by terrace, there went marble lawns well guarded by onyx lions and carved with effigies. . . .<sup>72</sup>

Unlike Lovecraft, whose later style is so relentlessly specific, Dunsany's early works rarely describe these urban landscapes in detail, the descriptions being, according to our schema, abbreviated, embedded, generalized, and surreal. With no more than a few quick brushstrokes, Dunsany effectively evokes a fantastic world by relying on the associations he knows readers will make. When he mentions Astahan's "wide court . . . which opens upon the river" and its "strange boats of antique design" and marble colonnades, he knows readers will, even with so little prompting, begin to imagine the ancient, semi-mythical world of the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>73</sup> Being premodern, these cities do not disrupt Dunsany's themes or arouse his ire. Indeed, like the Arcadian landscapes Dunsany evokes, his cities are deliberately antimodern, reflecting a way of life that was, prior to industrialization, closer to the natural world. Instead of being the antithesis of the natural landscape, Dunsany's cities exist alongside it: "Later the sun rose shining over Alatta as it shone over Istahn, and there arose a stir about the houses both in Alatta and Istahn, and cocks crowed in the city and men went out into the fields among the bleating sheep. . . ."<sup>74</sup> Such descriptions of the urban landscape do not, as one might expect, contradict Dunsany's commitment to a premodern, preindustrial life: they provide additional evidence of it.<sup>75</sup>

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72. Lord Dunsany, "Time and the Gods," in *In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 49.

73. Lord Dunsany, "Idle Days on the Yann," in *In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 150.

74. Lord Dunsany, "In the Land of Time," in *In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 60-1.

75. It may appear that, by focusing almost exclusively on Poe and Dunsany, I am oversimplifying a complex discussion about influence. After all, one could also analyze the influence of Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, M. R. James, and Walter de la Mare, all of whom Lovecraft deeply respected. And yet, Lovecraft himself was quite adamant that Poe and Dunsany influenced him far more than anyone else. In a letter penned in 1929, several years after

Outwardly, the cities that appear in Lovecraft's early works closely resemble Dunsany's, perhaps even slavishly so, but unlike Dunsany's cities, they do not contribute to a critique of urbanized modernism, nor do they lament humanity's separation from the natural world. Indeed, whereas Lovecraft employs the Gothic approach to landscape description to denigrate the countryside, which appears in his early works as a desolate wasteland, he glorifies the city, creating, again and again, what I call "Atlantean dream-cities."<sup>76</sup> Such cities appear in a remarkable number of Lovecraft's early works, being especially common in Lovecraft's "Dunsanian" stories: "Polaris," "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," "The White Ship," "The Doom That Came to Sarnath," "Celephaïs," and "The Quest of Iranon," all of which were written between 1918 and 1920.<sup>77</sup> The cities depicted therein, like Dunsany's, evoke ancient Greece, though they also blend imagery borrowed from the Orient and the Far East, the resulting mixture being a curious blend of exotic elements.<sup>78</sup> The city of Celephaïs, for instance, contains "glittering

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Lovecraft had written some of his most characteristic work, he still perceives himself as working in the shadow of those two authors: "Even when I break away, it is generally only through imitating something else! There are my 'Poe' pieces & my 'Dunsany' pieces—but alas—where are any *Lovecraft* pieces?" H. P. Lovecraft to Elizabeth Toldridge, Providence, March 8, 1929, in *Letters to Elizabeth Toldridge and Anne Tillery Renshaw*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2014), 37-8.

76. Javier Martínez Jiménez, who concludes that "classical cities, both as built and as cultural environments, had a large impact on Lovecraft's imagination," divides Lovecraft's cities into four distinct categories: "eldritch cities," which are home to alien civilizations; "oneiric cities," which appear in Lovecraft's Dunsanian tales; "Arkham-cities," imaginary but realistic places such as Arkham and Innsmouth; and "non-mythos cities," such as New York, Providence, and Boston. As logical as this division is, I have not adopted its terminology, as I wish to stress the overlooked connection between what Jiménez calls Lovecraft's "oneiric cities" and his "eldritch cities." "The Impact of the Eldritch City: Classical and Alien Urbanism in H. P. Lovecraft's Mythos," *Foundation* 47, no. 131 (2018), 40, 29-30.

77. Lovecraft actually wrote the earliest of these, "Polaris," before he "*ever read a word of Dunsany's*." H. P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence, January 25, 1924, in *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 65.

78. As a small child, Lovecraft was enamored with the Islamic Middle East, whose culture he had discovered through literature. As Lovecraft explains in one of his biographical essays, this fascination, which would soon be eclipsed by his discovery of ancient Greece and

minarets” and “graceful galleys riding at anchor in the blue harbour.”<sup>79</sup> Certain exotic materials, such as gold, ivory, marble, and jade, appear frequently, often in fantastic quantities.<sup>80</sup> In the city of Polaris, “its walls and its towers, its columns, domes, and pavements” are all made of marble.<sup>81</sup> Like Paradise, the cities of Cathuria, which are, evidently, even grander than Polaris, boast streets of gold.

To many modern readers, such descriptions might seem ridiculous, even childish, but judging by the number of Atlantean dream-cities in Lovecraft’s early works, he must have derived considerable pleasure from their creation. Indeed, Lovecraft’s fascination with these exotic urban landscapes was so strong that he could not, it seems, resist including them in his works, whether those works called for them or not. The word “terrace,” for instance, which often appears in descriptions of these cities, turns up in no less than fourteen of Lovecraft’s stories.<sup>82</sup> One might even argue that, for Lovecraft, who wrote only to please himself, the stories existed to provide a place for such descriptions, the plot being, in other words, an excuse to indulge in

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Rome, resulted in the creation of Abdul Alhazred, the fictional Arab who, according to Lovecraft’s work, wrote the *Necronomicon*, the most famous of Lovecraft’s many imaginary books: “Within the next few years I added to my supernatural lore the fairy tales of Grimm and the Arabian Nights. At one time I formed a juvenile collection of Oriental pottery and *objets d’art*, announcing myself as a devout Mussulman and assuming the pseudonym of ‘Abdul Alhazred.’” Lovecraft, “A Confession of Unfaith,” 145.

79. Lovecraft, “Celephaïs,” 187.

80. Much might be written about Lovecraft’s evident fascination with gemstones, which appear, always in fantastic quantities, in so many of his dream-cities. Similar imagery appears in the Book of Revelation, which would be a curious source for an ardent materialist like Lovecraft.

81. Lovecraft, “Polaris,” 66.

82. Some variation of the word “terrace” appears at least once in the following stories, which are listed according to the date of their composition: “The White Ship,” “The Doom That Came to Sarnath,” “The Temple,” “Celephaïs,” “The Shunned House,” “He,” “The Strange High House in the Mist,” “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath,” *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” “The Dreams in the Witch House,” and “The Shadow out of Time.” Note that these fourteen stories cover an enormous span of Lovecraft’s relatively short career, the earliest having been written in 1919, the latest in 1935.

description.<sup>83</sup> As difficult as that may be to believe, when describing his interest in weird fiction, Lovecraft mentions urban imagery explicitly, the idea of these dream-cities being intimately associated in his mind with wonder: “I cannot become truly interested in anything which does not suggest incredible marvels just around the corner—glorious and ethereal cities of golden roofs and marble terraces beyond the sunset, or vague, dim cosmic presences clawing ominously at the thin rim where the known universe meets the outer and fathomless abyss.”<sup>84</sup> The significance of such a statement can hardly be overstated: readers think of Lovecraft only as the creator of “vague, dim cosmic presences clawing ominously,” but from his own perspective, he wrote to suggest “incredible marvels just around the corner.” Both “vague, dim cosmic presences” and “glorious and ethereal cities” were equally valid means of doing so. It is no surprise then that, within the context of Lovecraft’s Dunsanian tales, these cities act as paradises, symbols of wonder, fantasy, and pleasure, for which the characters yearn. Indeed, many of these stories, including “Polaris,” “The White Ship,” “Celephaïs,” and “The Quest of Iranon,” share the same basic plot in which a character must reach or protect or return to one of these dream-cities. Dunsany’s descriptions may have provided Lovecraft with a model, but ultimately, the idea these cities represent meant more to Lovecraft than it did to Dunsany. Indeed, Lovecraft’s claim about Dunsany in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* applies more to him than it does to

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83. In his letters, Lovecraft claims, repeatedly, that he has no interest in writing for an external audience, writing being, in his mind, a means not of communication, but of self-exploration and imaginative stimulation: “I write for my own edification exclusively, since it improves & crystallises my dreams to get them down on paper; & although I appreciate the kindly comment of the few who like my stuff, am not at all perturbed or disappointed because the majority are indifferent.” H. P. Lovecraft to Donald Wandrei, Providence, March 27, 1927, in *Mysteries of Time and Spirit: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Donald Wandrei*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2002), 67.

84. H. P. Lovecraft to Zealia Brown Reed (Bishop), Providence, August 28, 1927, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 2, 1925-1929 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1968), 160.

his mentor: “He loves the vivid green of jade and of copper domes, and the delicate flush of sunset on the ivory minarets of impossible dream-cities.”<sup>85</sup>

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85. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*, 68.

#### IV. Thesis:

##### Urban Dystopia (1925)

*They took me slumming, where gaunt walls of brick  
Bulge outward with a viscous stored-up evil,  
And twisted faces, thronging foul and thick,  
Wink messages to alien god and devil.<sup>86</sup>*

Up until the summer of 1925, Lovecraft's fiction continued to eulogize the urban landscape, featuring, in story after story, Atlantean dream-cities as a source of wonder and beauty, but as a result of Lovecraft's experiences in New York City, his feelings towards the urban, and his depiction of it, would undergo a rapid and irrevocable change. He moved from Providence, Rhode Island, where he had been born, to Brooklyn in 1924 after marrying Sonia Haft Greene, an older woman whom he had met in 1921 through the amateur journalism movement. At first, as we might expect, Lovecraft found the urban landscape intoxicating. Like one of his "impossible dream-cities" made real, the otherworldly skyline of Manhattan seemed to promise a gateway to the unknown. Indeed, when he first saw the city in 1922, he described it in explicitly Dunsanian terms:

I spent the five-hour journey reading Dunsany and peering at way-stations. . . . Shortly before three p.m., the train reached the lofty and colossal Harlem River viaduct . . . and I saw for the first time the Cyclopean outlines of New-York. It was a mystical sight in the gold sun of late afternoon; a dream-thing of faint grey, outlined against a sky of faint grey smoke. City and sky were so alike that one could hardly be sure that there was a city—that the fancied towers and pinnacles were not the merest illusions.<sup>87</sup>

It was as if Lovecraft, like one of the characters in his stories, had finally found his Celephaïs, his Olathoë, his Aira, his long-imagined paradise, the gateway, it seemed, to "incredible marvels

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86. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Pigeon-Flyers," in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 84.

87. H. P. Lovecraft to Maurice W. Moe, Providence, May 18, 1922, in *Letters to Maurice W. Moe and Others*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2018), 84.



just around the corner.” And yet, as magical and dreamlike as the city initially appeared, his enthusiasm for the city soon waned. His marriage to Sonia proved unsatisfactory. Uninterested in sex, Lovecraft preferred to spend time with his male friends, a group of writers, poets, aesthetes, and intellectuals, with whom he formed the Kalem Club. And yet, as Joshi notes, their marriage might have been happy enough if they had been able to escape a run of bad luck: Lovecraft could not find a steady job in New York, and shortly after they were married, Sonia lost hers.<sup>88</sup> After a trying year, she left for Cleveland, where she had secured a position, in early 1925. Lovecraft stayed behind, moving into an apartment near Red Hook. Unhappily married, isolated from his home and family, impoverished, and humiliated, Lovecraft grew to despise New York, a sentiment that would, by the summer of 1925, start to appear in his fiction. Indeed, as we shall see, his hatred for the city, which at times bordered on monomania, would do more than affect his fiction: it would transform it.

Lovecraft’s growing dislike of the city inspired “The Horror at Red Hook,” the first of his short stories to use New York as a setting.<sup>89</sup> The story begins when Thomas F. Malone collapses after descrying a row of brick buildings in the village of Pascoag, Rhode Island. As the third-person narrator explains, Malone, an Irish detective in the New York City police department, is recuperating at a nearby dairy farm, having suffered a nervous breakdown when, during a police raid, a similar row of buildings in the Red Hook district of Brooklyn collapsed on top of him. That experience so scarred Malone that, from that point on, “old brick slums and seas of dark, subtle faces” became “a thing of nightmare and eldritch portent.”<sup>90</sup> Having hinted at why Malone

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88. Joshi, introduction to *An Epicure in the Terrible*, 16.

89. Much of the subsequent summary will appear in my article “Missing the Punchline: The Subversive Nature of H. P. Lovecraft’s Occult Detective,” which is scheduled to appear in *Lovecraft Annual* in the summer of 2020.

90. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Horror at Red Hook,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 482.

reacted the way that he did, the story's chronology shifts, returning to the beginning of his investigation into an elderly scholar named Robert Suydam. Malone suspects that Suydam, a "lettered recluse of ancient Dutch family," presides over a degenerate cult composed of Red Hook's multicultural denizens, which meets beneath a local dance hall.<sup>91</sup> Though Malone's fellow officers are concerned about the district's many crimes, Malone believes that the residents are engaged in something far more sinister, a "frightful and clandestine system of assemblies and orgies descended from dark religions antedating the Aryan world, and appearing in popular legends as Black Masses and Witches' Sabbaths."<sup>92</sup> Suddenly, Suydam undergoes an unexpected change: he abandons his furtive activities in Red Hook, adopts a dapper appearance, and proposes to Miss Cornelia Gerritsen, "a young woman of excellent position."<sup>93</sup> The two marry and sail for Europe while Malone's investigation stalls.

Events reach a climax in Chapter Five, which relates the gruesome events surrounding Suydam's death and resurrection. A sailor finds him and his bride dead shortly after hearing a scream from their stateroom. Not long afterwards, a steamer arrives, and a crew of strange individuals board the ship and demand Suydam's body, which the bewildered captain provides. Meanwhile, the police are raiding residences through Red Hook while Malone ransacks Parker Place, a row of houses belonging to Suydam and a suspected haven of occult activity. He batters down the cellar door, from "whence poured a howling tumult of ice-cold wind," which "coiling sentiently about the paralysed detective, dragged him through the aperture and down unmeasured spaces filled with whispers and wails, and gusts of mocking laughter."<sup>94</sup> As Malone drifts in and out of consciousness, he witnesses a witch's sabbath led by Lilith, a phosphorescent, tittering

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91. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 486.

92. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 485-6.

93. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 492.

94. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 498.

monstrosity. Malone hears the splashing of oars somewhere in the dark and, realizing that underground canals must link Suydam's properties to the sea, watches as the crew unload Suydam from a boat. They offer the corpse to Lilith and, joining the procession of monsters, dance out of sight. Suddenly, he sees Suydam's reanimated corpse racing towards Lilith's golden throne. Eluding his pursuers, Suydam reaches the throne and, with a mighty push that "sent its noisome bulk floundering to the floor in a state of jellyish dissolution," topples the throne, which disappears into the canal.<sup>95</sup> Malone faints and sees no more. The last chapter, which returns to the present, explains how the police found Malone, as well as Suydam's remains, beneath a collapsed house in Red Hook. Though they found nothing to corroborate Malone's wild tale, the police have traced the kidnapping epidemic to its source, and they consider the mystery solved. "As for Red Hook—it is always the same."<sup>96</sup> The crypt beneath the dance hall, which the police had filled, has been excavated, smuggling has resumed, and the older generation has begun to instruct the younger in the Satanic arts. In Lovecraft's words, "the soul of the beast is omnipresent and triumphant."<sup>97</sup>

Though usually dismissed as one of Lovecraft's worst tales, "The Horror at Red Hook" signals a sea change in how Lovecraft approached landscape description.<sup>98</sup> Unlike his previous descriptions, which, as we saw earlier, tend to be abbreviated, embedded, generalized, unnamed,

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95. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 502.

96. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 504.

97. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 504.

98. Indeed, the tale is, as far as I know, universally disliked. Joshi labels it "one of Lovecraft's great failures," a pronouncement endorsed by Jason C. Eckhardt, who writes that the story "is mostly a shriek of rage at New York's immigrants and modern, bustling character," and Donald Tyson, who concludes that "it is never ranked among his best work—there is too much venom in it." Joshi, *A Subtler Magick*, 104; Eckhardt, "The Cosmic Yankee," in *An Epicure in the Terrible: A Centennial Anthology of Essays in Honor of H. P. Lovecraft*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 91; Tyson, *The Dream World of H. P. Lovecraft: His Life, His Demons, His Universe* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2010), 142.

and surreal, Lovecraft's depiction of Red Hook is extensive, separate, specific, named, and realistic:

Red Hook is a maze of hybrid squalor near the ancient waterfront opposite Governor's Island, with dirty highways climbing the hill from the wharves to that higher ground where the decayed lengths of Clinton and Court Streets lead off toward the Borough Hall. Its houses are mostly of brick, dating from the first quarter to the middle of the nineteenth century, and some of the obscurer alleys and byways have that alluring antique flavour which conventional reading leads us to call 'Dickensian'. The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant. It is a babel of sound and filth, and sends out strange cries to answer the lapping of oily waves at its grimy piers and the monstrous organ litanies of the harbour whistles. Here long ago a brighter picture dwelt, with clear-eyed mariners on the lower streets and homes of taste and substance where the larger houses line the hill. One can trace the relics of this former happiness in the trim shapes of the buildings, the occasional graceful churches, and the evidences of original art and background in bits of detail here and there—a worn flight of steps, a battered doorway, a wormy pair of decorative columns or pilasters, or a fragment of once green space with bent and rusted iron railing. The houses are generally in solid blocks, and now and then a many-windowed cupola arises to tell of days when the households of captains and ship-owners watched the sea.<sup>99</sup>

Unlike, say, the Atlantean dream-city of Aira, of which we have only bits and pieces, stray allusions that, when stitched together, create a vague impression, Red Hook is a carefully constructed re-creation of a real place. Of course, one can picture, to some extent, what Aira, which Lovecraft describes as a "city of marble and beryl," might look like, but that act, the act of creation, occurs in the reader's mind, not on the printed page.<sup>100</sup> Here, Lovecraft himself is taking responsibility for the city's creation, ensuring that each reader pictures the same scene: an "ancient waterfront" whose wharves and brick houses line a low hill, atop which sits Borough Hall. Of course, one might argue that the reality of Red Hook, a place with which Lovecraft was intimately familiar, naturally suggests a much more detailed description, the shift we see being the result not of a change in Lovecraft's style, but of a change in his subject matter. And yet,

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99. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," 483-4.

100. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Quest of Iranon," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 249.

Lovecraft's decision to use the real world as a setting is, in and of itself significant. Much of Lovecraft's early work entails an escape from our mundane reality, our destination being either Gothic Europe, as in "The Alchemist," "The Moon-Bog," "The Outsider," "The Music of Erich Zann," "The Hound," and "The Rats in the Walls," or a Dunsanian Arcadia, as in "Polaris," "The White Ship," "The Doom That Came to Sarnath," "Celephaïs," and "The Quest of Iranon."<sup>101</sup> Here, for the first time, Lovecraft is facing reality—and turning his back on fantasy. It is as if, at this moment in Lovecraft's life, he could not ignore the influence of the landscape around him. Since 1917, when he resumed writing, he had, in his fiction at least, paid little attention to New England, repeatedly choosing the fantastic over the quotidian, but the effect of New York on Lovecraft's emotional state was so strong that he could not prevent the real world, or at least his impression of it, from seeping into his fiction.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, his very next story, more so than any other tale prior to that point, blends Lovecraft's reality with fantasy, the result, despite its many flaws, being one of the most psychologically compelling stories he ever wrote.

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101. All of the works listed above, whether Gothic in style or Dunsanian, were written between 1908 and 1923, the earliest being "The Alchemist" and the latest being "The Rats in the Walls." Most of Lovecraft's early works fit into one of these two categories, but a few do not, specifically his comic tales: "A Reminiscence of Dr. Samuel Johnson," "Sweet Ermengarde," and "Old Bugs," all three of which were written early in Lovecraft's career. Other notable exceptions include "Dagon," "The Temple," and "The Picture in the House."

102. Houellebecq makes a similar, though subtly different claim, arguing that Lovecraft's xenophobia, which New York amplified tenfold, inspired his later work: "His descriptions of the nightmare entities that populate the Cthulhu cycle spring directly from this hallucinatory vision. Racial hatred provokes in Lovecraft the trancelike poetic state in which he outdoes himself by the mad rhythmic pulse of cursed sentences; this is the source of the hideous and cataclysmic light that illuminates his final works." I would argue, however, that the "source of the hideous and cataclysmic light" in Lovecraft's work is not racism, but a bitter and profound dissatisfaction with the modern industrialized world, this dissatisfaction or discontentment being the result of Lovecraft's personality and his personal philosophy, which was shaped—in part—by xenophobia. *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, 107.

Written on August 11, 1925, less than two weeks after “The Horror at Red Hook,” “He” begins with a startling admission: “My coming to New York had been a mistake.”<sup>103</sup> Initially, the unnamed narrator claims, he had found beauty and mystery in the city’s skyline, believing New York to be “one with the marvels of Carcassonne and Samarcand and El Dorado and all glorious and half-fabulous cities.”<sup>104</sup> Gradually, however, the narrator became disillusioned with the city and its people, having come to the realization that New York had shed its colonial heritage and, as a result, was “not a sentient perpetuation of Old New York as London is of Old London and Paris of Old Paris,” though he still finds some pleasure in exploring the city’s surviving antiquities at night.<sup>105</sup> Late one night, while exploring the hidden courtyards of Greenwich Village, he meets a strange man who, recognizing a fellow antiquarian, offers to show the narrator scenes he might have missed. The narrator follows him through a labyrinthine series of courtyards and alleys, in the process, it seems, travelling backwards through time. Lampposts, for instance, disappear, having been replaced by what appear to be “colonial tin lanterns with conical tops and holes punched in the sides.”<sup>106</sup> The two finally arrive at the guide’s estate, where he tells the narrator a strange story about his ancestor, who having learned sorcery from a local tribe of American Indians, poisoned them with bad rum. Despite his growing alarm, the narrator watches as his host displays his power, showing him a series of scenes through the window. In the first scene, he sees Greenwich Village as it was before the Europeans arrived; in the second, he sees the city as it was during the colonial period; and in the third and final scene, he sees the city as it will be:

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103. H. P. Lovecraft, “He,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 506.

104. Lovecraft, “He,” 506.

105. Lovecraft, “He,” 507.

106. Lovecraft, “He,” 510.

I saw the heavens verminous with strange flying things, and beneath them a hellish black city of giant stone terraces with impious pyramids flung savagely to the moon, and devil-lights burning from unnumbered windows. And swarming loathsomely on aerial galleries I saw the yellow, squint-eyed people of that city, robed horribly in orange and red, and dancing insanely to the pounding of fevered kettle-drums, the clatter of obscene crotala, and the maniacal moaning of muted horns whose ceaseless dirges rose and fell undulantly like the waves of an unhallowed ocean of bitumen.<sup>107</sup>

Panicked by the sight, the narrator screams and, by doing so, inadvertently summons the vengeful ghosts of those American Indians poisoned by, as most readers will have guessed, his host. After they drag the magician away, the house begins to collapse, and the narrator flees, becoming injured in the process. He concludes his tale by warning others away from the city. As for himself, he has left New York and “gone home to the pure New England lanes up which fragrant sea-winds sweep at evening.”<sup>108</sup>

As melodramatic and contrived as its climax may be, with its implausible coincidences and its unsurprising revelations, “He” not only reflects Lovecraft’s growing dissatisfaction with New York, it documents his newfound appreciation, his psychologically acute need, for a congenial landscape that provides a fixed point, a sort of cultural anchor in a world experiencing rapid and unrelenting change. Quite tellingly, when the story begins, the narrator feels no such need. Indeed, he relishes the outré sight of New York’s “Cyclopean modern towers and pinnacles that rise blackly Babylonian under waning moons.”<sup>109</sup> Exactly like Lovecraft himself during his “decadent phase,” which preceded his time in New York, the narrator derives all the aesthetic satisfaction he needs from fantasy.<sup>110</sup> Just as Lovecraft, in his early fiction, chooses Dunsany’s

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107. Lovecraft, “He,” 514-5.

108. Lovecraft, “He,” 517.

109. Lovecraft, “He,” 506.

110. In his seminal work on Lovecraft, originally published in 1979, Barton Levi St. Armand explores Lovecraft’s “unmistakable connection with the Aesthetes and the Decadents of late nineteenth-century Europe,” its relationship to his other views, and his eventual rejection of it. *H. P. Lovecraft: New England Decadent* (Providence: Waterfire Providence, 2013), 15.

artificial but charming dreamland over reality, the narrator attempts to live in a dream, a conceit, in which New York is, as it initially appears to be, an Atlantean dream-city brought to life. And yet, reality intrudes: “Garish daylight shewed only squalor and alienage and the noxious elephantiasis of climbing, spreading stone where the moon had hinted of loveliness and elder magic.”<sup>111</sup> Unable to perpetuate their illusions in the shadow of New York, both the narrator and Lovecraft reach the same conclusion: fantasy is insufficient. Seeking authenticity, the narrator begins to explore New York at night, his nocturnal searches mirroring those made by Lovecraft at this time.<sup>112</sup> As is fitting, the landscape descriptions accompanying his search for cultural permanence reflect this shift away from fantasy, being realistic and precise:

The street-lights we first encountered had been of oil, and of the ancient lozenge pattern. Later I noticed some with candles; and at last, after traversing a horrible unlighted court where my guide had to lead with his gloved hand through total blackness to a narrow wooden gate in a high wall, we came upon a fragment of alley lit only by lanterns in front of every seventh house—unbelievably colonial tin lanterns with conical tops and holes punched in the sides. This alley led steeply uphill—more steeply than I thought possible in this part of New York—and the upper end was blocked squarely by the ivy-clad wall of a private estate, beyond which I could see a pale cupola, and the tops of trees waving against a vague lightness in the sky.<sup>113</sup>

Lovecraft the fantasist, the devotee of Dunsany and Poe, has become Lovecraft the antiquarian, the topographical realist.

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111. Lovecraft, “He,” 507.

112. Instead of spending his evenings at home, Lovecraft preferred exploring the city, his long walks sometimes lasting all night. George Kirk, who occasionally accompanied Lovecraft on his perambulations, describes the experience in a letter to his fiancée in Cleveland: “I have mentioned to you HL’s 18th century craze, also his love for American Colonial architecture, furniture, etc. That I felt no particular love for either I need hardly mention to you who know me so well, but I do enjoy H’s company. Girl, if ever you give me a more enjoyable time I shall hand you the skid-proof banana peel.” George Kirk to Lucile Dvorak, New York City, August 22, 1924, in *Lovecraft’s New York Circle: The Kalem Club, 1924-1927*, eds. Mara Kirk Hart and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2006), 25.

113. Lovecraft, “He,” 510.



And yet, the narrator's journey ends not in success, not in emotional or even aesthetic fulfillment, but in failure. Read autobiographically, the story reveals Lovecraft's fear that his attempts to live in the past might not be enough. Alone in New York, he had tried to do exactly that. By writing pastiches of eighteenth-century poetry and exploring the city's remaining antiquities at night, he was trying to hold together a vision of the past, of a premodern world that no longer existed. When his aunt suggested that he discard the family's "ponderous furniture & paintings & clocks & books," which he had kept in order to "keep 454 always in my dreams," he responded with anger and passion:

When they go, I shall go, for they are all that make it possible for me to open my eyes in the morning or look forward to another day of consciousness without screaming in sheer desperation & pounding the walls & floor in a frenzied clamour to be waked up out of the nightmare of "reality" & my own room in Providence. Yes—such sensitivenesses of temperament are very inconvenient when one has no money—but it's easier to criticise than to cure them. When a poor fool possessing them allows himself to get exiled & sidetracked through temporarily false perspective & ignorance of the world, the only thing to do is let him cling to his pathetic scraps as long as he can hold them. They are life for him.<sup>114</sup>

Lovecraft needed the past—or, at the very least, the illusion of the past—to keep the "nightmare of 'reality'" at bay. Without it, he was, like the foreigner-born residents he criticizes in "He," "without kinship to the scenes" about him, the modern urban landscape of New York being a strange and unfamiliar world that "could never mean aught to a blue-eyed man of the old folk, with the love of fair green lanes and white New England village steeples in his heart."<sup>115</sup> And yet, as both "He" and the intensity of his reply to his aunt suggests, Lovecraft feared that, despite his best efforts, his attempts at recreating the past might be inadequate. After all, even though the narrator of "He" discovers a means of recalling the past, a way far more effective than any

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114. H. P. Lovecraft to Lillian D. Clark, New York, August 8, 1925, in *Letters from New York*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2005), 168.

115. Lovecraft, "He," 507.

available to Lovecraft, his triumph is short-lived. He finds a way into the past, but in the process, he also sees the future. Lovecraft's description of it condemns both New York and modern urbanism itself, the city's distinguishing feature being its alien, inhuman quality. Its "giant stone terraces" and "strange flying things" and feverish music resembles nothing on Earth. Such a vision, for both the narrator and the reader, instantly obliterates the earlier picture of "the Greenwich that used to be" with its "lovely green lanes and fields and bits of grassy common."<sup>116</sup> Having seen the nightmarish future that awaits, the narrator can only flee New York, much as Lovecraft wished to do, but one wonders how successful his escape will be. After all, the narrator's decision to narrate his story, in and of itself, indicates that, despite having "gone home to the pure New England lanes up which fragrant sea-winds sweep at evening," he has not overcome his experience, nor, for that matter, would Lovecraft. In less than a year, Lovecraft would be home with his furniture and his books and his poems about him, but he would not forget the vision of the future he had seen in New York. The city had imprinted itself on his consciousness. From 1925 on, New York would occupy a permanent place in his fiction, its "Cyclopean modern towers and pinnacles" becoming a symbol of inescapable corruption and degeneration.

In the spring of 1926, shortly before he returned home to Providence, Lovecraft wrote "Cool Air," the last of his stories to use New York, the real New York, as a setting and perhaps, in terms of capturing the experience of urban life, the most successful of the three. The unnamed narrator, not unlike the narrator of "He," seems to detest the city and seeks only "a bearable place to hibernate till one might really live again."<sup>117</sup> After securing "some dreary and

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116. Lovecraft, "He," 514.

117. H. P. Lovecraft, "Cool Air," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 12.

unprofitable magazine work,” he moves into a brownstone on West Fourteenth Street, a busy thoroughfare separating Lower Manhattan from Midtown:

The place was a four-story mansion of brownstone, dating apparently from the late 'forties, and fitted with woodwork and marble whose stained and sullied splendour argued a descent from high levels of tasteful opulence. In the rooms, large and lofty, and decorated with impossible paper and ridiculously ornate stucco cornices, there lingered a depressing mustiness and hint of obscure cookery; but the floors were clean, the linen tolerably regular, and the hot water not too often cold or turned off. . . .<sup>118</sup>

The narrator avoids the other residents, regarding them as “Spaniards a little above the coarsest and crudest grade,” but after his neighbor, a retired doctor, who lives in the apartment directly above his own, saves him from a heart attack, the two become friends.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, the narrator harbors a deep respect for Dr. Muñoz, whom he considers “a man of birth, cultivation, and discrimination,” though, at times, he finds his hollow voice and his audacious theories about the prolongation of life disturbing.<sup>120</sup> The doctor claims that he suffers from a degenerative disease that requires him to keep his rooms cool year-round. Unfortunately, the condition seems to be worsening, for Dr. Muñoz physically deteriorates as their friendship progresses. One day, the mechanism he uses to cool his apartment breaks down, and the narrator, eager to help his friend, embarks on a long, frustrating search for a new piston and a mechanic to install it. At this point, the city itself becomes the villain, its apathetic immensity frustrating the narrator’s frantic attempts to find help. He finally obtains the assistance he needs, but it comes too late: when he returns to the apartment, he finds only a “dark, slimy trail [that] led from the open bathroom door to the hall door, and thence to the desk, where a terrible little pool had accumulated.”<sup>121</sup> The hastily scrawled note the narrator finds on the desk explains that Dr. Muñoz, with the help of an

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118. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 12.

119. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 12.

120. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 14.

121. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 20.

associate, had applied his theory of artificial preservation to himself, having died eighteen years ago.

As grotesque as Dr. Muñoz may seem, the true villain of “Cool Air” is the urban landscape itself, the vast yet apathetic city being a far more menacing antagonist than the pathetic doctor. Indeed, the New York of “Cool Air,” despite Lovecraft’s restrained descriptions of it, is every bit as threatening as the “tangle of material and spiritual putrescence” that is Red Hook or the “noxious elephantiasis of climbing, spreading stone” that we encounter in “He.”<sup>122</sup> By steadily adding layers of realistic detail, Lovecraft creates an impression of a dirty, loud, uncaring metropolis, in the process creating a setting that, more so than any of his previous ones, seems like a recognizable place that exists in the real world. He achieves this effect not by beginning the story with a lengthy description of the urban landscape as he does in “The Horror at Red Hook” and “He,” but by alluding to the urban environment throughout the tale, noting, for instance, that “the din of street cars in the thoroughfare below proved a serious annoyance” and referring to the building in which the story takes place as a “nest of squalor and seediness.”<sup>123</sup> Compared to the descriptions found in “The Horror at Red Hook” or “He,” which retain the fantastic, otherworldly quality characteristic of Lovecraft’s Dunsanian tales, the descriptions in “Cool Air” are somber and understated, Lovecraft’s approach being noticeably abbreviated, embedded, and specific. Though unusual for Lovecraft, who, after “Cool Air,” would return to the extensive, separate, and generalized descriptions developed in his previous New York tales, this approach works well: the impression of isolation and alienation that it conveys adds to the suspense. Both the narrator and Dr. Muñoz are alone, so to speak, in a city full of unpleasant and uncaring strangers. The narrator even states that he would like to forsake his macabre

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122. Lovecraft, “The Horror at Red Hook,” 484; Lovecraft, “He,” 507.

123. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 12, 13.

companion, whose deteriorating condition and unwholesome fanaticism have become alarming, but he cannot “abandon him to the strangers around him.”<sup>124</sup> The plot itself reinforces the impression created by Lovecraft’s description, for the narrator soon learns that the city is every bit as apathetic as it appears to be. And yet, when he begins his search on behalf of his dying friend, the narrator does not encounter, as the protagonist of “The Horror at Red Hook” does, devil-worshipping cults, nor does he encounter, as the protagonist of “He” does, a centuries-old magician. No, what he encounters is not villainy but incompetence and indifference: the mechanic hired to repair the doctor’s machine informs him that “nothing could be done till morning”; when morning arrives, their landlord refuses to let her son Esteban fetch ice for Dr. Muñoz while the narrator orders a piston; and the boy’s replacement, a “seedy-looking loafer . . . encountered on the corner of Eighth Avenue,” flees “screaming and mad-eyed not long after his second delivery of ice.”<sup>125</sup> Despite the presence of millions, the narrator, it seems, must do everything himself. This critique of New York, which watches, indifferently, as the narrator, his friend dying, embarks on a “hectic quest from place to place, hither and thither by subway and surface car,” may be less colorful than the critiques that appear in Lovecraft’s other New York tales, but it is no less damning. Lovecraft had, as he suggests in the opening to “Cool Air,” found horror not in the Gothic landscapes of his previous stories but “in the glare of mid-afternoon, in the clangour of a metropolis.”<sup>126</sup>

Despite the effectiveness of “Cool Air,” after Lovecraft returned home to Providence in the spring of 1926, he never again used New York as a setting, though the city, in a symbolic form, haunts every single one of his most characteristic tales, including “The Call of Cthulhu,”

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124. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 17.

125. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 19.

126. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” 11.

“The Dunwich Horror,” “The Whisperer in Darkness,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” “The Dreams in the Witch House,” “The Shadow out of Time,” and “The Haunter of the Dark.”<sup>127</sup> Transfigured almost beyond recognition, the city reappears, time and time again, in the shape of what I call a Cyclopean monster-city, a nightmarish urban landscape, often abandoned and usually located beneath the ocean or on another planet.<sup>128</sup>

Though never described in detail, their presence in Lovecraft’s fiction signifies just how dramatically his conception of the urban landscape had changed. Prior to 1925, the city appears in Lovecraft’s fiction in the form of an Atlantean dream-city, a fantastic, paradisaal metropolis inspired by Dunsany, Greek mythology, and *The Arabian Nights*. These cities, quite tellingly, disappear from Lovecraft’s work after he moves to New York: none of the five tales he writes while living there contain one of these places.<sup>129</sup> In the summer of 1926, shortly after Lovecraft returned home to Providence, their nightmarish counterparts begin to emerge, the first of these Cyclopean monster-cities appearing in “The Call of Cthulhu.”<sup>130</sup> In that tale, Lovecraft provides

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127. The earliest of these eight works, “The Call of Cthulhu,” was written in 1926, the last in late 1935. Seven of them, the exception being “The Haunter of the Dark,” appear on Michel Houellebecq’s list of Lovecraft’s “great texts,” which he discusses in his book-length essay *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*. Houellebecq also includes “The Colour out of Space” on this list, a work that, in many ways, departs from the template Lovecraft uses for so many of his later works. *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, 41.

128. Houellebecq arrives at a similar conclusion, noting in passing that “it could even be posited that a fundamental figure in his body of work—the idea of a grand, titanic city, in whose foundations crawl repugnant nightmare beings—sprang directly from his New York experience.” *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, 103.

129. Though Lovecraft lived in New York from 1924 to 1926, he only wrote five stories during that time: “The Shunned House,” “The Horror at Red Hook,” “He,” “In the Vault,” and “Cool Air.”

130. Conversely, one could argue that New York itself, or at least the futuristic version of it glimpsed in “He,” which Lovecraft describes as “a hellish black city of giant stone terraces with impious pyramids flung savagely to the moon,” constitutes the first example of a Cyclopean monster-city in Lovecraft’s fiction. Unlike Lovecraft’s other monster-cities, it is not the home or the birthplace of alien gods, though Lovecraft, whose xenophobia has already been discussed, does seem to regard its inhabitants as less than human.

a description that would function as a sort of template, which he would use, with surprisingly few modifications, in many of his later stories:

I suppose that only a single mountaintop, the hideous monolith-crowned citadel whereon great Cthulhu was buried, actually emerged from the waters. When I think of the *extent* of all that may be brooding down there I almost wish to kill myself forthwith. Johansen and his men were awed by the cosmic majesty of this dripping Babylon of elder daemons, and must have guessed without guidance that it was nothing of this or of any sane planet. Awe at the unbelievable size of the greenish stone blocks, at the dizzying height of the great carven monolith, and at the stupefying identity of the colossal statues and bas-reliefs with the queer image found in the shrine on the *Alert*, is poignantly visible in every line of the mate's frightened description.

Without knowing what futurism is like, Johansen achieved something very close to it when he spoke of the city; for instead of describing any definite structure or building, he dwells only on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces—surfaces too great to belong to any thing right or proper for this earth, and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs. I mention his talk about *angles* because it suggests something Wilcox had told me of his awful dreams. He had said that the *geometry* of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours. Now an unlettered seaman felt the same thing whilst gazing at the terrible reality.<sup>131</sup>

Never again would Lovecraft provide such a detailed description of a monster-city, preferring to allude to their existence, but his allusions, abbreviated though they are, always refer to the same features, these cities being invariably built of enormous stones, almost always described as “Cyclopean”; resistant to geometry as we know it; and decorated with “horrible images and hieroglyphs.”<sup>132</sup> It is as if Lovecraft's Atlantean dream-cities, after millennia beneath the waves, have reemerged, dripping with seaweed and redolent of decay. At first glance, such alien worlds

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131. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 51.

132. As Joshi has pointed out, the rise of R'lyeh out of the depths of the ocean recalls a similar scene in “Dagon,” which Lovecraft wrote nine years before “The Call of Cthulhu.” In that story, the narrator, lost on the open sea, is stranded when the sea floor rises above the waves. While exploring this new land, he encounters a stone monolith and the gigantic creature that worships it. Noting these similarities, Joshi goes so far as to claim that “The Call of Cthulhu” is “an exhaustive reworking” of “Dagon.” For our purposes, however, it is worth noting that, while the seafloor in “Dagon” is a flat and empty wilderness, R'lyeh is an enormous city, only the highest district of which is exposed. Joshi, *I Am Providence*, 640.

bear no resemblance to New York, as we might visualize it, but the language Lovecraft uses to describe his monster-cities mirrors his description of New York in “He,” which is, after all, not a description of what New York looks like, but a description of how New York made Lovecraft feel: “In the Cyclopean modern towers and pinnacles that rise blackly Babylonian under waning moons, I had found instead only a sense of horror and oppression which threatened to master, paralyse, and annihilate me.”<sup>133</sup>

As a symbol, the Cyclopean monster-city represents these feelings, Lovecraft’s sense, that is, of being alone in an uncaring world populated by powerful but indifferent, perhaps even malevolent, forces. The godlike monsters that inhabit these places care nothing about humanity or morality as we understand it; from an anthropocentric perspective, they may seem malicious, but judged objectively, they are merely disinterested. Just as human beings pay no attention to the welfare of the bacteria in our intestines, entities like Cthulhu, whom Lovecraft describes as a “mountain [that] walked,” cannot be bothered with something as insignificant as the human race.<sup>134</sup> Lovecraft himself makes this point, arguing that his fiction explores a cosmic, as opposed to human, perspective:

Now 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. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human

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133. Lovecraft, “He,” 506. Nor is that the only passage Lovecraft ever wrote that describes modern New York as if it were a nightmare-city. In a letter penned in 1930, four years after Lovecraft returned home to Providence, he describes his impressions in a series of disconnected fragments, only a few of which can be quoted here: “darting up steps to strange sunward vistas, taking in exotic contrasts & outspread seas of alien roofs & spires, hurtling through interstellar blackness in cryptic subways, never knowing on just what planet or within just what universe I would next emerge to overwhelming light. . . . rattle of the elevated through unknown labyrinths of accursed life. . . . Pressure of insane blackness on the insane lights of Time Square at night—like a low, evil ceiling over a monstrosly brazier’d and doom-hieroglyphed secret temple of inner Ægyptus.” H. P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton, Providence, March 12, 1930, in *Letters to James F. Morton*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 223.

134. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 53.



passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.<sup>135</sup>

As Joshi argues, the Cthulhu Mythos, the pantheon of godlike aliens Lovecraft created, symbolizes this “real externality,” which, as is fitting, is reflected in the cities they inhabit.<sup>136</sup> Their incomprehensible design, inhuman artistry, illogical geometry, and titanic size resist human understanding or appreciation. Indeed, those who encounter such cities find them baffling: Henry Wilcox, for instance, who sees R’lyeh in his dreams, can only describe its geometry as “*all wrong*” while Gustaf Johansen, who actually encounters the city after it rises from beneath the sea, cannot describe “any definite structure or building,” instead dwelling “only on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces—surfaces too great to belong to any thing right or proper for this earth, and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs.”<sup>137</sup> Fundamentally alien or inhuman, these cities defy description, and those who make the attempt can only speak vaguely of “horrible images” and “broad impressions.” Human beings, Lovecraft suggests, are not objective observers, detached intelligences that can understand or appreciate realms of experience fundamentally different from their own. Instead, we are bound to a specific tradition, which provides a vantage point from which we observe and interpret reality. As a

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135. H. P. Lovecraft to Farnsworth Wright, Providence, July 5, 1927, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 2 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1968), 150.

136. Joshi, who has little interest in the Cthulhu Mythos as a mythology, claims that “it is careless and inaccurate to say that the Lovecraft Mythos *is* Lovecraft’s philosophy: his philosophy is mechanistic materialism and all its ramifications, and if the Lovecraft Mythos is anything, it is a series of plot devices meant to facilitate the expression of this philosophy.” And yet, as convincing as Joshi’s argument is, it is telling that so many of Lovecraft’s godlike monsters live in *cities*. Such creatures may defy the laws of space and time as we know them, but they still live in a type of place we associate specifically with humanity. It is as if Lovecraft, despite his talk of “real externality,” cannot help but associate the alien with the urban landscape. *A Subtler Magick*, 129.

137. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 51.

result, no human being can have an emotional or aesthetic connection to a place like R'lyeh, which not only does not conform to any recognizable tradition, but actively contradicts norms that had once seemed universal.<sup>138</sup> The nebulousness that results, the inability, that is, to apply topographical realism to such places, may frustrate some readers, who tire of Lovecraft's elusiveness and want to see R'lyeh in vivid detail, but Lovecraft's approach to these monster-cities not only reinforces his theory about the "essence of real externality," but also captures his recent experience of being trapped in an alien city that did not conform, in any way, to his own conceptions of home. Thus, the feelings that inspire the monster-city emerged not in the summer of 1926 when Lovecraft wrote "The Call of Cthulhu," but in 1925 when Lovecraft was living in what felt like an alien city. Interpreted in this way, Lovecraft's New York tales, which at first glance seem insubstantial, as if they were divorced from the concept of "real externality" that Lovecraft would develop in his later fiction, take on added significance. Indeed, the New York of "Cool Air," that all powerful entity that cares nothing for the narrator's desperate search, acts as a perfect microcosm of our godless and meaningless universe as Lovecraft, the atheist, envisioned it. Though one might argue that "Cool Air," by addressing these feelings directly, explores these themes of alienation more thoroughly than Lovecraft's later tales, Lovecraft would never address them in quite the same way again, preferring to write stories in which he

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138. Lovecraft stresses, repeatedly, that the city does not seem to obey what had once seemed to be the fixed laws of nature: "Briden pushed at the stone in several places without result. Then Donovan felt over it delicately around the edge, pressing each point separately as he went. He climbed interminably along the grotesque stone moulding—that is, one would call it climbing if the thing was not after all horizontal—and the men wondered how any door in the universe could be so vast. Then, very softly and slowly, the acre-great panel began to give inward at the top; and they saw that it was balanced. Donovan slid or somehow propelled himself down or along the jamb and rejoined his fellows, and everyone watched the queer recession of the monstrously carven portal. In this phantasy of prismatic distortion it moved anomalously in a diagonal way, so that all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset." Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," 52.

only *alludes* to a nightmarish urban landscape. It is as if, even though Lovecraft could not help returning to this image of an inhuman city, which he includes in one story after another, he could not or would not write about his experience directly, wishing perhaps to keep such powerful emotions at a distance. And yet, after his return to Providence, Lovecraft did not immediately move away from the urban landscape as a theme and a setting, nor did he display a greater interest in its antithesis: the natural landscape. Instead, he would begin depicting Providence itself as a sort of anti-city, as if it were the ideal urban landscape and the antidote to everything New York seemed to represent.

In the spring of 1927, less than a year after his return, Lovecraft would pen two of his longest works, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, which, in their very different ways, celebrate both his homecoming and his hometown itself. The first of the two, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* tells the story of Randolph Carter, Lovecraft's alter ego from "The Statement of Randolph Carter" and "The Unnamable," who journeys through dreamland in search of the "marvelous sunset city" he has glimpsed in his dreams:

Three times Randolph Carter dreamed of the marvellous city, and three times was he snatched away while still he paused on the high terrace above it. All golden and lovely it blazed in the sunset, with walls, temples, colonnades, and arched bridges of veined marble, silver-basined fountains of prismatic spray in broad squares and perfumed gardens, and wide streets marching between delicate trees and blossom-laden urns and ivory statues in gleaming rows; while on steep northward slopes climbed tiers of red roofs and old peaked gables harbouring little lanes of grassy cobbles.<sup>139</sup>

Dissatisfied with the world he knows, Randolph Carter, much like Lovecraft himself at this point in his life, is searching for the ideal city, and in that sense, the novella recalls Lovecraft's earlier works, such as "Celephaïs" and "The Quest of Iranon," which also dramatize the search for a

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139. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 98.

city, specifically what I have labeled an Atlantean dream-city. Initially, Carter's "marvelous sunset city" sounds as if it might be yet another variation on a setting Lovecraft had thoroughly explored at an earlier stage of his career. After all, the city contains all the same elements: Grecian architecture, "perfumed gardens," and exotic materials, such as silver and ivory. And yet, as Lovecraft's description of the city progresses, its character seems to change. The city's steep slopes lined with "old peaked gables" and crisscrossed by "little lanes of grassy cobbles" recall New England, not Greece. It is as if the city's Dunsanian features act as a sort of façade or illusion that, when examined closely enough, fades away, revealing the city's true nature.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, the description above foreshadows the tale's climax in which Carter learns that his ideal city exists, not in dreamland, but in the real world, being nothing more than the "sum of what you have seen and loved in youth."<sup>141</sup> In that sense, despite its superficial resemblance to Lovecraft's Dunsanian tales, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* actually rejects the very themes that were once so important to Lovecraft.<sup>142</sup> That is, the tale renounces the power of fantasy, the artist's ability to create an emotionally and aesthetically satisfying world out of whole cloth. Lovecraft's experience in New York had driven home the importance of tradition, revealing just how much Providence had shaped him and forcing him to acknowledge, much as Carter does, that pure imagination is not a suitable substitute. Indeed, from Lovecraft's perspective, neither he nor Carter can be separated from the New England landscapes that formed them, a sentiment he famously expressed in a letter to his aunt in 1925:

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140. Note the similarity to the opening of "He," in which the narrator explains that New York's sublime skyline masks a dead city.

141. Lovecraft, "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath," 211.

142. Joshi writes, "the Dunsanianism that was the hallmark of his 1919-1921 period appears to reemerge in a startling fashion in several tales of 1926, notably the dream-fantasy *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*; but when read closely, these tales in reality present a repudiation of Dunsanianism—or, more precisely, of what Lovecraft imagined Dunsany to represent." *A Subtler Magick*, 112.

I will be dogmatic only to the extent of saying that it is *New England* I *must* have—in some form or other. Providence is part of me—I *am* Providence. . . . Providence is my home, & there I shall end my days if I can do so with any semblance of peace, dignity, or appropriateness. . . . Providence would always be at the back of my head as a goal to be worked toward—an ultimate Paradise to be regain'd at last.<sup>143</sup>

Though speaking only for himself, Lovecraft suggests that the landscapes around us mold us into who we are. Separated from them, as Carter is and as Lovecraft was, we feel alienated, isolated, adrift, our memories of home being the only place in which we can find contentment and meaning. Carter may very well be an “old dreamer,” who has visited every corner of dreamland and sampled all its pleasures, but he is not at home there, nor is the reader.<sup>144</sup> Lovecraft’s descriptions reflect Carter’s growing—though subconscious—dissatisfaction with dreamland: compared to the passionate descriptions of New England that appear at the end of the tale, Lovecraft’s descriptions of dreamland seem vague, abbreviated, surreal, and unsatisfying. As a result, picturing dreamland is all but impossible: it is as if the story is taking place in a vacuum. And yet, as unsatisfying as that is from a reader’s perspective, such an approach makes sense thematically. As Joshi has argued, Carter’s lengthy journey, which consists of a repetitive and eventually tiresome series of outré encounters, actually reinforces Lovecraft’s message: our sense of meaning dissipates as soon as we are removed from the environment in which our values were formed.<sup>145</sup> Outside of that environment, in the bizarre dreamland of *The Dream-*

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143. H. P. Lovecraft to Lillian D. Clark, New York, March 29, 1926, in *Letters from New York*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2005), 289.

144. Lovecraft, “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath,” 101.

145. Joshi writes, “the various fantastic creatures Carter meets along his journey—gugs, ghaists, ghouls, moonbeasts, zoogs—touch no chord in us: they are not meant to. They are all very charming, in that ‘Dresden-china’ way Lovecraft mistook Dunsany to be; but they amount to nothing because they do not correspond to anything in our memories and dreams.” The same, of course, could be said of the places Carter visits. As for Lovecraft himself, he recognized just how unsatisfactory such an approach was from a reader’s perspective: “I concocted a whole novelette (which I never typed & which only Wandrei has read) in this vein in the winter of 1926-7, & the massed effect of it so bored & disgusted me that I changed my attitude & methods altogether.” Joshi, *A Subtler Magick*, 114; H. P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence,

*Quest of Unknown Kadath*, for instance, everything is meaningless. To return to that landscape, as Carter does and as Lovecraft did, is to wake from an unpleasant and largely unintelligible dream.

Lovecraft's newfound love and appreciation of Providence takes a very different form in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, which, despite being a more satisfying narrative than *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, also reveals the limitations of Lovecraft's approach to landscape description at this time. In it, the eponymous Ward, a young antiquarian whose love of Providence recalls Lovecraft's growing passion, learns of a mysterious ancestor, Joseph Curwen, who was a hated and feared necromancer in the eighteenth century. After learning from Curwen's notes how to use the "Essential Saltes" of corpses to bring them back to life, Ward resurrects the wizard, but when he refuses to assist Curwen with his plans, the necromancer murders Ward and passes himself off as the younger man, whom he closely resembles.<sup>146</sup> Such a simple summary, which is incomplete in so many ways, cannot hope to convey the novella's allure, but one must have some understanding of the plot to realize just how extraordinary the opening description is. Indeed, Lovecraft's description of Providence in Chapter One is the longest and most detailed in his entire opus:

His [Charles Dexter Ward's] walks were always adventures in antiquity, during which he managed to recapture from the myriad relics of a glamorous old city a vivid and connected picture of the centuries before. His home was a great Georgian mansion atop the well-nigh precipitous hill that rises just east of the river; and from the rear windows of its rambling wings he could look dizzily out over all the clustered spires, domes, roofs, and skyscraper summits of the lower town to the purple hills of the countryside beyond. Here he was born, and from the lovely classic porch of the double-bayed brick facade his nurse had first wheeled him in his carriage; past the little white farmhouse of two hundred years before that the town had long ago overtaken, and on toward the stately colleges along the shady, sumptuous street, whose old square brick mansions and smaller

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September 25, 1930, in *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 235-6.

146. Lovecraft, "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," 232.

wooden houses with narrow, heavy-columned Doric porches dreamed solid and exclusive amidst their generous yards and gardens.<sup>147</sup>

This description, a tiny fragment of which has been quoted, continues for pages. At thirteen hundred words, it is longer than “The Terrible Old Man” and “Nyarlathotep” and almost as long as “Polaris.” As an example of topographical realism, of Lovecraft’s unique ability to recreate a real place on paper, this opening forms the high-water mark in Lovecraft’s fiction, and yet, for our purposes, it is significant for a very different reason: the narrative does not justify such a long passage. It is the first of what I call Lovecraft’s “Gratuitous Descriptions.” Instead of moving the plot forward or developing the characters or adding to the verisimilitude, this description interrupts the story, slowing down the pace and pausing the narrative for no apparent reason. Despite his lifelong commitment to Poe’s Unity of Effect, Lovecraft violates it here.<sup>148</sup> His heartfelt attachment to place is spilling over into his fiction, interfering with his ability to tell a story. Indeed, the tale itself, though adored by admirers of Lovecraft’s work, takes a step backward. Since New York, which had inadvertently forced him to explore forms outside of the Gothic and Dunsanian mold, Lovecraft had been working towards a merger of science fiction and horror set in identifiable places in the modern world.<sup>149</sup> And yet, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, despite the skill apparent in its execution, is a conventional Gothic tale of supernaturalism, much of which takes place in the distant past. An insightful if unforgiving critic of his own work, Lovecraft himself recognized the tale’s limitations, referring to it as “a cumbrous, creaking bit of

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147. Lovecraft, “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,” 221-2.

148. Joshi, quoting Lovecraft’s reformulation of Poe’s Unity of Effect in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, claims that “all Lovecraft’s stories—even his three short novels—adhere to this principle.” Joshi, *A Subtler Magick*, 53.

149. Joshi also considers this “union of horror and science fiction” the “hallmark of [Lovecraft’s] later work,” though he perceives “The Call of Cthulhu,” rather than Lovecraft’s New York tales, as the turning point in his fiction. Joshi, *A Subtler Magick*, 137.

self-conscious antiquarianism.”<sup>150</sup> As unjust as such a description may be, Lovecraft is making a crucial admission: his re-creation of Providence transforms *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* from a weird tale into a sort of antiquarian travelogue.

Lovecraft, in fact, was so displeased with both *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* that he never submitted them anywhere. Considering how much Lovecraft wrote after he returned to Providence, finishing two novellas and five short stories in nine months, and how much he disapproved of his longest and most developed works, it seems as if Lovecraft were searching for a method, in the process experimenting with a variety of different settings, ranging from modern New York, to dreamland, to eighteenth-century Providence. To modern readers, specifically those fond of Lovecraft and his work, this experimentation may seem fruitful, but Lovecraft himself was less sanguine about his efforts. Judging by his reluctance to use New York, which, after he returned to Providence, he never again used as a setting, he was evidently unwilling to use the modern urban landscape—unless, as I have argued, it appeared in a symbolic form. And yet, as his comments on *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* indicate, his love of the colonial urban landscape had proved an obstacle rather than an aid. As for the dreamworld he developed in the early 1920s after reading Dunsany, it now seems flat and rather bland compared to New York and Providence. In a letter to fellow writer Clark Ashton Smith, Lovecraft acknowledges that this period was a crossroads for him and dismisses the products of that winter as “practice work,” which led to a “decidedly maturer style.”<sup>151</sup> One might assume, considering how much Lovecraft had loathed New York and

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150. H. P. Lovecraft to R. H. Barlow, Providence, March 19, 1934, in *O Fortunate Floridian: H. P. Lovecraft's Letters to R. H. Barlow*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 2007), 120.

151. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence, September 25, 1930, in Schultz and Joshi, *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill*, 236.



missed his hometown, that he would delight in his two odes to Providence. His dissatisfaction belies a shift in his thinking, a willingness to move away from the urban to an aesthetic he had long ignored in his fiction.

## V. Antithesis:

### Lovecraftian Pastoral (1928-1930)

*The way led down a dark, half-wooded heath  
Where moss-grey boulders humped above the mould,  
And curious drops, disquieting and cold,  
Sprayed up from unseen streams in gulfs beneath.*<sup>152</sup>

Lovecraft's experience in New York had biased him against the modern urban landscape, whose radical alterity he found threatening and disorienting, and yet he was dissatisfied with his attempts to write about Providence. Indeed, Lovecraft seems to protect Providence in his fiction by transferring the worst of his horrors to nearby Massachusetts, as if the very idea of a threat to the city was insupportable. In that sense, Providence was a less than ideal setting for the kind of horror story that Lovecraft was trying to write. Lovecraft himself may have sensed this: after *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, he did not use Providence as a setting again until he wrote "The Haunter of the Dark" eight years later in 1935. As for the natural landscape, the traditional antithesis of the urban, Lovecraft continued to ignore it. As discussed above, his descriptions of the natural landscape in his early works are abbreviated, embedded, generalized, and surreal, the main influence on his descriptions being that branch of the Gothic tradition associated with Edgar Allan Poe. At times, his settings recall New England, but they could just as easily be in Old England or, for that matter, anywhere in Northern Europe. Consider, for instance, the rural landscape that provides the setting for "The Statement of Randolph Carter":

The place was an ancient cemetery; so ancient that I trembled at the manifold signs of immemorial years. It was in a deep, damp hollow, overgrown with rank grass, moss, and curious creeping weeds, and filled with a vague stench which my idle fancy associated absurdly with rotting stone. On every hand were the signs of neglect and decrepitude, and I seemed haunted by the notion that Warren and I were the first living creatures to invade a lethal silence of centuries. Over the valley's rim a wan, waning crescent moon peered through the noisome vapours that seemed to emanate from unheard-of catacombs, and by

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152. H. P. Lovecraft, "Recapture," in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 94.

its feeble, wavering beams I could distinguish a repellent array of antique slabs, urns, cenotaphs, and mausolean facades; all crumbling, moss-grown, and moisture-stained, and partly concealed by the gross luxuriance of the unhealthy vegetation.<sup>153</sup>

Judging by the references to the Gainesville Pike and Big Cypress Swamp, scholars have concluded that the story takes place in Florida, but Lovecraft makes no attempt to convey to the reader what Florida is like. If the words “Gainesville Pike” and “Big Cypress Swamp” were removed, the reader might think the story occurs in New England or the Midwest or anywhere. Prior to 1927, the natural landscape simply did not interest Lovecraft as a setting or a theme. In a way, that is fitting. After all, one has difficulty imagining Lovecraft in a natural setting. Fastidious, abstemious, asexual, and bookish, Lovecraft, as we imagine him to be, would have seemed out of place amidst natural surroundings.<sup>154</sup> Jack Morgan even suggests that Lovecraft’s fiction conveys a dislike of the organic, implying that Lovecraft found life itself rather disgusting.<sup>155</sup> And yet, the natural landscape, neglected for so long, would come to dominate Lovecraft’s fiction, eventually forming an important part of his aesthetic. Indeed, Lovecraft

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153. Lovecraft, “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” 134.

154. St. Armand, for instance, depicts young Lovecraft as a rather dandyish figure: “friends like Rheinhart Kleiner would call on Lovecraft in his cluttered, stuffy, and hypochondriacal apartment in Providence, and find him lounging in a dressinggown, striking languid attitudes that would have been borrowed, variously, from Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, Huysman’s *Des Esseintes*, or Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*.” *H. P. Lovecraft: New England Decadent*, 21.

155. Morgan contends that “Lovecraft was an ardent scientific materialist for whom the organic suggested the unclean, a harbor of vileness. This phobia contributed positively to his tales of terror, but it unfortunately extended to his virtually psychopathic social philosophy and politics. . . .” Houellebecq, going one step farther, concludes that Lovecraft found existence itself hateful: “This is the profound secret of Lovecraft’s genius, and the pure source of his poetry: he succeeded in transforming his aversion for life into an *effective* hostility.” Considering Lovecraft’s dislike of sex, his disinterest in foodstuffs, and his hatred for fish and seafood, one is tempted to agree with Morgan, if not with Houellebecq. And yet, Lovecraft also loved the outdoors, often preferring to work outside, a preference at odds with a hatred for the organic. *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 100-1; *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, 119.

himself would later claim that he wrote fiction in part because he wanted to express the delicate moods inspired by certain types of landscapes:

My reason for writing stories is to give myself the satisfaction of visualising more clearly and detailedly and stably the vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy which are conveyed to me by certain sights (scenic, architectural, atmospheric, etc.), ideas, occurrences, and images encountered in art and literature.<sup>156</sup>

Elsewhere, Lovecraft states that these moods, these “fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy,” not only inspired him to write, but inspired him to live. Indeed, Lovecraft goes so far as to claim that what prevented him from committing suicide was not love or friendship or even self-expression, but the mere *sight* of certain landscapes:

I am perfectly confident that I could never adequately convey to any other human being the precise reasons why I continue to refrain from suicide. . . . These reasons are strongly linked with architecture, scenery, and lighting and atmospheric effects, and take the form of vague impressions of adventurous expectancy coupled with elusive memory—impressions that certain vistas, particularly those associated with sunsets, are avenues of approach to spheres or conditions of wholly undefined delights and freedoms which I have known in the past and have a slender possibility of knowing again in the future.<sup>157</sup>

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156. Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” 175.

157. H. P. Lovecraft to August Derleth, Providence, December 19 or 26, 1930, in *Essential Solitude: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1926-1931 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 301-2. One might be tempted to disregard Lovecraft’s bold statement, dismissing it, perhaps, as an exaggeration. And yet, his letters are replete with similar claims: “Sometimes I stumble accidentally on rare combinations of slope, curved street-line, roofs & gables & chimneys, & accessory details of verdure & background, which in the magic of late afternoon assume a mystic majesty & exotic significance beyond the power of words to describe. Absolutely nothing else in life now has the power to move me so much; for in these momentary vistas there seem to open before me bewildering avenues to all the wonders & lovelinesses I have ever sought. . . . All that I live for is to recapture some fragment of this hidden & just unreachable beauty.” Note the similarities between the two passages, which were written three and a half years apart: both mention “architecture” as well as “scenery,” which must be viewed at a very specific time—during what photographers call the “golden hour.” H. P. Lovecraft to Donald Wandrei, Providence, April 21, 1927, in *Mysteries of Time and Spirit: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Donald Wandrei*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2002), 89.

One could argue that Lovecraft does not wholly dismiss the urban landscape in these statements, noting that architecture, along with “scenery,” can stimulate a sense of “adventurous expectancy,” but in his poem “Continuity,” Lovecraft states, very clearly, his preference for the rural landscape, which, as the title suggests, reunites the viewer with the past and, by doing so, inspires a sense of permanence:

It moves me most when slanting sunbeams glow  
On old farm buildings set against a hill,  
And paint with life the shapes which linger still  
From centuries less a dream than this we know.  
In that strange light I feel I am not far  
From the fixt mass whose sides the ages are.<sup>158</sup>

Considering how little interest in the natural landscape his early fiction conveys, Lovecraft’s assertion that the sight of a farm at sunset “moves me most” indicates a rather remarkable shift in his perspective. What changed? What caused Lovecraft, who once thought of himself as an “urban, civilized type,” to see the rural New England landscape as a life-affirming link with imperishable traditions, a semi-divine means of connecting with the “fixt mass whose sides the ages are”? Clearly, his dreadful experience in New York had impressed upon him just how aesthetically barren and psychologically harmful urban modernity can be, but it did not, in and of itself, give him an appreciation for the rural or the natural. After all, in the letters he wrote while living in New York, Lovecraft does not express a longing for the natural landscape; he expresses a longing for Providence. For that matter, Lovecraft did not begin writing about the natural landscape immediately after he escaped New York, his major works, such as “The Call of Cthulhu,” *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, taking place in either Providence or dreamland. No, the shift did not occur after New York. It began, I

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158. H. P. Lovecraft, “Continuity,” in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 95.

would argue, when Lovecraft visited Foster, Rhode Island, in 1927 and found in the natural landscape what he had lost in New York: a sense of continuity.

This short visit, so easily overlooked, would initiate a radical shift in how Lovecraft perceived the natural landscape, a change that would soon begin to appear in his fiction. Several branches of Lovecraft's mother's family hailed from that area, which Lovecraft had visited in 1896 when he was a child and again in 1908 when he was a teenager. In October 1926, six months after his return to Providence, Lovecraft returned to Foster with the youngest of his maternal aunts, Annie E. P. Gamwell. Though their visit lasted only a single day, the two thoroughly explored the area, admiring the scenery, talking with relatives, examining rural cemeteries, and inspecting "as many of the original colonial homesteads as are yet standing."<sup>159</sup> Though Lovecraft had lived almost his entire life in Rhode Island, he describes the experience as if he were seeing the New England countryside for the first time:

As we followed the antique highway past copse and mead, cottage and stream, gentle slope and shady bend, I was destin'd to be surpris'd by the loveliness of the countryside. I had known before that it was pretty, but having seen it only twice—once thirty and once eighteen years ago—I had never properly appreciated it. Now, in my old age, I was forcibly struck with its incomparable graceful lines of rolling hill and stone-walled meadow, distant vale and hanging woodland, curving roadway and nestling farmstead, and all along the route the crystal convolutions of the upper Moosup River, cross'd here and there by some pleasing rustic bridge.<sup>160</sup>

Indeed, Lovecraft repeatedly voices his admiration for the countryside, being "literally enchanted with the beauty of the landscape" and "prodigiously imprest with the beauty of the whole picture."<sup>161</sup> Accompanying these declarations are lavish, detailed portraits of the rural landscape,

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159. H. P. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, October 26, 1926, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 2, 1925-1929 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1968), 81.

160. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, October 26, 1926, in Derleth and Wandrei, *Selected Letters*, 82.

161. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, October 26, 1926, in Derleth and Wandrei, *Selected Letters*, 83, 85.

examples of topographical realism that have little in common with the dreamy descriptions found in Lovecraft's early works. And yet, for Lovecraft, the natural beauty of the scene formed but one part of its appeal. As he and his aunt traipsed across the countryside, they kept encountering dimly remembered, if not long-forgotten, scenes from their past: the house in which his mother, now deceased, had been born; the village of Greene, which his beloved grandfather had founded; the site where his great-grandfather had died in an industrial accident; the gravestone which marked where his great-great grandfather, Stephen Place, had been buried.<sup>162</sup> In New York, Lovecraft had felt as if he were separated from the world he knew, as if he were living in an alien world in which nothing was beautiful or recognizable. The country surrounding Foster inspired the opposite emotion, the rural landscape being a visual link connecting Lovecraft to a place and a people and a tradition that, unlike the "dead" city of New York, were alive, the chain connecting Foster to the past being unbroken by modernity.<sup>163</sup> Moreover, unlike the people of New York, who, from Lovecraft's perspective, had no connection to the place where they now lived, the rural folk Lovecraft encountered on his trip only reinforced this impression of cultural continuity. In 1925, in New York, Lovecraft had tried, rather pathetically, to "keep 454 always in my dreams" by preserving his beloved grandfather's "ponderous furniture & paintings & clocks & books." In Greene, he could talk to people who had actually known his grandfather and even worked for him when he was a young man. For Lovecraft, the trip was a journey inward, an exploration of the places that had shaped him: "This devotional survey is naturally a recreation of the keenest interest; covering as it does those forms of landscape whose images are permanently burnt into my pastoral soul, and those actual scenes from which my personality was

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162. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, October 26, 1926, in Derleth and Wandrei, *Selected Letters*, 88, 88, 82, 86.

163. Lovecraft, "He," 507.

moulded. . . .”<sup>164</sup> Lovecraft, the man who had once claimed that “the environment into which I was born was that of the average American Protestant of urban, civilised type,” had discovered his “pastoral soul.” Converted and revitalized after his experience in New York, he proudly proclaimed that he was “infus’d and saturated with the vital forces of my inherited being, and rebaptis’d in the mood, atmosphere, and personality of sturdy New-England forbears” and renounced the urban in favor of the rural: “A pox on thy taowns and decadent modern notions—one sight of the mossy walls and white gables of true agrestick America, and pure heredity can flout ’em all!”<sup>165</sup> After returning from Foster, Lovecraft would start work on his two novellas, his odes to Providence, but his newfound appreciation for the natural landscape would soon appear in a short story that, according to Lovecraft himself, was the best that he would ever write.<sup>166</sup>

Finished in March 1927, less than a month after the completion of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, “The Colour out of Space” bears little resemblance to anything else Lovecraft had written up to that point, being a poignant tale of ecological disaster and a rural family’s dissolution. Employing a multileveled frame narrative, the story itself is actually told by an unnamed surveyor, a stranger to the area, who encounters a curious spot, “five acres of grey desolation that sprawled open to the sky like a great spot eaten by acid in the woods and fields.”<sup>167</sup> The local townsfolk refuse to talk about the “blasted heath,” but the narrator learns its

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164. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, October 26, 1926, in Derleth and Wandrei, *Selected Letters*, 81.

165. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, October 26, 1926, in Derleth and Wandrei, *Selected Letters*, 87.

166. “Of my products, my favourites are ‘The Colour out of Space’ and ‘The Music of Erich Zann’, in the order named.” H. P. Lovecraft, “Some Notes on a Nonentity,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 5, *Philosophy; Autobiography & Miscellany* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2006), 210.

167. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, 1926-1930 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 369.



story from an old timer named Ammi Pierce, whose account forms the rest of the tale. His story begins with a meteorite, which crashes into an isolated farm belonging to the Gardner family, landing not far from the well. Several scientists from the nearby city of Arkham examine the stone, which displays odd properties, its color, for instance, being “almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all.”<sup>168</sup> Continuously and inexplicably shrinking, all traces of the meteorite soon disappear, leaving the professors baffled. That autumn, Nahum Gardner’s orchards produce bigger fruit than ever, but the fruit tastes foul, and he ultimately loses the entire crop. The meteorite has, it seems, somehow “poisoned the soil” and contaminated the well water.<sup>169</sup> Gradually, everything on the farm, including the vegetables, the trees, the livestock, and even the wild animals, becomes corrupted, the vegetation eventually “crumbling to a greyish powder.”<sup>170</sup> As for the Gardner family, which continues to drink from the well, its members begin to deteriorate mentally and psychologically. The first to succumb, Nahum’s wife is locked in the attic, while her husband and their three sons become increasingly listless and oddly apathetic. One by one, the members of the Gardner family either lose their minds or disappear. When Ammi sees his friend and neighbor for the last time, Nahum is scarcely human, having physically disintegrated. And yet, Nahum cannot bring himself to leave, claiming that the color embedded in the meteorite “beats down your mind an’ then gits ye . . . burns ye up [. . .] ye know summ’at’s comin’, but ’tain’t no use. . . .”<sup>171</sup> Later that evening, Ammi returns with the police, and while they watch, horrified, from inside the farmhouse, the color explodes from the well, shooting “vertically up toward the sky like a rocket or meteor,

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168. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” 373.

169. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” 375.

170. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” 381.

171. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” 387-8.

leaving behind no trail and disappearing through a round and curiously regular hole in the clouds before any man could gasp or cry out.”<sup>172</sup>

Though necessary, such a summary cannot hope to convey the beauty and richness of the rural setting in which “The Colour out of Space” takes place. Having displayed a remarkable talent for description in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, Lovecraft demonstrates in “The Colour out of Space” that he can just as easily apply those talents to the rural landscape, in the process creating a fictional world that seems real, that seems to extend far beyond the boundaries of the story. In that sense, Lovecraft’s early works, by comparison, resemble plays, which contain a stage just large enough to accommodate the plot and which, as a result, conform to the principle of Chekhov’s gun. Here, however, Lovecraft creates a world that seems to stretch far beyond the Gardner’s farm, the relatively small stage where most of the action takes place. Indeed, the reader learns about a multiplicity of adjacent places, including cities, such as Arkham, Bolton, and Boston; hamlets, such as Clark’s Corners; landmarks, such as Meadow Hill and Chapman’s Brook; and even institutions, such as Miskatonic University. Lovecraft, in other words, is not just creating an expansive world for his story; he is creating a world that is much larger and more complex than it needs to be. This desire, or need, to engage in unnecessary worldbuilding surfaces early in the story, which opens with a lengthy description, one infinitely longer than the abbreviated ones that appear in so many of Lovecraft’s early works:

When I went into the hills and vales to survey for the new reservoir they told me the place was evil. They told me this in Arkham, and because that is a very old town full of witch legends I thought the evil must be something which grandams had whispered to children through centuries. The name ‘blasted heath’ seemed to me very odd and theatrical, and I wondered how it had come into the folklore of a Puritan people. Then I saw that dark westward tangle of glens and slopes for myself, and ceased to wonder at anything besides its own elder mystery. It was morning when I saw it, but shadow lurked always there. The trees grew too thickly, and their trunks were too big for any healthy

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172. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” 396.

New England wood. There was too much silence in the dim alleys between them, and the floor was too soft with the dank moss and mattings of infinite years of decay.

In the open spaces, mostly along the line of the old road, there were little hillside farms; sometimes with all the buildings standing, sometimes with only one or two, and sometimes with only a lone chimney or fast-filling cellar. Weeds and briars reigned, and furtive wild things rustled in the undergrowth. Upon everything was a haze of restlessness and oppression; a touch of the unreal and the grotesque, as if some vital element of perspective or chiaroscuro were awry. I did not wonder that the foreigners would not stay, for this was no region to sleep in. It was too much like a landscape of Salvator Rosa; too much like some forbidden woodcut in a tale of terror.<sup>173</sup>

No more than a fraction can be quoted, as the full description contains more than six hundred words or about three pages worth of text, which explore the rural country west of Arkham, describe the wooded hills and “squat, moss-coated cottages” dotting the region, and explain the history of the region and its settlement. Though shorter than the description of Providence that appears in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, its counterpart in “The Colour out of Space” is noteworthy not only for its focus on the natural landscape but for its creativity, for the rural country it depicts is entirely Lovecraft’s creation. It is as if Lovecraft, who had resumed writing fiction a decade before “The Colour out of Space,” is just now discovering the opportunities it provides for a style of play he had always favored, the creation of miniature worlds:

My favourite toys were *very small* ones, which would permit of their arrangement in widely extensive scenes. My mode of play was to devote an entire table-top to a scene, which I would proceed to develop as a broad landscape . . . helped by occasional trays of earth or clay. I had all sorts of *toy villages* with small wooded or cardboard houses, and by combining several of them would often construct *cities* of considerable extent and intricacy. (Do they make these toy villages now? There were even steepled churches!) Toy trees—of which I had an infinite number—were used with varying effect to form parts of the landscape . . . even *forests* (or the suggested edges of forests). Certain kinds of blocks made walls and hedges, and I also used blocks in constructing large public buildings.<sup>174</sup>

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173. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” 368-9.

174. H. P. Lovecraft to J. Vernon Shea, Providence, November 22, 1933, in *Letters to J. Vernon Shea, Carl F. Strauch, and Lee McBride White*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2016), 187.

Exploring this rediscovered “mode of play,” Lovecraft adds more and more detail as the story proceeds, alluding not just to buildings and villages but to flowers and wildlife, elements that, up to this point, have been absent from Lovecraft’s fiction. By doing so, he creates a landscape that is both beautiful and eerie.<sup>175</sup> The eeriness, of course, adds to the sense of dread that Lovecraft, as a horror writer, wished to cultivate and, in that sense, recalls his Gothic approach to landscape description with its emphasis on decay and isolation, but at first glance, it may be unclear what purpose, if any, the *beauty* of the scene serves.

I would argue that, as poignant as “The Colour out of Space” is, the gradual but seemingly inevitable decline of the Gardner family being one of the saddest stories Lovecraft would ever tell, the story’s power, its emotional force, stems not from the predicament facing its characters but from the corruption threatening the natural landscape that Lovecraft so lovingly pens. Indeed, Lovecraft’s decision to lavish so much attention on the landscape transforms the tale, shifting the emphasis away from the human characters and onto the land itself. One could hardly overstate how disturbing the resulting story is, for the reader must watch, helpless, as the meteorite methodically poisons the idyllic world Lovecraft has created, infecting the fruit, the trees, the water, and even the animals. This infection, moreover, cannot be treated or reversed. Radiation may, in time, dissipate, but the “blasted heath” will never heal. It will always remain a scar on the landscape, “a great spot eaten by acid in the woods and fields.” Confronted with this nightmarish tale of relentless, inescapable, and untreatable ecological corruption, modern readers will immediately think of global warming or nuclear war or acid rain, but from Lovecraft’s perspective, the greatest threat to rural New England was urban modernity. Interpreted in this

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175. Lovecraft, displaying a sudden and unexpected enthusiasm for botany, mentions a variety of flowering plants, including skunk cabbages, Dutchman’s breeches, bloodroots, asters, goldenrod, roses, zinneas, and hollyhocks.

way, “The Colour out of Space” symbolizes Lovecraft’s fear that he had not, in a sense, escaped from New York, the city itself being nothing more than an epicenter, not unlike the crater where the meteorite lands, out of which the evils of industrialism, commercialism, and urbanism were gradually seeping. Though outwardly thrilled to come home, Lovecraft knew that New York, so to speak, would not stay in New York. Even in the country around Foster, a place that had, even more so than College Hill in Providence, resisted modernity, the old ways were changing. In Lovecraft’s letter to Frank Belknap Long, in which he vividly describes his trip to the region, Lovecraft notes with irritation that foreign-born immigrants had come to Foster:

The only flaw in the picture is a recent social-ethnic one—FINNS, eternally confound ‘em, have bought the old Jacob Place house! This Finnish plague has afflicted North Foster for a decade, but has hardly secured a real foothold in Moosup Valley, only two families marring the otherwise solid colonialism. They are seldom seen or heard—but it does make me crawl to think of those bovine peasants in the house where my great-uncle’s wife was born—and tramping about an antient Place graveyard! Maybe a *hand* will reach up thro’ the rocky mould some day. . . .<sup>176</sup>

From Lovecraft’s viewpoint, these newcomers had snapped one of the links that connected the past to the present, in this case separating Lovecraft’s great-uncle’s wife from her descendants, whom Lovecraft evidently considered the rightful owners of the property. Lovecraft had actually written about this very theme in an earlier story, an inconsequential tale entitled “The Street,” which recounts how the arrival of immigrants transformed a quaint Colonial street into a seedy district of radicals.<sup>177</sup> The street, however, like the hand reaching “up thro’ the rocky mould,”

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176. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, October 26, 1926, in Derleth and Wandrei, *Selected Letters*, 86.

177. Scholars have paid relatively little attention to “The Street,” which Lovecraft completed in 1920, and do not consider it canonical. Neither Arkham House nor Penguin Books included the story in their three-volume sets of Lovecraft’s “collected” works. As for Lovecraft himself, he considered it a “failure”: “I’ve expunged both [*The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*] from my list of acknowledged writings—relegating them to the oblivion now enjoyed by such failures as ‘The Street’ & ‘Juan Romero.’ Before long I shall strike other items out in the same way—‘The Tree’, ‘Polaris’, ‘The Hound’, ‘The White Ship’, ‘He’, & perhaps a few more. It doesn’t do me any good to have my name

enacts its revenge: its buildings suddenly collapse one summer night, killing everyone and preventing “a vast band of terrorists” from launching “an orgy of slaughter for the extermination of America and of all the fine old traditions which The Street had loved.”<sup>178</sup> As different as “The Street,” which is little more than a fragment, and “The Colour out of Space” may seem, they both recount how an unstoppable threat gradually poisons an idyllic landscape, and the “fine old traditions” it symbolizes. In “The Colour out of Space,” however, Lovecraft wisely avoids the didactic approach he used in “The Street,” choosing to disguise the threat beneath layers of symbolism. If that is so, it may be that Lovecraft hides his meaning too well, for critics have interpreted “The Colour out of Space” literally, as a rumination on the potentially destructive alterity of alien life, rather than symbolically, as a tale of creeping modernity. Joshi, for instance, groups “The Colour out of Space” with Lovecraft’s later tales, such as *At the Mountains of Madness*, which explore humanity’s insignificance in the cosmos.<sup>179</sup> At first glance, such a classification makes sense, for the Gardner family is certainly powerless compared to the entity they face. And yet, Lovecraft’s depiction of the countryside complicates the message. The world Lovecraft creates is not a meaningless one in which humanity has no place, no meaningful role, for the land provides the Gardner family with exactly that; instead, it is a world in which humanity’s place is eroded by a process that, once initiated, is irreversible and incorrigible. This process prompts us not to think about the insignificance of humanity in a vast and godless universe, as Joshi suggests, but to think about potential threats to those natural landscapes that provide us with significance in a vast and godless universe. Like the Gardner family, which is as

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associated with absurd crap.” Lovecraft to R. H. Barlow, Providence, March 19, 1934, in Joshi and Schultz, *O Fortunate Floridian*, 120.

178. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Street,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 118.

179. Joshi calls it “the first of Lovecraft’s major tales to effect that union of horror and science fiction which would become the hallmark of his later work.” *A Subtler Magick*, 137.

much a part of the land as the trees and the flowers, we cannot live a full life without access to such places. If deprived of the landscapes that shaped us, as the Gardner family is in “The Colour out of Space” and as Lovecraft was in New York, we lose our connection to reality itself. As Lovecraft noted in a letter written shortly before he began “The Colour out of Space”:

Everything I saw [in New York] became unreal and two-dimensional, and everything I thought and did became trivial and devoid of meaning through lack of any points of reference belonging to any fabric of which I could conceivably form a part. I was stifled—poisoned—imprisoned in a nightmare—and now not even the threat of damnation could induce me to dwell in the accursed place again.<sup>180</sup>

Lovecraft’s comments, not coincidentally, recall Nahum’s Gardner’s behavior as he and his sons, having grown “calloused to strange and unpleasant things,” accept “unreal and two-dimensional” lives:

He and the boys continued to use the tainted supply, drinking it as listlessly and mechanically as they ate their meagre and ill-cooked meals and did their thankless and monotonous chores through the aimless days. There was something of stolid resignation about them all, as if they walked half in another world between lines of nameless guards to a certain and familiar doom.<sup>181</sup>

The Gardner family’s plight suggests that we cannot be separated from the landscapes of which, according to Lovecraft, we are a part. If they are destroyed, we are destroyed, our fates being intertwined. Interpreted in this way, “The Colour out of Space” becomes a work of ecological horror, an ode to the New England landscape and a rumination on what it might mean if it were lost. The next substantial story Lovecraft would write, “The Dunwich Horror,” would return to this very landscape, and as in “The Colour out of Space,” its presence radically changes how the reader experiences the tale.

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180. H. P. Lovecraft to Donald Wandrei, Providence, February 10, 1927, in *Mysteries of Time and Spirit: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Donald Wandrei*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2002), 35.

181. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” 381.

Described by Joshi as one of the weakest of Lovecraft's later works, "The Dunwich Horror" tells the story of the Whateley twins, the offspring of a human woman and an extraterrestrial entity known as Yog-Sothoth.<sup>182</sup> Not unlike "The Colour out of Space," the story opens with an extended description of Dunwich, a village in rural New England where the Whateley family lives. As far as the reader knows, the family consists of only three members: Lavinia Whateley, a "somewhat deformed, unattractive albino woman"; her elderly father, known in the text as Old Whateley; and her bastard son Wilbur Whateley, who is "exceedingly ugly . . . there being something almost goatish or animalistic about his thick lips, large-pored, yellowish skin, coarse crinkly hair, and oddly elongated ears."<sup>183</sup> The boy, moreover, matures rapidly, becoming physically mature at the age of ten. Before his death, his grandfather tutors him in the dark arts, teaching him how to perform rituals atop Sentinel Hill on May-Eve and All-Hallows. Old Whateley also teaches his grandson how to feed and care for his otherworldly twin, whose gigantic presence must be kept from the townsfolk. After the death of his mother and grandfather, Wilbur travels to Miskatonic University in Arkham to consult the *Necronomicon*, a grimoire that contains a spell he needs to "open up the gates to Yog-Sothoth," but the librarian, Dr. Henry Armitage, becomes suspicious and refuses to let the grotesque youth borrow the book.<sup>184</sup> Desperate, Wilbur tries to steal the volume one night, but a guard dog stops him. Armitage himself discovers the monstrous, tentacled corpse and concludes that the "really human element in Wilbur Whateley must have been very small."<sup>185</sup> With no one to feed it, Wilbur's twin grows hungry and, smashing through the farmhouse where Wilbur has been

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182. Joshi, though admitting that the story is "not a complete failure," contends that "many points of plotting and characterization in the story are painfully inept." *A Subtler Magick*, 142, 139.

183. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," 425.

184. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," 430.

185. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," 441.



keeping it, rampages through Dunwich, leaving behind what one local describes as “great round prints as big as barrel-heads.”<sup>186</sup> The invisible monstrosity wreaks havoc on several local families, but Armitage and his colleagues cast an incantation that destroys the creature, whose alien features they glimpse a moment before it is obliterated. According to Armitage, whose words conclude the story, “*it was his twin brother, but it looked more like the father than he did.*”<sup>187</sup>

As the above summary suggests, “The Dunwich Horror,” which depicts the natural landscape and its people as sources of horror, seems to differ quite dramatically from its predecessor “The Colour out of Space” and, initially at least, recalls the Gothic approach Lovecraft used in many of his early tales. Like “The Colour of Space,” however, or *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, Lovecraft begins the story with a detailed description of the setting:

When a traveller in north central Massachusetts takes the wrong fork at the junction of the Aylesbury pike just beyond Dean’s Corners he comes upon a lonely and curious country. The ground gets higher, and the brier-bordered stone walls press closer and closer against the ruts of the dusty, curving road. The trees of the frequent forest belts seem too large, and the wild weeds, brambles, and grasses attain a luxuriance not often found in settled regions. At the same time the planted fields appear singularly few and barren; while the sparsely scattered houses wear a surprisingly uniform aspect of age, squalor, and dilapidation. Without knowing why, one hesitates to ask directions from the gnarled, solitary figures spied now and then on crumbling doorsteps or on the sloping, rock-strown meadows. Those figures are so silent and furtive that one feels somehow confronted by forbidden things, with which it would be better to have nothing to do. When a rise in the road brings the mountains in view above the deep woods, the feeling of strange uneasiness is increased. The summits are too rounded and symmetrical to give a sense of comfort and naturalness, and sometimes the sky silhouettes with especial clearness the queer circles of tall stone pillars with which most of them are crowned.<sup>188</sup>

Yet again, the sheer length of Lovecraft’s description defies quotation, the description, in its entirety, consisting of more than five-hundred words or about two full pages. At first glance, it

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186. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 442.

187. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 466.

188. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 417-8.

seems to recall the Gothic approach, for the country surrounding Dunwich is a forbidding place, one that inspires feelings of isolation and dread. Planted fields are “few and barren,” the houses squalid and dilapidated, and the inhabitants “gnarled” and “solitary.” And yet, when we compare Lovecraft’s depiction of Dunwich to his ostensibly similar depiction of Tempest Mountain in “The Lurking Fear,” the differences become obvious. Lovecraft describes the natural landscape that constitutes Tempest Mountain as curiously unnatural, as abnormal and morbid:

It was not a wholesome landscape after dark. . . . The ancient lightning-scarred trees seemed unnaturally large and twisted, and the other vegetation unnaturally thick and feverish, while curious mounds and hummocks in the weedy, fulgurite-pitted earth reminded me of snakes and dead men’s skulls swelled to gigantic proportions.<sup>189</sup>

To the extent that Lovecraft’s surreal and outlandish description of Tempest Mountain inspires anything in the reader, it inspires disgust. It is a foul place infested with misshapen plants and populated by a grotesque people. Some, specifically the Martense family, have degenerated into monsters, but in terms of human evolution, the entire population has regressed, the inhabitants of Tempest Mountain being, in Lovecraft’s words, “poor mongrels” and “pitiful squatters.”<sup>190</sup> Indeed, as Lovecraft notes, “normal beings seldom visited the locality.”<sup>191</sup> By comparison, Lovecraft’s description of Dunwich inspires not revulsion but wonder. Despite the Gothic language and the emphasis on isolation and decay, Dunwich attracts rather than repels.<sup>192</sup> The reader, who has no desire to visit Tempest Mountain, cannot resist the region’s appeal. There is dread there, obviously, but there is also what Lovecraft calls “wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy,” the feeling that something extraordinary, though perhaps horrible, may be about to

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189. Lovecraft, “The Lurking Fear,” 350.

190. Lovecraft, “The Lurking Fear,” 350, 363.

191. Lovecraft, “The Lurking Fear,” 350.

192. Note, also, what Lovecraft leaves out of his description of Dunwich: signs of modernity. It is if, once he was away from New York, Lovecraft could not bring himself to write about the modern world. As a result, even decidedly creepy locales, like Dunwich, have a sort of antiquarian charm, as if they had not been touched by the Second Industrial Revolution.

happen.<sup>193</sup> Lovecraft achieves this effect by directing the reader through the landscape instead of simply displaying the landscape in front of the reader. This journey into the landscape begins when “a traveler in north central Massachusetts takes the wrong fork at the junction of the Aylesbury pike just beyond Dean’s Corners.”<sup>194</sup> As the reader, following along with this hypothetical traveler, approaches Dunwich, the road rises as it climbs into the hills, and the surrounding forests begin to crowd out the fields. Then the mountains appear on the horizon, followed by deep ravines and steep valleys at the bottom of which lie “stretches of marshland that one instinctively dislikes.”<sup>195</sup> Wildlife, previously unnoticed, begins to emerge, including whippoorwills and fireflies and bullfrogs. At this point, the reader has passed through the recognizable and somewhat mundane setting that is north central Massachusetts and entered into a sublime wilderness, a “lonely and curious country,” on the other side of which sits the village of Dunwich.<sup>196</sup> Unlike most descriptions, which pause the narrative in order to present the reader with a picture, Lovecraft’s description creates a virtual world that the reader, guided by Lovecraft, explores. In that sense, Lovecraft is inviting the reader into the story, into the world he has created. The description’s length and realism, so different from Lovecraft’s abbreviated and surrealistic approach to “The Lurking Fear,” reinforce this illusion, creating in the mind of the reader an impression of a real world, as inviting as it is frightening, that borders our own. Lovecraft never invites us to explore Tempest Mountain, which, in any case, seems to be nothing more than a series of disconnected images, although, for that matter, no reader would ever desire to do so. And yet, despite the radical difference between these two approaches to descriptions, critics have not asked how Lovecraft’s new approach to landscape description, which he

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193. Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” 175.

194. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 417.

195. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 418.

196. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 417-8.

embraces after New York, affects the way reader's experience Lovecraft's later works in general and "The Dunwich Horror" in particular.

I would suggest that, as with "The Colour out of Space," Lovecraft's novel approach transforms "The Dunwich Horror," greatly complicating what might otherwise seem like a rather conventional horror story. Indeed, from Joshi's perspective, "The Dunwich Horror" is one of the poorest of Lovecraft's later works, being an "elementary 'good vs. evil' struggle between Armitage and the Whateleys" that is especially disappointing when compared to its predecessor, the truly cosmic "The Colour out of Space."<sup>197</sup> A testament to Lovecraft's philosophy of "cosmicism," that tale actually captures what Lovecraft calls the "essence of real externality," the meteorite being beyond our conception of "good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind."<sup>198</sup> By comparison, it would seem as if "The Dunwich Horror" reinforces humanity's misguided belief that our terrestrial values can be applied throughout the cosmos, for the "erudite Henry Armitage (A.M. Miskatonic, Ph. D. Princeton, Litt. D. Johns Hopkins)" is clearly good and Wilbur Whateley clearly bad.<sup>199</sup> And yet, such distinctions, though in accord with the plot itself, do not reflect the actual reading experience, for the didactic message that is explicitly revealed in "The Dunwich Horror" and which forms the ostensible reason for the story itself, contradicts not just Lovecraft's views and sentiments but the reader's as well. This observation actually applies to many of Lovecraft's stories. Consider, for instance, the story "He," which has been discussed previously. No reader can fail to recognize that the murderous magician is the villain, and yet, as a preserver of tradition and a lover of the ancient, he closely resembles Lovecraft himself. Indeed, Virgil

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197. Joshi, *I Am Providence*, 718.

198. Lovecraft to Farnsworth Wright, Providence, July 5, 1927, in Derleth and Wandrei, *Selected Letters*, 150.

199. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," 433.

Finlay's famous portrait of Lovecraft in eighteenth-century garb would be a fitting illustration for the story. Confronted with this incongruity, the reader finds himself in an odd position: he both admires and fears the villain, who seems to be the problem as well as the solution. The resulting disharmony, a literary device I call Lovecraftian Contrarianism, lends zest to his fiction, ensuring that even the simplest tale inspires a complex reaction. Despite Joshi's dismissal of the "The Dunwich Horror" as "not much more than a pastiche," the story, in part because of the alluring setting Lovecraft so painstakingly depicts, perfectly captures this notion.<sup>200</sup> Thus, even though Lovecraft insists that "outsiders visit Dunwich as seldom as possible," the virgin forests, rolling hills, deep ravines, and wooden bridges appeal to the reader's sense of the picturesque. Though ostensibly a place to be avoided, Dunwich is exactly the sort of out-of-the-way place Lovecraft would have found delightful. In Lovecraft's curious, seemingly gratuitous description of Dunwich, readers receive their first hint that the conventional laws of storytelling do not always apply to Lovecraft. In his fiction, monsters may represent both our deepest fears as well as our deepest desires. Consider, for instance, Wilbur Whateley, the grotesque degenerate and supposed villain, whose insatiable desire for knowledge mirrors Lovecraft's own passion. Indeed, the two are not as different as they may seem, Wilbur's childhood being much like Lovecraft's. Perceived as odd by his peers and deprived of his father, Wilbur spends his childhood in arcane pursuits inspired by his beloved grandfather, just as Lovecraft did. Young Wilbur, moreover, just like Lovecraft, matures rapidly, and as young adults, both have strained relationships with their mothers. Symbolically, Wilbur's failed attempt to gain access to Miskatonic University's resources recalls Lovecraft's failure to enter Brown.<sup>201</sup> As for Wilbur's

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200. Joshi, *I Am Providence*, 719.

201. Due to his erratic attendance, Lovecraft never earned a high school diploma and, as a result, could not attend Brown University as he had always assumed he would. He was, as he explains in a letter to his friend Reinhart Kleiner, deeply embarrassed by this failure: "Of my

goals, he seeks to conjure Yog-Sothoth, whom the Necronomicon cryptically describes as an all-powerful entity: “*Yog-Sothoth* is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in *Yog-Sothoth*.”<sup>202</sup> What, precisely, this means is unclear, but it suggests that Yog-Sothoth not only controls time, but can, being the guardian of the gate between worlds, subvert natural law as we know it. Why Wilbur would want access to such an entity remains an open question, his motivations being unaddressed by the text, but in his letters, Lovecraft often claims that his desire to escape from the confines of time and natural law motivated him to write:

I am interested only in broad pageants—historic streams—orders of biological, chemical, physical, and astronomical organisation—and the only conflict which has any deep emotional significance to me is that of *the principle of freedom or irregularity or adventurous opportunity against the eternal and maddening rigidity of cosmic law*. . . . especially the laws of *time*. . . . The cosmos is such a closely-locked round of fatality—with everything prearranged—that nothing impresses me as *really dramatic* except some sudden and abnormal *violation of that relentless inevitability* . . . something which cannot exist, but which can be imagined as existing. Hence the type of thing I try to write.<sup>203</sup>

Despite being a monstrosity that we should all presumably despise and fear, Yog-Sothoth seems to symbolize that “irregularity or adventurous opportunity against the eternal and maddening rigidity of cosmic law” that Lovecraft was so desperately seeking.<sup>204</sup> Armitage, of course, self-righteously dismisses Wilbur as evil, concluding that “we have no business calling in such things from outside, and only very wicked people and very wicked cults ever try to,” but his preachy,

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non-university education, I never cease to be ashamed. . . . [After high school] I shunned all human society, deeming myself too much of a failure in life to be seen socially by those who had known me in youth, & had foolishly expected such great things of me.” H. P. Lovecraft to Reinhart Kleiner, Providence, November 16, 1916, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 1, 1911-1924 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965), 41.

202. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” 434.

203. H. P. Lovecraft to E. Hoffmann Price, Providence, August 15, 1934, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and James Turner, vol. 5 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976), 19.

204. One might even say that Lovecraft, the writer, accomplishes in his fiction what Wilbur Whateley attempts in the story. Both men, for reasons inexplicable to outsiders, struggle to usher horrifying monstrosities into a complacent world.

anthropocentric worldview is just the sort of attitude Lovecraft found intolerable.<sup>205</sup> Indeed, from Lovecraft's perspective, all sensitive people yearned, just as he did, to escape the "eternal and maddening rigidity of cosmic law," and he mocked those who did not:

A great part of religion is merely a childish and diluted pseudo-gratification of this perpetual gnawing toward the ultimate illimitable void. Superadded to this simple curiosity is the galling sense of *intolerable restraint* which all sensitive people (except self-blinded earth-gazers like little Augie DerlEth) feel as they survey their natural limitations in time and space as scaled against the freedoms and expansions and comprehensions and adventurous expectancies which the mind can formulate as abstract conceptions.<sup>206</sup>

Considering how little Lovecraft respected conventional morality and how much he resented the "intolerable restraint" he felt, he surely would have sympathized more with Wilbur than with Armitage.<sup>207</sup> Indeed, in his letters, Lovecraft often jokingly refers to himself as if he were one of the cultists in his later tales, frequently concluding them with mock valedictions, such as "Yrs. for the Daemon of the Cyclopean Crypt" or "Yrs. for the Chant of Bal Sagoth."<sup>208</sup> Judging by the plethora of merchandise featuring Cthulhu's visage, Lovecraft's admirers feel much the same way. One often encounters Cthulhu posters or bumper stickers or toys, but no one, it seems, has

205. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," 466.

206. H. P. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, February 1931, in *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography of Letters*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 259.

207. Donald R. Burleson, I suspect, would agree; he argues that the true "hero" of "The Dunwich Horror" is not who it appears to be: "Not only does Armitage fall decidedly short of the characteristics of the archetypal hero—these characteristics, indeed, one discerns only in Armitage's alien adversaries, Wilbur Whateley and his twin brother." "The Mythic Hero Archetype in 'The Dunwich Horror,'" in *Lovecraft: An American Allegory: Selected Essays on H. P. Lovecraft* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 159.

208. H. P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence, March 19, 1934, in *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 546; H. P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence, July 25, 1935, in *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 613. Lovecraft and his friends even created humorous nicknames for one another inspired by their shared mythology. Lovecraft, for instance, was E'ch-Pi-El (H. P. L.), Clark Ashton Smith was Klarkash-Ton (Clark Ashton).

any interest in Armitage or any of Lovecraft's other protagonists. This odd inversion, in which both Lovecraft and his readers find his antagonists intriguing and his protagonists forgettable, is the inevitable result of Lovecraft Contrarianism. Before the plot of "The Dunwich Horror" even begins, Lovecraft's opening description, his creation of a natural landscape that both attracts and repels, signifies to the reader that the inhabitants of Dunwich, including that loathsome dreamer Wilbur Whateley, will be both repulsive—and magnificent.

Another tale of Lovecraftian Contrarianism and the third of four stories to contain one of Lovecraft's Gratuitous Descriptions, "The Whisperer in Darkness" may, at first glance, seem oblivious to the natural landscape, as the first half of the story, which is told through a series of letters, does not describe the landscape at all. The narrator, an English professor named Albert N. Wilmarth, who teaches at Miskatonic University in Massachusetts, traces his story back to November 3, 1927 when there was a record flood in Vermont. Soon afterwards, local newspapers report that strange, alien-looking bodies have been spotted in the floodwaters. Some claim that these sightings substantiate an ancient myth, a legend that a race of winged monstrosities lives in the backwoods of Vermont. Wilmarth publicly contests these claims, pointing out that these myths conform to a well-documented pattern that can be found all over the globe. Then in the spring of 1928, he receives a letter from Henry Wentworth Akeley, a reclusive scholar who lives near Townshend, Vermont. He claims that he has seen footprints belonging to the "Old Ones" and has heard them talking in the wilderness.<sup>209</sup> And unlike the rustics quoted in the newspapers, he has proof. He sends Wilmarth photographs of the footprints, a strange stone covered in hieroglyphics, and a recording of a conversation overheard in the woods. Sharing an interest in folklore and a general love of knowledge, the two begin to

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209. Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness," 471.



converse back and forth through the mail, their letters constituting most of Chapters Two through Five. The letters from Akeley become increasingly disturbing as he describes his deteriorating situation: the creatures, aided by their human spies, are watching him, intercepting his mail, and cutting the lines that connect him to civilization. Soon, they begin launching nightly attacks on his farmhouse, which he repulses with the help of his big-game rifle and his police dogs. At one point, the creatures make contact with Akeley, threatening to take him “not only to Yuggoth, but beyond that—away outside the galaxy *and possibly beyond the last curved rim of space*.”<sup>210</sup> Fearing for his life, Akeley contemplates leaving Vermont, but his attachment to his birthplace paralyzes him.

And then, a letter changes everything. In it, Akeley encourages Wilmarth to visit him in Vermont. He has reached an accord with the creatures and wants to share their revelations with his friend. Both alarmed and intrigued, Wilmarth accepts the invitation. But when he arrives at the farmhouse after a long journey through Vermont, he finds Akeley unable to move. The old man, who never rises from his chair in the corner, can do no more than whisper, the expression on his face unchanging. He tells Wilmarth about the Old Ones, their history on Earth, and their outpost on the rim of the solar system. He claims that they can transfer a person’s mind to a metal cylinder, which can then be transported through—and beyond—the known universe. Akeley has several of these cylinders in his home, and when Wilmarth, who is following Akeley’s directions, connects one of these cylinders to its corresponding apparatus, it begins to talk to him. It claims to have visited “thirty-seven different celestial bodies—planets, dark stars, and less definable objects—including eight outside our galaxy and two outside the curved cosmos of space and time.”<sup>211</sup> Akeley is looking forward to a similar journey, and he encourages

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210. Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” 496.

211. Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” 525.

his friend to join him. Later that night, as Wilmarth lies awake in bed, he overhears a conclave downstairs. Alarmed, he decides to wake Akeley and flee. Wilmarth sneaks downstairs, but instead of his friend, he finds an empty chair and, lying on top of it, “the face and hands of Henry Wentworth Akeley.”<sup>212</sup>

As this summary implies, the natural landscape does not appear to play any role in the story whatsoever, Lovecraft’s lengthy description of Vermont in Chapter Six being wholly gratuitous. After all, Lovecraft did not write this description for “The Whisperer in Darkness.” He borrowed much of it from an essay he had circulated among his friends, in which he describes his recent trip to Vermont. In this essay, as one might expect, Lovecraft lavishes praise on the natural scenery he encountered, Vermont retaining much of that “pristine and ancestral beauty” which had once belonged to southern New England.<sup>213</sup> And yet, the essay, which Lovecraft entitled “Vermont—A First Impression,” does not praise beauty for beauty’s sake: for Lovecraft, the natural landscape that Vermont, unlike southern New England, had preserved served a vital function, linking the residents to their cultural heritage and thereby transforming a collection of individuals into a nation, a folk. From a modern viewpoint, such a connection might seem unnecessary, perhaps even problematic, but Lovecraft, the extent of his alienation revealed by his experience in New York, yearned for just such a connection, or reconnection, with the people, the landscapes, and the traditions that, in his mind, had formed him, seeking them up and down the Eastern Seaboard like an orphan searching for his parents. Indeed, according to Lovecraft, we are a facet of this cultural heritage and cannot exist apart from it. That is, though our heritage births us and molds us, we never truly become autonomous individuals. We are not

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212. Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” 538.

213. H. P. Lovecraft, “Vermont—A First Impression,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 4, *Travel* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2005), 13.

birds destined to leave the nest, for the nest remains a part of us forever, whether we acknowledge it or not. Just as, from a Christian perspective, the soul seeks God, this part of us craves—needs—to submerge itself into its natural element, the “time-stream” that produced it.<sup>214</sup>

In Vermont, Lovecraft found himself, suddenly and unexpectedly, submerged in a medium that he had assumed had been destroyed by urban modernity:

It is plain from the first that this town is not quite like those one has left behind. Roofs and steeples and chimneys, prosaic enough in the telling, here cluster together on the green river-bluff in some magical collocation that stirs dim memories. Something in the contours, something in the setting, has power to touch deep viol-strings of feeling which are ancestral if one be young and personal if one be old. The whole scene vaguely brings us a fleeting quality we have known before. We have seen such towns long ago, climbing above deep river-valleys and rearing their old brick walls beside sloping, cobbled streets. Grandeur may be wanting, but the marvel of rekindled vision is there. Something is alive that is dead elsewhere; something that we, or the blood that is in us, can recognise as more closely akin to ourselves than anything in the busy cosmopolis to the southward. This, in fine, is a surviving fragment of the old America; it is what our other towns used to be in the days when there were most themselves, the days when they housed their own people and gave birth to all the little legends and bits of lore which make them glamorous and significant in the eyes of their children.<sup>215</sup>

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214. H. P. Lovecraft to C. L. Moore, Providence, February 7, 1937, in *Letters to C. L. Moore and Others*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 207. Lovecraft’s beliefs, though wholly secular, resemble a sort of inverted pantheism: instead of the landscape being a reflection of God, we are a reflection of it, the human race being a feature of the landscape, much like an elm tree or a coyote or a village steeple. From Lovecraft’s perspective, to reunite ourselves with our natural habitat and thereby end the separation caused by modernity was to achieve nirvana: “The visible beauty & dignity of a settled, aesthetically integrated region take on a fresh degree of poignancy & motivating stimulation when one can feel one’s own hereditary blood-stream coursing through the scene as through the veins of some vast & exquisite organism. One can say not only, ‘I love these waving grasses & towering elms & brook-threaded valleys & stone-wall’d farmsteads & white village steeples,’ but ‘these waving grasses & towering elms & brook-threaded valleys & stone-wall’d farmsteads & white village steeples are ME, MYSELF, I, THE CONSCIOUS EGO’! And what more can any guy ask than that?” The implications of such a worldview, which calls not for action, but for a disintegration of the self, warrant further study. H. P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton, Providence, November 19, 1929, in *Letters to James F. Morton*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 180.

215. Lovecraft, “Vermont—A First Impression,” 13.

For Lovecraft, the natural landscape of Vermont was more than a living painting, a collage of “roofs and steeples and chimneys” arranged in an aesthetically pleasing manner; it was more than a symbol even of a cherished but partially forgotten past; it was a part of a living organism, an organic community that could exist, that could only be itself, as long as it retained all its members: the land, its people, and their traditions.<sup>216</sup> Lovecraft, whether he was or not, believed himself to be one of these peoples, a part of the only entity greater than himself in which he could believe. For Lovecraft, this trip, like a baptism, was a spiritual rebirth. Forced to live amongst the dead, in a world he could neither recognize, nor appreciate, nor meaningfully understand, Lovecraft was now returning, like the prodigal son, to an existence that he thought modernity had denied to him. After his trip to Vermont, Lovecraft would spend the rest of his life, and what little money he could scrape together, chasing this feeling, looking as far afield as Quebec and St. Augustine and New Orleans for “something that we, or the blood that is in us, can recognise as more closely akin to ourselves.” He was searching for a place, obviously, but he was also searching for himself, there being no clear distinction in his mind between the two.

Though its inclusion in “The Whisperer in Darkness” may seem wholly superfluous, Lovecraft’s vivid description of Vermont, which he lifts from this essay, actually constitutes a high-water mark in his treatment of the natural landscape, for in this tale, unlike in “The Dunwich Horror,” the protagonist’s encounter with the natural landscape determines the very outcome of the story itself. The first five chapters of “The Whisperer in Darkness,” which consist mostly of exposition and Wilmarth and Akeley’s correspondence, lack a sensorium, the story taking place in a sort of void or vacuum. In a sense, Wilmarth has paused the story, which does

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216. Considering the passage above, which links a specific people (defined by their ethnicity) to a specific place, it is no surprise that Lovecraft, at times, found fascism attractive. For this, Lovecraft has been justly and thoroughly upbraided. And yet, if his views on race and ethnicity can be separated from his critique of modernity, that critique may still be of value.

not really begin until Chapter Six. That is, the first five chapters consist of Wilmarth's thoughts and reflections; aside from reading letters and examining the artifacts Akeley sends him, he does not interact with the fictional world around him. Indeed, as far as the reader knows, there is no world around him, for Lovecraft tells us almost nothing about Wilmarth or his life or the place where he lives. A mind without a body, Wilmarth exists to think and watch, to comment and analyze.<sup>217</sup> Of course, there is action, as Akeley struggles to defend his farm from a horrifying race of extraterrestrials, but Wilmarth experiences it indirectly, learning of events from Akeley long after they are over. Indeed, the actual events of the story proceed through a series of filters before they reach Wilmarth, who adds his own layer to the narrative, further separating the reader from the actual experience. Framed in this way, such an approach might seem dull, but Lovecraft builds suspense by first separating the reader from the action and then gradually stripping away the intervening layers. In Chapter Six, Wilmarth, for the first time, enters the story as a character, an imaginary person who interacts with an imaginary world, as opposed to an intellect, an eyeball. At this moment in the story, he is debating the offer Akeley has presented to him, the opportunity to undergo a "cosmic voyage" to the farthest reaches of the universes and

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217. One would think that, for a cerebral individual like Lovecraft, such an existence would be acceptable, if not ideal. In a letter describing his experience in New York and downplaying the value of the friendships he left behind, Lovecraft claims that "it is more important to live—to dream and to write—than to talk, and in New York I could not live." Though that appositive phrase is easy to overlook, Lovecraft is making an incredible claim: a good life consists, not of time spent with others, but of self-exploration and self-expression, cognition—not love or joy or experience—being the basis of a good life. To many, of course, such a perspective is all but inconceivable. J. M. Coetzee, for example, roundly rejects this view in *The Live of Animals*: "To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrast starkly with Descartes's key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell." H. P. Lovecraft to Donald Wandrei, Providence, February 10, 1927, in Joshi and Schultz, *Mysteries of Time and Spirit*, 35; J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 33.

perhaps even beyond the known rim.<sup>218</sup> Such an experience, however, comes with a heavy price. The brain must be separated from the body and connected to a machine, a metal cylinder that allows the mind within to see, hear, and speak. A human being, to use Wilmarth's phrase, must be converted into a "phonograph record" that can be played "wherever a phonograph of the corresponding make exists."<sup>219</sup> Many readers, I suspect, would find such a transformation, which reduces a person to a thing, nightmarish, but Wilmarth finds himself tempted:

Mad or sane, metamorphosed or merely relieved, the chances were that Akeley had actually encountered some stupendous change of perspective in his hazardous research; some change at once diminishing his danger—real or fancied—and opening dizzy new vistas of cosmic and superhuman knowledge. My own zeal for the unknown flared up to meet his, and I felt myself touched by the contagion of the morbid barrier-breaking. To shake off the maddening and wearying limitations of time and space and natural law—to be linked with the vast *outside*—to come close to the nighted and abysmal secrets of the infinite and the ultimate—surely such a thing was worth the risk of one's life, soul, and sanity!<sup>220</sup>

By the end of Chapter Five, as Wilmarth prepares to leave for Vermont, he seems on the verge of accepting Akeley's proposal. Why should he not? As far as the reader knows, there are no ties binding Wilmarth to this life—or even to this world. In a way, he has already become a sort of thinking machine, a disembodied intellect that analyzes the world but does not actually exist in it. As a result, the necessary transformation does not threaten him: it has already occurred. By allowing these creatures to turn him into an apparatus, he loses nothing, but he gains access to a level of stimulation heretofore unimagined. Indeed, who could resist the opportunity to visit, as a veteran of the process has, "thirty-seven different celestial bodies—planets, dark stars, and less definable objects—including eight outside our galaxy and two outside the curved cosmos of space and time?" Needless to say, this opportunity, this chance to escape from the "eternal and

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218. Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness," 522.

219. Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness," 522-3.

220. Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness," 505-6.

maddening rigidity of cosmic law,” formed Lovecraft’s dearest dream, his very reason for writing speculative fiction, for composing stories like “The Whisperer in Darkness.” Indeed, Lovecraft makes Akeley’s proposal so tempting that, by the start of Chapter Six, a curious consensus has emerged: the author, the protagonist, and the reader all want Wilmarth to accept it, to seize this opportunity to see beyond the limits of space and time. And then, at the exact moment when Wilmarth is on the verge of accepting, when he has decided that “such a thing was worth the risk of one’s life, soul, and sanity,” he sees Vermont.<sup>221</sup> This place, this natural landscape, which Lovecraft, at the height of his descriptive powers, depicts in awed and loving tones, provides Wilmarth with his sole connection to *this* world. Here is that “continuous native life whose deep roots make it the one authentic outgrowth of the landscape.” The sight stirs him, for Wilmarth, like Lovecraft, has never known “an unspoiled, ancestral New England without the foreigners and factory-smoke, billboards and concrete roads,” having spent his entire life in the “mechanised, urbanised coastal and southern areas.” Wilmarth realizes, in other words, much as Lovecraft came to realize when he became separated from Providence, that he has been living in a world that is “quite dead,” in an artificial urban culture that lacks those “deep roots” that are formed when a people occupy the same landscape for generations and that provide the only context and meaning that a godless universe has to offer. Wilmarth, having found, at long last, his place in this world, cannot leave it. He cannot go back to being a brain in a jar, an intellect in a featureless void.<sup>222</sup> Wilmarth, for the first time, understands exactly what such a transformation

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221. One might argue that Wilmarth has, at this point in the story, not yet made up his mind, but note how relaxed he is before his departure: “But I slept soundly and long that night, and was eagerly busy with preparations during the ensuing two days.” He is not conflicted or anxious or frightened, but eager. Lovecraft, “Whisperer in Darkness,” 507.

222. As I have argued, Lovecraft is contrasting a cerebral life spent in a void with a corporeal life spent in the world. Note that, while doing so, Lovecraft draws a similar distinction between a life spent in a “mechanised, urbanised” area replete with “foreigners and factory-smoke, billboards and concrete roads” and a life spent in an “unspoiled, ancestral” rural

would cost.<sup>223</sup> Wilmarth has sought to transcend time and space, to cast off the mundane and predictable world around him, but in Vermont, in the “hoary groves, the untainted pastures edged with gay autumnal blossoms, and at vast intervals the small brown farmsteads nestling amidst huge trees beneath vertical precipices of fragrant brier and meadow-grass,” he finds “a thing I had innately known or inherited, and for which I had always been vainly searching.”<sup>224</sup> He finds, in others words, a place that has already transcended time and space, a place where “Time had lost itself in the labyrinths behind, and around us stretched only the flowering waves of faery and the recaptured loveliness of vanished centuries.” Having a connection to such a place, one would die before severing it, which is exactly what his friend Akeley does.

By 1930, the year Lovecraft wrote “The Whisperer in Darkness,” the natural landscape, which he had previously ignored in his early fiction or treated in a conventionally Gothic manner, had emerged as a reason for living, as a part of ourselves without which we would cease to be ourselves. By that time, Lovecraft’s descriptions had completed their transformation. No longer abbreviated, generalized, or surreal, they have become extensive, specific, and realistic. His best descriptions, moreover, possess a uniquely three-dimensional quality. In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” for instance, Wilmarth’s description of Vermont evolves as he travels through the state, the outside world being not so much a single image that the narrator views as much as a panorama through which the narrator moves. Needless to say, Lovecraft’s depictions of this landscape are among the most beautiful and poignant in his entire oeuvre:

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landscape. In a sense, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” not unlike Lovecraft’s New York tales, is a rejection of the city, a place from which one is so disconnected that one can only pursue a purely cerebral existence.

223. It is worth noting that Akeley already understands the cost. Even though his farm is under constant attack, he cannot bring himself to leave and join his son in California, a decision that is otherwise inexplicable.

224. Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” 512.



Even the sunlight assumed a supernal glamour, as if some special atmosphere or exhalation mantled the whole region. I had seen nothing like it before save in the magic vistas that sometimes form the backgrounds of Italian primitives. Sodoma and Leonardo conceived such expanses, but only in the distance, and through the vaultings of Renaissance arcades. We were now burrowing bodily through the midst of the picture, and I seemed to find in its necromancy a thing I had innately known or inherited, and for which I had always been vainly searching.<sup>225</sup>

And yet, at this point in Lovecraft's life, the natural landscape was more than a source of aesthetic pleasure. His experience in New York, or "the pest zone" as he calls it in his letters, had shown him what his life lacked, what modernity lacked, and what people needed to feel connected to the landscape around them: a sense or, at the very least, an illusion of permanence.<sup>226</sup> People, Lovecraft suggests, cannot simply adapt to new surroundings: deprived of their ancestral traditions, they lose all sense of context. Much like the future, which it celebrates, and unlike the past, which it denigrates, the modern world, with its new peoples and customs and landscapes, offers its inhabitants nothing familiar, nothing recognizable that corresponds to the values they imbibed in other places and in other times.<sup>227</sup> As a result, the world around them seems unfamiliar, confusing, and ultimately meaningless.<sup>228</sup> To live in such an environment is akin to living in one of the "mighty cities of Yuggoth," where "the sun shines [. . .] no brighter than a star" and "black rivers of pitch . . . flow under those mysterious

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225. Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness," 512.

226. H. P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton, Providence, February 1937, in *Letters to James F. Morton*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 404.

227. Despite his reputation as a science-fiction writer, Lovecraft found the future, as an abstract concept, uninspiring: "There is nothing in the future to tie one's loyalties and affections to—it can mean nothing to us, because it involves none of those mnemonic association-links upon which the illusion of meaning is based." H. P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton, Providence, October 19, 1929, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 3 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1971), 31.

228. Lovecraft may be faulted for assuming that his own sentiments were universal. From his perspective, the modern world, symbolized by the modern urban landscape, was disorienting, disturbing even. Many Americans today, however, would argue that the newness and diversity that the modern world has given us is exciting, stimulating, and freeing.

Cyclopean bridges,” a place so alien that “to visit Yuggoth would drive any weak man mad.”<sup>229</sup>

What people need, whether they realize it or not, is exactly what modernism disrupts: a

“continuous native life whose deep roots make it the one authentic outgrowth of the landscape.”

After New York, Lovecraft felt this need strongly; indeed, experiencing a sense of connection to the traditions that had shaped him, even if for no more than a moment, mattered more to

Lovecraft than anything else in this life, and by extension, nothing harried him more than the thought of losing those precious strands he had managed to preserve:

In a colourless or monotonous environment I should be hopelessly soul-starved—New York almost finished me, as it was! I find that I draw my prime contentment from beauty & mellowness as expressed in quaint town vistas & in the scenery of ancient farming & woodland regions. Continuous growth from the past is a *sine qua non*—in fact, I have long acknowledged *archaism* as the chief motivating force of my being.<sup>230</sup>

For Lovecraft, it is this, far more than beauty or even sublimity, which the “scenery of ancient farming & woodland regions” offers: a visual reminder of “continuous growth from the past.”<sup>231</sup>

In a sense, the bleak and rocky New England landscape, which to others might represent nothing more than poverty and blight, symbolizes the possibility of victory, the overcoming of what had once seemed inevitable: the disruptive forces of urbanism, industrialization, commercialization, and migration, which one might, if of a poetic frame of mind, personify as the “blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things, encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers, and lulled by the thin monotonous piping of a daemoniac flute held in nameless

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229. Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” 518.

230. Lovecraft to Donald Wandrei, Providence, March 27, 1927, in Joshi and Schultz, *Mysteries of Time and Spirit*, 63.

231. Note the places where Lovecraft traveled: Charleston, Savannah, St. Augustine, New Orleans, Quebec, Philadelphia, etc. When traveling, he was always searching for places, for landscapes, that had retained a sort of continuity, that had resisted the changes associated with urbanism, industrialization, and modernism in general. Such landscapes are often beautiful, but it was not their beauty that Lovecraft was seeking. He never showed any interest, for example, in the sublime landscapes of the West.

paws.”<sup>232</sup> It is hardly surprising that Lovecraft, like many who consider “*archaism*” to be their “chief motivating force,” would find the sense of isolation that modernity inspires repulsive, if not terrifying, nor is it shocking that he would imprint this dichotomy onto the landscape itself, depicting the futuristic urban landscape as chaotic and menacing and the traditional natural landscape as beautiful and reassuring, but it is surprising that he would, by the end of his literary career, complicate the paradigm he had created and find in the urban landscape itself the “continuous growth from the past” he so highly valued.

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232. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark” 471. That is not to imply that Azathoth represents or symbolizes the urban landscape. I am merely suggesting that Lovecraft associates *both* Azathoth and urban modernity with a sense of chaotic disorientation.

## VI. Synthesis:

### Urban Pastoral (1935)

*I never can be tied to raw, new things,  
For I first saw the light in an old town,  
Where from my window huddled roofs sloped down  
To a quaint harbour rich with visionings.<sup>233</sup>*

After completing “The Whisperer in Darkness” in late 1930, Lovecraft began to experiment with a variety of landscapes, some natural and some urban. Abandoning the real and the familiar, attributes that had defined his use of setting since New York, Lovecraft began to place his tales in imaginary or exotic locales, places, in other words, where he had not been and could not go. *At the Mountains of Madness*, for instance, takes place in Antarctica, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” in a fictional seaport, “The Dreams in the Witch House” and “The Thing on the Doorstep” in Arkham, and “The Shadow out of Time” partly in Arkham and partly in the Australian outback.<sup>234</sup> None of these tales contain what I have called Gratuitous Descriptions. Indeed, though Lovecraft’s city of Arkham, now a permanent part of popular culture thanks to Arkham Asylum, may very well constitute his most famous creation, Lovecraft does not attempt to reconstruct the city on the printed page. “The Dreams in the Witch House,” which contains far more information about the city than either “The Thing on the Doorstep” or “The Shadow out of Time,” speaks vaguely of the “changeless, legend-haunted city of Arkham” and its “shadowy tangles of unpaved musty-smelling lanes where eldritch brown houses of unknown age leaned and tottered and leered mockingly through narrow, small-paned windows,” but if one were to

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233. H. P. Lovecraft, “Background,” in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 92.

234. Lovecraft finished *At the Mountains of Madness* and “The Shadow over Innsmouth” in 1931, “The Dreams in the Witch House” in 1932, “The Thing on the Doorstep” in 1933, and “The Shadow out of Time” in 1935.

draw a map based on these descriptions, one would find the finished result mostly blank.<sup>235</sup>

Lovecraft spends far more time on Antarctica and Innsmouth, his description of that city's layout being a triumph of topographical realism. And yet, the plot, in which a Lovecraftian antiquarian learns the history of a semi-deserted city, through which he is later chased, calls for such details in a way that *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Dunwich Horror," and "The Whisperer in Darkness" do not. It is as if Lovecraft only wrote such descriptions when he felt moved to do so. Much like poetry as William Wordsworth defined it, they reflect a "spontaneous overflow of emotion . . . recollected in tranquility."<sup>236</sup> That does not imply, as I have tried to demonstrate, that such descriptions have no effect on the story or how the reader interrupts it, but the feelings generated by his encounter with New York, his return to Providence, and his discovery of Foster, Rhode Island, and the state of Vermont had, perhaps, dissipated somewhat, leaving Lovecraft free to explore other settings and other themes.

And yet, Lovecraft had clearly not forgotten about New York, for its symbolic counterpart, the Cyclopean monster-city, appears in every major story Lovecraft wrote during this period. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, for instance, Lovecraft provides a detailed description of one of these otherworldly places:

The effect was that of a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws and attaining the most grotesque extremes of sinister bizarrerie. There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarged and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped discs. . . . All of these febrile structures seemed knit together by tubular bridges crossing from one to the other at various dizzy heights, and the implied scale of the whole was terrifying and oppressive in its sheer giganticism.<sup>237</sup>

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235. Lovecraft, "The Dreams in the Witch House," 232, 234.

236. William Wordsworth, preface to *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1800*, eds. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Editions, 2008), 183.

237. H. P. Lovecraft, "At the Mountains of Madness," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 3, 1931-1936 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 52.

Surprisingly similar descriptions appear in “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” the monstrous race known as the “Deep Ones” inhabiting sunken cities composed of “titanic sunken porticos and labyrinths of weedy Cyclopean walls”; the “Dreams in the Witch House,” in which Walter Gilman dreams of another dimension composed of “prisms, labyrinths, clusters of cubes and planes, and Cyclopean buildings”; “The Thing on the Doorstep,” in which Edward Derby visits “Cyclopean ruins in the heart of the Maine woods beneath which vast staircases lead down to abysses of nighted secrets”; and “The Shadow out of Time,” in which Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee has “visions of sweeping through Cyclopean corridors of stone, and up and down gigantic inclined planes of the same monstrous masonry.”<sup>238</sup> Clearly, such imagery struck a chord with Lovecraft, who could not, it seems, resist from inserting it in every single story he wrote. One might argue, of course, that the image of a ruined city composed of titanic blocks and arranged in an incomprehensible manner resonated with Lovecraft but does not symbolize anything, if Lovecraft’s depiction of these places did not match his descriptions of modern art, which, in trying to capture the industrial age, depicts “diagrams of scrambled conic sections or nightmares with locomotives floating in the sky over landscapes of skyscrapers twisted into spirals & dollar-signs.”<sup>239</sup> That is not to imply that Lovecraft’s Cyclopean monster-cities symbolize Futurism or Cubism; instead, I am suggesting that, from Lovecraft’s perspective, both modern art and his Cyclopean monster-cities reflect the same hateful zeitgeist. They render into visual images the alterity of modernity by transmuting the new forms associated with it, such as the skyscraper (the

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238. Lovecraft, “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” 228; Lovecraft, “The Dreams in the Witch House,” 237; H. P. Lovecraft, “The Thing on the Doorstep,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 3, 1931-1936 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 335-6; H. P. Lovecraft, “The Shadow out of Time,” in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 3, 1931-1936 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 378.

239. H. P. Lovecraft to C. L. Moore, Providence, February 7, 1937, in *Letters to C. L. Moore and Others*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 206.

urban), the locomotive (the industrial), and the dollar sign (the commercial). In his fiction, in his letters, in his poetry, in his essays, in everything he wrote, Lovecraft contrasts these new forms, which, he claims, are “as meaningless and alien to men of our heritage and memories as the culture of China or Abyssinia or ancient Carthage or the planet Saturn,” with older forms—the peaked gable, the gambrel roof, the hay meadow, and the barn—which have, over the centuries, accumulated layers of meaning and, as a result, inspire emotional reactions in all who view them.<sup>240</sup> Mapping this dichotomy onto the landscape, Lovecraft had, ever since New York, associated urbanism with dehumanizing chaos and pastoralism with reaffirming traditions. And yet, in late 1935, in the last work of original fiction that Lovecraft would ever write, he would return to the urban landscape one more time and, in the last of his Gratuitous Descriptions, describe it in glowing, rapturous terms.

Generally considered one of the best of Lovecraft’s later works, “The Haunter of the Dark” takes place in contemporary Providence, all the action occurring in two districts on either side of the city: College Hill in the east and Federal Hill in the west.<sup>241</sup> The protagonist, a writer and an artist named Robert Blake, has moved into a “venerable dwelling in a grassy court off College Street—on the crest of the great eastward hill near the Brown University campus and behind the marble John Hay Library.”<sup>242</sup> From his office window, he can look across downtown to the other side of the city, where he sees, as if through a glass darkly, a strange yet hypnotizing sight: an ancient, seemingly vacant church. Over time, Blake becomes obsessed with this

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240. H. P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton, Providence, November 19, 1929, in Schultz and Joshi, *Letters to James F. Morton*, 180.

241. In his book-length study of Lovecraft, Paul Roland writes, “the all-too-convenient *deus ex machina* aside, ‘The Haunter of the Dark’ is one of Lovecraft’s most effective tales, immersing the reader in a credible location where the dread of the dark is more unsettling than any sudden scare.” *The Curious Case of H. P. Lovecraft* (London: Plexus, 2014), 174.

242. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 453.

structure and, leaving his comfortable residence on College Hill behind, embarks on a quest to find it. After a long search through the “squalid, unpaved lanes” of Federal Hill, which to Blake seems like another world, he finally finds the church—and a policeman who is willing to talk about it.<sup>243</sup> According to the officer, the church had once housed a cult, “an outlaw sect that called up awful things from some unknown gulf of night.”<sup>244</sup> Undeterred, Blake finds a way into the edifice through the basement and, while exploring the cobwebbed interior, discovers one oddity after another: a moldy collection of books on the occult, a cryptogram, and the skeleton of a reporter for the *Providence Telegram*. The journalist’s notes outline the history of Starry Wisdom, a cult that, before its dispersal in 1877, used an artifact called the “Shining Trapezohedron” to summon and communicate with the Haunter of the Dark. In that same room, which is directly beneath the steeple, Blake discovers a curious-looking crystal that brings to mind images of “alien orbs with great stone towers, and other orbs with titan mountains and no mark of life, and still remoter spaces where only a stirring in vague blacknesses told of the presence of consciousness and will.”<sup>245</sup> Sensing a presence watching him, Blake flees the church, but he later learns, to his horror, that the superstitious residents of Federal Hill have heard noises coming from the church, which they believe is being occupied by an alien entity.

Fortunately, this “Haunter of the Dark” cannot stand even the feeblest light and, as a result, cannot cross the grid of electric light formed by the city’s streetlamps. Paralyzed by fear and hypnotized by the entity he has inadvertently summoned, Blake begins to lose control over himself. One night, he finds himself climbing the ladder to the steeple, having been called, it seems, by the alien presence within. In early August, a storm disrupts the city’s power. The local

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243. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 456.

244. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 457.

245. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 462.



residents, creating a ring of candles around the church, keep the entity at bay for a while, but their efforts ultimately fail. Connected in some inexplicable fashion to Blake, the Haunter of the Dark soars across the city, but the moment it reaches Blake, a random bolt of lightning strikes nearby, dissipating the creature. And yet, it is too late to save Blake, who is found the next day, a look of horror frozen on his face. In his diary, which he was writing in when he died, investigators find a series of disconnected and baffling statements, including allusions to “Yuggoth, and more distant Shaggai, and the ultimate void of the black planets. . . .”<sup>246</sup>

The action, as this summary suggests, takes place in two locations: Blake’s residence on College Hill and the Free-Will Baptist Church on Federal Hill, both of which Lovecraft describes in exquisite detail, though the former is noteworthy for being the last and perhaps the most striking of Lovecraft’s four Gratuitous Descriptions. After erecting a frame narrative, in which an unnamed third-person narrator introduces the controversy surrounding Robert Blake’s death, Lovecraft begins the story itself by describing Blake’s home on College Hill:

Young Blake returned to Providence in the winter of 1934–5, taking the upper floor of a venerable dwelling in a grassy court off College Street—on the crest of the great eastward hill near the Brown University campus and behind the marble John Hay Library. It was a cosy and fascinating place, in a little garden oasis of village-like antiquity where huge, friendly cats sunned themselves atop a convenient shed. The square Georgian house had a monitor roof, classic doorway with fan carving, small-paned windows, and all the other earmarks of early nineteenth-century workmanship. Inside were six-panelled doors, wide floor-boards, a curving colonial staircase, white Adam-period mantels, and a rear set of rooms three steps below the general level.<sup>247</sup>

Like the descriptions we have analyzed elsewhere, Lovecraft’s depiction of Blake’s home on College Hill is separate, as opposed to embedded in the narrative; specific, as opposed to generalized; and realistic, as opposed to surreal. Considerably shorter than the page-long descriptions that appear in “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Whisperer in Darkness,” it

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246. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 476.

247. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 453.

cultivates a very different atmosphere, for there is no horror here. There is not even any mystery. Lovecraft's description, with its "grassy courts" and "huge, friendly cats," suggests peace and comfort and familiarity. Most of Lovecraft's works, including those that depict gorgeous natural landscapes, still convey a sense of the unknown, of the alien or the unfamiliar. In that sense, the passage recalls Lovecraft's loving re-creation of Providence in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, the noticeable difference being that Lovecraft's novella takes place mostly in the past, in Providence as it was before the onset of modernity, while "The Haunter of the Dark" begins in the winter of 1934. Not only does the description disrupt the sense of impending dread that Lovecraft, like Poe, strives to develop in his other works, it is wholly gratuitous: the reader does not need to know anything about College Hill or Blake's love of it, which is, oddly enough, expressed by a third-person narrator who is supposedly presenting the reader with an objective account. The reader certainly does not need to know about the house's "classic doorway with fan carving" or its "six-panelled doors," its "wide floor-boards," or its "curving colonial staircase." Curiously enough, this is not an imaginary place. After several years in Arkham and Antarctica, Lovecraft has returned to the real world, the house described here being Lovecraft's own home at 66 College Street. As he laconically explains in a letter to fellow writer Clark Ashton Smith, "the scene is in Providence, & the abode of the victim is #66—indeed, I've described the place a bit."<sup>248</sup> Judging from Lovecraft's nonchalance, his casual dismissal of his own description, one might assume that Lovecraft simply could not refrain from inserting a bit of description into his story. Most scholars, it seems, have interpreted the passage in this light, assuming that it is nothing more than an irrelevant anecdote, inserted into the text by an author who could not stop

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248. H. P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence, November 10, 1935, in *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 622.

talking about his beloved residence atop the hill.<sup>249</sup> And yet, Lovecraft, as his letters attest, did not take his writing lightly. Indeed, in a letter penned a year before he wrote “The Haunter of the Dark,” Lovecraft describes his writing as “the only thing in life that means anything to me.”<sup>250</sup> Why then, if this description does not, as Lovecraft’s other descriptions do, foster a sense of dread or an atmosphere of mystery and if it does not contribute to the plot or add detail to the characters, does Lovecraft include it at all? What, if anything, does it add to the story?

Before we can answer that question, we must first turn to Lovecraft’s second description of Providence, which depicts the antithesis of College Hill and the sense of familiarity and belonging it represents. The two are not, however, completely separate: Lovecraft’s description of College Hill actually bleeds into his description of Federal Hill, the line between the two being uncomfortably permeable:

Blake’s study, a large southwest chamber, overlooked the front garden on one side, while its west windows—before one of which he had his desk—faced off from the brow of the hill and commanded a splendid view of the lower town’s outspread roofs and of the mystical sunsets that flamed behind them. On the far horizon were the open countryside’s purple slopes. Against these, some two miles away, rose the spectral hump of Federal Hill, bristling with huddled roofs and steeples whose remote outlines wavered mysteriously, taking fantastic forms as the smoke of the city swirled up and enmeshed them. Blake had a curious sense that he was looking upon some unknown, ethereal world which might or might not vanish in dream if ever he tried to seek it out and enter it in person.<sup>251</sup>

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249. Joshi notes that “many of the landmarks described in the story are manifestly based upon actual sites,” including the house at 66 College Street and the Catholic church on Federal Hill, but he does not explore, or even question, how this trait affects the story or how readers interpret it. Indeed, he sees little meaning in the story itself, concluding that “‘The Haunter of the Dark’ does not involve any grand philosophical principles—Lovecraft does not even do much with the basic symbolism of light and dark as parallel to good and evil or knowledge and ignorance—but it is simply an extremely well-executed and suspenseful tale of supernatural horror.” *A Subtler Magick*, 182.

250. H. P. Lovecraft to E. Hoffmann Price, Providence, August 15, 1934, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and James Turner, vol. 5, 1934-1937 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976), 20.

251. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 453.

To Blake, who is viewing the district from a distance, Federal Hill appears to be a fantastic, otherworldly place, an “unknown, ethereal world.” Unlike College Hill and Blake’s home thereon, which Lovecraft describes as “venerable,” “cosy,” and “village-like,” the sight of Federal Hill suggests mystery, as do the words Lovecraft uses to describe it: “spectral,” “mysteriously,” “fantastic,” “unknown.” Compared to College Hill, which seems oddly pastoral, as if Blake were living not in a city, but in a village amongst the “open countryside’s purple slopes,” Federal Hill is unmistakably urban. And yet, it also seems insubstantial and dreamlike. One recalls Lovecraft’s early description of the “Cyclopean outlines” of New York: “It was a mystical sight in the gold sun of late afternoon; a dream-thing of faint grey, outlined against a sky of faint grey smoke. City and sky were so alike that one could hardly be sure that there was a city—that the fancied towers and pinnacles were not the merest illusions.” As you can see, similarities abound. In both instances, Lovecraft, who characteristically uses “the gold sun of late afternoon” as a backdrop, alludes to dreams, those tantalizing glimpses of unreal but conceivable spheres. Here again, we see Lovecraft’s oft-repeated wish, his desire to exchange “the world of trolleys and cash-registers, Freudian complexes and Binet-Simon tests, for realms of exalted and iridescent strangeness beyond space and time.”<sup>252</sup> Considering Lovecraft’s claim that “my local affections are not personal, but topographical & architectural,” it is fitting that in his works such transcendent experiences are usually initiated by the discovery of a *place*.<sup>253</sup> For Blake, whose restlessness indicates that he no longer finds imaginative fulfillment in either College Hill or his own weird writing, Federal Hill appears to be just such a place, a gateway to a “spectral,

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252. H. P. Lovecraft, “Review of *Ebony and Crystal* by Clark Ashton Smith,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, *Literary Criticism* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004), 73. In this case, Lovecraft is praising the poetry of his friend Clark Ashton Smith.

253. Lovecraft to Lillian D. Clark, New York City, March 29, 1926, in Joshi and Schultz, *Letters from New York*, 289.

unreachable world beyond the curling smoke.” And yet, not all is well. This smoke, which also appears in Lovecraft’s description of New York, symbolizes not only the nebulous unreality of these places, but also their frustrating insubstantiality. Upon closer examination, neither city vanishes, but they do transform.

As Blake begins to explore Federal Hill, he encounters an urban environment quite different from the one he saw through his field-glasses. From a distance, from, that is, the confines of the comfortable, familiar world that is College Hill, Blake finds the district’s “unknown streets and labyrinthine gables” charming. The sight provides him, in other words, with that sense of “adventurous expectancy” or “adventurous opportunity” that matters so much to Lovecraft. And yet, when Blake finally enters into that “smoke-wreathed world of dream,” he discovers a strange and disturbingly unfamiliar world:

Plodding through the endless downtown streets and the bleak, decayed squares beyond, he came finally upon the ascending avenue of century-worn steps, sagging Doric porches, and blear-paned cupolas which he felt must lead up to the long-known, unreachable world beyond the mists. There were dingy blue-and-white street signs which meant nothing to him, and presently he noted the strange, dark faces of the drifting crowds, and the foreign signs over curious shops in brown, decade-weathered buildings. Nowhere could he find any of the objects he had seen from afar; so that once more he half fancied that the Federal Hill of that distant view was a dream-world never to be trod by living human feet.<sup>254</sup>

Separated from the environment he knows, Blake struggles to comprehend this new landscape, which, at every turn, resists his attempts to understand it: he cannot read the signs or talk to the people or recognize the landmarks he has seen from his window.<sup>255</sup> Everywhere Blake looks, he encounters signifiers that signify something to others—but nothing to him. Indeed, the signs he

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254. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 455.

255. Blake repeatedly questions the Italian residents of Federal Hill about the church, but no one will talk to him. After he finally finds the building, he meets a policeman who is willing to talk. This policeman, however, is a “great wholesome Irishman.” He belongs, that is, to the old stock that inhabited the district before the Italians. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 457.

does recognize, the “avenue of century-worn steps, sagging Doric porches, and bleary-paned cupolas,” objects Lovecraft invariably associates with the wealth and tastes of his beloved eighteenth century, no longer mean what they once did, for they now represent poverty and decay. Even the church itself, an obvious symbol of the Christian tradition and, to an atheist like Lovecraft, irritating but reassuring conformity, no longer represents what it used to. Not unlike the stone church that the people of Red Hook have converted into a seedy dance hall and a Satanic shrine, Free-Will Baptist Church has become a home to unknowable horrors. Indeed, in many ways, Blake’s journey through the inscrutable slums of Federal Hill recalls Thomas F. Malone’s experiences in Red Hook, where “the population is a hopeless tangle and enigma.” In both cases, the contemporary residents, all of whom are foreign-born, inhabit places they have seized from the original inhabitants, occupying structures whose battered elegance testifies to the area’s decline:

Here long ago a brighter picture dwelt, with clear-eyed mariners on the lower streets and homes of taste and substance where the larger houses line the hill. One can trace the relics of this former happiness in the trim shapes of the buildings, the occasional graceful churches, and the evidences of original art and background in bits of detail here and there—a worn flight of steps, a battered doorway, a wormy pair of decorative columns or pilasters, or a fragment of once green space with bent and rusted iron railing. The houses are generally in solid blocks, and now and then a many-windowed cupola arises to tell of days when the households of captains and ship-owners watched the sea.<sup>256</sup>

Though “The Haunter of the Dark” spends far less time on the subject, its narrator notes that “the far-off slope was a vast Italian quarter, though most of the houses were remnants of older Yankee and Irish days.”<sup>257</sup> In both cases, the populations have transformed a familiar and beloved landscape into an insoluble puzzle by stripping the objects that comprise it of meaning. These newcomers have, from Lovecraft’s perspective, committed the worst of sins: by separating

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256. Lovecraft, “The Horror at Red Hook,” 484.

257. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 454.

the landscape from its traditions, they have deprived those who remain of the illusion of continuity, forcing them to acknowledge “what a futile, aimless, and disconnected welter of mirages and hypocrisies life is.”<sup>258</sup> And yet, one might argue that the residents of Federal Hill have little in common with the devil-worshippers of Red Hook. After all, it is the devout Italians of Federal Hill, providing us with another example of Lovecraftian Contrarianism, who keep the Haunter of the Dark confined to the church with their candlelight vigils.<sup>259</sup> Indeed, Lovecraft depicts the foreign-born residents of Federal Hill far more sympathetically than he depicts immigrants in his other works. In “The Horror at Red Hook,” for instance, Lovecraft describes the “swarthy, sin-pitted faces [that] disappear from windows when visitors pick their way through,” which in “The Haunter of the Dark” have become the “strange, dark faces of the drifting crowds,” a comparatively benign description.<sup>260</sup> The latter, it is true, may not be malevolent, but from Blake’s perspective, the people of Federal Hill are still every bit as foreign and incomprehensible as the residents of Red Hook are to Malone, being, so to speak, a “tangle and enigma.” Despite Lovecraft’s reputation as a racist, his depiction of Federal Hill suggests that it is alterity, not race in and of itself, that Lovecraft laments.<sup>261</sup> He does not despise the

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258. H. P. Lovecraft, “Lord Dunsany and His Work,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 2, *Literary Criticism* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004), 60.

259. Curiously, it is an Anglo-Saxon, Professor Enoch Bowen, who brings the Haunter of the Dark to Providence, not an immigrant.

260. Lovecraft, “The Horror at Red Hook,” 484; Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 455.

261. Lovecraft’s views on race and ethnicity, which evolved over the course of his lifetime, are too complex to discuss here. To put it simply, many critics consider Lovecraft—and in some cases his works themselves—racist. In his biography of Lovecraft, L. Sprague de Camp, for instance, writes at length about Lovecraft’s xenophobia, concluding that it “is a common defense against one’s own failures and shortcomings.” While there is no shortage of evidence for such a view, I would argue that Lovecraft’s xenophobia constituted but one part of a much larger critique of modernity. Contemporary readers cannot and should not condone Lovecraft’s views on race, but other aspects of his critique may be worth examining. *H. P. Lovecraft: A Biography* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), 251.

people of Federal Hill, nor does he postulate that they are inferior, but he does, nonetheless, resent their colonization of one of Providence's seven hills. With its "avenue of century-worn steps, sagging Doric porches, and blear-paned cupolas," Federal Hill could have been another College Hill, another "village-like" retreat from urban modernity, but instead, it has become like New York, the disparity between its people and the landscape mocking and exposing the flimsiness of tradition. Indeed, it is as if New York, that symbol of impermanence and meaninglessness, has corrupted a part of Providence and turned Lovecraft's safe haven into another one of its many outposts. Of course, from a distance, Lovecraft suggests, from the Brooklyn Bridge or College Hill, such places may seem appealing, their alterity novel and attractive, but when one actually enters into that "smoke-wreathed world of dream" and "garish daylight [shows] only squalor and alienage," one realizes what is missing, what has been left behind. Despite his restlessness and his long-repressed fascination with Federal Hill, when Blake grasps, if only dimly, what he has done, he flees from the church, plunging "through the teeming, fear-haunted alleys and avenues of Federal Hill toward the sane central streets and the home-like brick sidewalks of the college district."<sup>262</sup>

Noting the similarities between Blake's disenchantment with Federal Hill and Lovecraft's disillusionment with New York, one could interpret "The Haunter of the Dark" allegorically, as a veiled retelling of Lovecraft's own traumatic experience with the urban in 1925. After all, even though Lovecraft has clearly modeled Robert Blake on his young friend Robert Bloch, whose short story "The Shambler from the Stars" inspired Lovecraft to write "The Haunter of the Dark," he places Blake in his own house, as if Blake were, in some sense, replacing Lovecraft. The two certainly have much in common, Lovecraft being, like Blake, "wholly devoted to the

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262. Lovecraft, "The Haunter of the Dark," 466.



field of myth, dream, terror, and superstition, and avid in his quest for scenes and effects of a bizarre, spectral sort.”<sup>263</sup> As a result of this longing, both men become disenfranchised with the seemingly mundane world around them. Blake, in particular, loses interest in the “little garden oasis of village-like antiquity” where he lives. In that sense, his perspective differs from the reader’s and from Lovecraft’s in 1935. Despite his idyllic surroundings, Blake looks outward, away from College Hill to Federal Hill in the distance, but the reader, thanks to the perspective provided by the omniscient narrator, sees both landscapes and, as a result, realizes that Blake errs when he exchanges the one for the other.<sup>264</sup> At first, both Blake in 1934 and Lovecraft in 1924 view this urban landscape as a source of mystery and adventure, as an escape from the mundane. In a sense, this dissatisfaction with the quotidian defines the two men. It drives them to create, and at this point in their careers both men devote themselves to pure fantasy:

During that first winter [Blake] produced five of his best-known stories—‘The Burrower Beneath’, ‘The Stairs in the Crypt’, ‘Shaggai’, ‘In the Vale of Pnath’, and ‘The Feaster from the Stars’—and painted seven canvases; studies of nameless, unhuman monsters, and profoundly alien, non-terrestrial landscapes.<sup>265</sup>

Note the titles. “The Burrower Beneath” and “The Stairs in the Crypt” recall Lovecraft’s Gothic works, specifically “The Lurking Fear,” with its race of subterranean monsters burrowing beneath Tempest Mountain, and “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” in which one of the two main characters descends a stair into a crypt. As for “Shaggai” and “In the Vale of Pnath,” one cannot help thinking of Lovecraft’s Dunsanian tales, which so often feature exotic-sounding locales, such as Polaris, Sarnath, Ulthar, Celephaïs, Iranon, and Kadath. The last title even evokes “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Feaster from the Stars” being a fitting description for

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263. Lovecraft, “The Hunter of the Dark,” 452.

264. It is as if Lovecraft, aware at this point of his previous error, his misjudgment not just of New York but of Providence as well, is encouraging the reader to judge Blake, who seems oblivious to the magical landscape that surrounds him.

265. Lovecraft, “The Hunter of the Dark,” 453-4.

Cthulhu, that “titan Thing from the stars [which] slavered and gibbered.”<sup>266</sup> It is as if, in these titles, Lovecraft is tracing his own development, urging us to compare his career to Blake’s. As tantalizing as these titles may sound, Blake, like Lovecraft, soon tires of fantasy. One suspects that, like Kuranos, the king of Celephaïs in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, he comes to recognize his lack of an emotional connection to the “profoundly alien, non-terrestrial landscapes” he paints, finding them, in Lovecraft’s words, “monotonous for want of linkage with anything firm in his feelings and memories.”<sup>267</sup> Much like Lovecraft, who soon after New York would reject the Decadent movement he had so enthusiastically embraced in the 1920s, Blake stops searching for “scenes and effects of a bizarre, spectral sort” in art and begins looking for them in the very real world around him. As discussed above, the urban landscape initially seems to offer just such an experience. Seen through the city’s smoke, it promises access to the marvelous and the uncanny, but of course, in the end, both Federal Hill and New York inspire only a disturbing sense of alienation, forcing both men to retreat to the place they never should have left: their home on College Hill.

At first glance, such a reading may seem rather obvious, for Lovecraft, as is widely known, invariably draws upon his own experiences when creating characters, places, and situations, but it also tells us something about both “The Haunter of the Dark” and Lovecraft himself. If we read the story as an allegory, the Haunter becomes a symbol not of *cosmic* alienation, a feeling, that is, of insignificance and dread evoked by the otherness of outer space, but of *urban* alienation, a similar feeling evoked by the otherness of urban spaces. Of course, I would argue that, in Lovecraft’s fiction, the two cannot be so easily untangled. The Haunter, for example, one of the most intangible and alien of all Lovecraft’s monstrosities, invokes the

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266. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 54.

267. Lovecraft, “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath,” 156.

alienness of outer space, which, in turn, symbolizes the alterity of urban modernity. As a monster, the Haunter threatens Blake not with disintegration, but with separation, with the knowledge that he does not belong—hence the ramblings in his diary about “other worlds and other galaxies” and “more distant Shaggai, and the ultimate void of the black planets” and his pathetic attempts to reassure himself by asserting that “I am on this planet.”<sup>268</sup> Blake seems to fear that the Haunter, much like the Old Ones from “The Whisperer in Darkness,” will abduct him and take him to another world, a truly alien place not unlike the “orbs with great stone towers” he glimpsed in the Shining Trapezohedron. Like all the Cyclopean monster-cities Lovecraft depicts, this alien world draws upon Lovecraft’s feelings for a very real place: Federal Hill. Indeed, by referring to the church thereon as “Cyclopean,” Lovecraft is juxtaposing the district with his other alien landscapes, which he invariably describes in similar terms. Such an interpretation places far greater emphasis on Blake’s journey through Federal Hill, a long passage that, otherwise, does nothing more than set the mood for the events that follow. If, however, the Haunter symbolizes urban alienation, then it is fitting that the entity emerges immediately after Blake’s first encounter with Federal Hill. Indeed, his experience, his sudden awareness of his own isolation in a strange and unfamiliar city that he once considered his home, calls forth the monster, the Haunter being, in a sense, the physical manifestation of his alienation, which he tries to alleviate by retreating to “the sane central streets and the home-like brick sidewalks of the college district.”

It is telling that this fails. That is, Blake’s fear of the Haunter does not dissipate after his return to College Hill. If, as I have suggested, Blake acts as Lovecraft’s avatar within this allegory, then Blake’s inability to recover from this trauma confirms that Lovecraft’s sense of

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268. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 476-7.

alienation did not evaporate after he returned to Providence in 1926. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the transformation of Lovecraft's Atlantean dream-cities into Cyclopean monster-cities, which occurs in 1926 *after* Lovecraft returned to Rhode Island, indicates that, despite his outward optimism, he struggled and ultimately failed to heal from the painful disruption that New York had inflicted on his mental state. In that sense, for both Blake and Lovecraft, an encounter with urban modernity differs from a wound that heals. It reveals a fundamental truth that, once known, can never be forgotten: no matter how permanent it may seem, the environment that forms us, that gives birth to us as the "lovely New England slopes" gave birth to Randolph Carter, is disappointingly and shockingly ephemeral.<sup>269</sup> Thus, Federal Hill spoils College Hill for Blake just as New York spoiled it for Lovecraft. If only, the story suggests, the two men had stayed home, if only they had been content with that "little garden oasis of village-like antiquity" and never ventured into the urban desert that surrounds it, they would never have suffered such a horrible fate. And yet, is that what we, as readers, would really want? Would we want Blake to draw the curtains and block out that "smoke-wreathed world of dream" on the other side of his window?

Herein lies the conundrum at the heart of Lovecraft's later fiction: like Lovecraft himself, we crave that sense of "adventurous expectancy" that the strange and unfamiliar provides, and yet the sense of alienation that accompanies such an encounter with alterity leaves us feeling lost, isolated, and adrift. We may, in other words, appreciate the "village-like antiquity" of College Hill, but we cannot resist "that spectral, unreachable world beyond the curling smoke."<sup>270</sup> Simultaneously attractive and repulsive, it traps us, its promise of mystery holding us spellbound. Blake finds himself caught in this net not once, but three times, having been hypnotized by

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269. Lovecraft, "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath," 157.

270. Lovecraft, "The Haunter of the Dark," 454.

Federal Hill, the Shining Trapezohedron, and the Haunter itself, all three of which show him fascinating but disturbing visions of what seems to be another world. In the end, Blake, who is unable to move from his desk, can only ramble about “other worlds and other galaxies” and “620 East Knapp Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” his disordered, seemingly random thoughts revealing his inability to choose between the known and the unknown.<sup>271</sup> Blake’s fatal indecision recalls Lovecraft’s claim that his nature was “tripartite, [his] interests consisting of three parallel and dissociated groups—(a) Love of the strange and the fantastic. (b) Love of the abstract truth and of scientific logick. (c) Love of the ancient and the permanent.”<sup>272</sup> The conflict between Lovecraft’s “love of the strange and the fantastic,” which invariably draws him to alterity, and his “love of the ancient and the permanent,” which recoils from it, plays out, again and again, in his later fiction. Indeed, it is this very tension, whose expression I have labeled Lovecraftian Contrarianism, that powers Lovecraft’s later works, for the experience that Lovecraft captures, a chance encounter with true alterity—with “real externality”—both stimulates the reader intellectually and shocks him emotionally. One cannot help, in other words, blanching at the notion of one’s brain traveling through space in a metal cylinder any more than one can help being intrigued by the idea of visiting “thirty-seven different celestial bodies—planets, dark stars, and less definable objects—including eight outside our galaxy and two outside the curved cosmos of space and time.” This contradiction, which is so characteristic of Lovecraft’s later work, distinguishes them not only from his early tales, but from the pulp fiction of his predecessors, contemporaries, and many of his successors, the ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and monsters of mainstream weird fiction being nothing more than one-sided, and ultimately

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271. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 476-7.

272. H. P. Lovecraft to Rheinhart Kleiner, Providence, March 7, 1920, in *Letters to Rheinhart Kleiner*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2005), 184.

uninteresting, horrors. Indeed, as a result of the ambivalence Lovecraft provokes, his later works do not even conform to the definition of weird fiction that Lovecraft himself devises in his essay

*Supernatural Horror in Literature:*

The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim. And of course, the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere, the better it is as a work of art in the given medium.<sup>273</sup>

Of course, Lovecraft’s later works certainly excite “a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers,” but they also stimulate a sense of wonder, awe, and excitement, which sometimes, if not frequently, outweigh the former. It is conflict and ambivalence, despite Lovecraft’s stated commitment to atmospheric unity, that define his later works in part because, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, the natural landscape—or, in the case of “The Haunter of the Dark,” the urban landscape—often functions as the comforting antithesis to the otherworldly horrors that threaten it. In that sense, Lovecraft’s distinctive use of place serves an important but overlooked role in the Cthulhu Mythos that he developed in the 1920s: it contributes to the paradox at the core of Lovecraft’s most characteristic work, that desire to both explore and avoid alterity. As the reverse side of the Cthulhu Mythos, Lovecraft’s imaginary New England provides a comforting alternative to the alluring but horrifying otherness of his monsters. It is his “love of the ancient and the permanent,” which the protagonist must defend from or sacrifice to Lovecraft’s “love of the strange and the fantastic.” As readers, as individuals even, we are caught between these irreconcilable desires. How, we might ask, do we live our lives if, as Lovecraft suggests, our fascination with alterity threatens our need for permanence?

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273. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*, 23.

How do we avoid Blake's fate? How can we explore Federal Hill without risking our "little garden oasis" atop College Hill?

Lovecraft's fiction, I would argue, satisfies precisely because it allows us to explore the unknown without losing our connection to those environments that provide our lives with context and without which, according to Lovecraft, we would be lost. It allows us, as Lovecraft himself explains, to experience the "illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis."<sup>274</sup>

According to Lovecraft, "all sensitive people," aside from a few "self-blinded earth-gazers," feel this desire to transcend the restrictions placed upon us by time and space, an aspiration so strong that it gave birth to religion itself, "a great part of religion [being] merely a childish and diluted gratification of this perpetual gnawing toward the ultimate illimitable void."<sup>275</sup> In a secular age, which scorns religion and superstition, art—and weird fiction in particular—is the only means left of satisfying this "perpetual gnawing." And yet, actual immersion in alterity, as Lovecraft learned in 1925, is intolerable: stripped of any context by which he or she might understand this new environment, the individual can only stumble confusedly through a series of meaningless scenes. The violation of natural law, in other words, results not in freedom but in confusion. This is why Lovecraft's early works, specifically his Dunsanian fantasies, are so much less satisfying than his later works.<sup>276</sup> At first glance, the topographically realistic descriptions we encounter in

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274. Lovecraft, "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction," 176.

275. H. P. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, February 1931, in *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*, eds. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 259.

276. As noted previously, Lovecraft himself was well aware of this: "My stories of the 1920 period reflect a good deal of my two chief models, Poe and Dunsany, and are in general too strongly inclined to extravagance and overcolouring to be of much serious literary value." "Some Notes on a Nonentity," 210.

Lovecraft's later works appear to be nothing more than the self-indulgent ramblings of an antiquarian, a harmless if eccentric addition that provides his fiction with a bit of flavor, but Lovecraft's topographical realism actually serves a crucial purpose: it provides the context that both the reader and the protagonist need in order to understand the intrusion of the unknown and its significance. Without it, all of Lovecraft's later works would collapse, as *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* does, into a series of meaninglessly outré episodes. By grounding his stories in seemingly tangible places, clearly delineated in time and space, and introducing only the briefest glimpses of alterity, Lovecraft creates an imaginary environment in which the reader can indulge in the contemplation of that which cannot be—without suffering that sense of vertigo or alienation usually triggered by encounters with the unknown. Lovecraft's descriptions of the landscape, in other words, provide the reader with a safe haven, a secure base to which the reader can return after brief forays into that “Ultimate Chaos” that surrounds it.<sup>277</sup> Without this, we would be as disillusioned as Lovecraft and as disoriented as his protagonists.

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277. Lovecraft, “The Haunter of the Dark,” 471.



## VII. Conclusion

*There is in certain ancient things a trace  
Of some dim essence—more than form or weight;  
A tenuous aether, indeterminate,  
Yet linked with all the laws of time and space.*<sup>278</sup>

To say, as Joshi does, that Lovecraft is a topographical realist or to argue, as Janicker does, that he is a regionalist is to misunderstand not only the significance of the landscape to Lovecraft, but also its role in his fiction. Such a perspective, moreover, overlooks how much Lovecraft's approach to landscape description changed over the course of his career. From 1917, when Lovecraft resumed writing fiction, to 1924, when he moved to New York, he all but ignored the natural landscape, his detached approach, which consists of vague, dreamlike snippets of description, reflecting the influence of Edgar Allan Poe. As for the urban landscape, Lovecraft depicted it, in story after story, as a source of wonder and mystery, a perspective that would change, quite suddenly, in 1925 when Lovecraft, unemployed and alone, moved into a seedy apartment in Brooklyn Heights near Red Hook. After that, Lovecraft's Atlantean dream-cities, with their marble domes and spires, disappear, replaced by nightmarish citadels, alien ruins composed of Cyclopean blocks and arranged according to an incomprehensible geometry. After Lovecraft's return to Providence in the spring of 1926, he began to apply his newly discovered talent for landscape description to the natural environment. Inspired by trips to Foster, Rhode Island, and rural Vermont, these descriptions constitute some of the most memorable and heartfelt passages in Lovecraft's oeuvre, being far more impressive than Lovecraft's bland and rather forgettable protagonists. After all, even the most observant readers will have trouble distinguishing Henry Armitage from, say, William Dyer or Albert N. Wilmarth or Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, all of whom are middle-aged academics at Miskatonic University.

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278. Lovecraft, "Continuity," 94.

By comparison, Lovecraft's descriptions of the landscape are indelible. Who could forget the "wild domed hills of Vermont" or the eerily empty streets of Innsmouth or the vacant church atop Federal Hill?<sup>279</sup> Though long neglected by scholars or brushed aside as colorful backgrounds, Lovecraft's descriptions of the landscape, whether natural or urban, shape how readers experience his fiction. Their presence therein provides us with a unique lens, which can, if we choose to look through it, change our perspective on the study of Lovecraft.

When applied to Lovecraft's fiction, for instance, this lens alters our perception of his methods, his approach to writing weird fiction. His four Gratuitous Descriptions, in particular, which appear in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Dunwich Horror," "The Whisperer in Darkness," and "The Haunter of the Dark," contradict the notion that Lovecraft's fiction adheres to Poe's Unity of Effect. To be sure, his earlier tales, beginning with "The Tomb," maintain an atmosphere of dread from the first page to the last, but one need only glance at Lovecraft's loving re-creation of Providence in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* or his awestruck description of Vermont in "The Whisperer in Darkness" to see how far his later works diverge from, say, "The Fall of the House of Usher." Upon closer examination, one can hardly fail to notice that these descriptions often recycle the same imagery, being composed of the same architectural and topographical elements: fanlights and transoms, gambrel roofs, small-paned windows, deep woods, ravines, and rounded hills.<sup>280</sup> In a sense, they form one continuous description, a sort of panorama of New England, bits of which appear in each of Lovecraft's stories. This setting, the loving description of which is so characteristic of Lovecraft's mature

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279. Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness," 467.

280. The phrase "gambrel roofs," for instance, appears in no less than eleven works: "The Unnamable," "The Festival," "The Silver Key," "He," *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Colour out of Space," "The Dunwich Horror," "The Shadow over Innsmouth," "The Dreams in the Witch House," and "The Thing on the Doorstep." Lovecraft wrote the earliest of these in 1923, the latest in 1933.

style, not only prevents his fiction from becoming uniformly and unrelentingly oppressive; it grounds his Cthulhu Mythos in reality. It supplies, so to speak, a firm and concrete reality that provides a stark contrast to the otherworldliness of his monstrous races and the alien cities from which they hail. And yet, it does more than this. Because his descriptions, specifically those penned after 1925, are so lovingly penned, they, far more than Lovecraft's forgettable protagonists, form the antithesis to Lovecraft's monsters. Lovecraft does not, as another horror writer might, create tension by introducing an appealing *character* and then threatening him; he creates tension by introducing an idyllic *landscape* and then threatening it. If the "nameless things" beneath the sea were to "rise above the billows to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of puny, war-exhausted mankind," we, as readers, would not mourn Henry Armitage or Marinus Bicknell Willett or Daniel Upton, but we would miss the "old villages and woods and misty downs, / South winds, the sea, low hills, and lighted towns," the lure of which, for Lovecraft and for those he converts, "alone makes life worth living."<sup>281</sup>

Lovecraft's descriptions of these scenes not only change how we interpret his fiction, but also change how we understand Lovecraft himself. Looking solely at Lovecraft's letters, which ecstatically describe his return to Providence in 1926, scholars have assumed that Lovecraft, once he arrived back home, escaped from the pall New York had cast over his life, that he, as he claims in one letter, resumed "a waking & tri-dimensional life."<sup>282</sup> Of course, there can be no doubt that Lovecraft was delighted to return home, but the permanent transformation of his

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281. H. P. Lovecraft, "Dagon," in *Collected Fiction: A Variorum Edition*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 1, 1905-1925 (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2015), 58; H. P. Lovecraft, "Expectancy," in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 91.

282. H. P. Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, Providence, May 1, 1926, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 2, 1925-1929 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1968), 46.

Atlantean dream-cities, which had prior to New York symbolized awe and wonder, into Cyclopean monster-cities in 1926 indicates that the specter of New York haunted Lovecraft long after he had left the city. Indeed, in a sense, every story Lovecraft wrote after 1925 is a veiled critique of urban modernity. That is not to say, of course, that the alien mythology, the so-called Cthulhu Mythos, that Lovecraft created does not also convey his philosophy of cosmicism, his belief that the vastness of time and space renders our lives both insignificant and meaningless. Instead, I would argue that Lovecraft's mythos, a key component of which is his lovingly detailed "panorama" of New England, expresses both his belief in cosmicism and his loathing of urban modernity. In a sense, cosmicism provides Lovecraft with an intellectual theme, a viewpoint that he repeatedly explores, while urban modernity provides Lovecraft with an emotional response to that theme, for it strips the individual of those very traditions that defend against the nihilism cosmicism evokes. If that is so, the turning point in Lovecraft's career was not 1926, when he returned home to Providence, but 1925, when he learned, firsthand, how it feels to dwell in an environment in which "everything I saw became unreal and two-dimensional, and everything I thought and did became trivial and devoid of meaning through lack of any points of reference belonging to any fabric of which I could conceivably form a part."<sup>283</sup> After leaving New York, Lovecraft would spend the next decade exploring this sensation, this awful awareness of triviality, which is the result of a "lack of any points of reference."

While living in New York, Lovecraft had thought that Providence would cure him, so to speak, would provide him with the "points of reference" he had lost:

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283. Lovecraft to Donald Wandrei, Providence, February 10, 1927, in Joshi and Schultz, *Mysteries of Time and Spirit: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Donald Wandrei*, 35. Note that this description of alienation succinctly explains how Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos affects the reader: Lovecraft provides, through detailed descriptions of the landscape, a point of reference, which the intrusion of the otherworldly renders both "unreal and two-dimensional" as well as "trivial and devoid of meaning."

I will be dogmatic only to the extent of saying that it is *New England* I *must* have—in some form or other. Providence is part of me—I *am* Providence . . . Providence is my home, & there I shall end my days if I can do so with any semblance of peace, dignity, or appropriateness. . . . Providence would always be at the back of my head as a goal to be worked toward—an ultimate Paradise to be regain'd at last.<sup>284</sup>

And yet, Lovecraft's fiction, which continuously returns to the theme of alienation, indicates that, though Lovecraft regained Providence at last, the city was not the "ultimate Paradise" he had hoped it would be. Indeed, not long after Lovecraft returned to Rhode Island, he began taking long trips up and down the Eastern Seaboard, two of which, his excursions to Foster, Rhode Island, in 1926 and to rural Vermont in 1927, we have discussed already. On these trips, Lovecraft paid no attention to food or lodgings, on which he spent as little money as possible. Instead of trying to indulge himself, as most tourists do, he was searching for something, for "any fabric of which I could conceivably form a part." Psychologically, Lovecraft needed these points of reference, which he, quite characteristically, always envisioned as *places*. They provided him with a sort of balm, a soothing sense that, despite its seemingly inevitable progress, urban modernity had not conquered all. Aware that he would be "hopelessly soul-starved" in a "colourless or monotonous environment," Lovecraft realized that he drew his "prime contentment from beauty & mellowness as expressed in quaint town vistas & in the scenery of ancient farming & woodland regions." Much like his trips to Quebec and Charleston and elsewhere, Lovecraft's writing provided him with access to a sensorium free of the "tawdry industrial Babbity" he so despised.<sup>285</sup>

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284. Lovecraft to Lillian D. Clark, New York City, March 29, 1926, in Joshi and Schultz, *Letters from New York*, 289.

285. H. P. Lovecraft, "An Account of *Charleston*, in His Majesty's Province of *South-Carolina*," in *Collected Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi, vol. 4, *Travel* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2005), 82.

And yet, one wonders if Lovecraft's needs, as an individual who only wrote to please himself, were truly compatible with the genre he had chosen when he was twenty-six. Considering the number of his admirers, not to mention the number of his imitators, one is tempted to answer in the affirmative, but one must also consider Lovecraft's growing dissatisfaction with his own writing:

In everything I do there is a certain concreteness, extravagance, or general crudeness which defeats the vague but insistent object I have in mind. I start out trying to find symbols expressive of a certain mood induced by a certain visual conception . . . , but when I come to put anything on paper the chosen symbols seem forced, awkward, childish, exaggerated, & essentially inexpressive.<sup>286</sup>

These "visual conceptions" that Lovecraft mentions can only refer to the natural and urban landscape, as the landscape is the only element in his work that he describes in detail, that he paints, so to speak, for the reader's benefit. As for the "mood" that these sights evoke, Lovecraft must be referring to the "vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy" that he repeatedly describes elsewhere. If, over the course of Lovecraft's career, his goal shifted from exciting "in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers" to expressing the sense of "wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy" that "quaint town vistas & . . . the scenery of ancient farming & woodland regions" inspired in him, one can hardly deny that he failed. If his reason for writing fiction was to convey some sense of what the natural and urban landscapes meant to him, one cannot blame him for concluding that "I have staged a cheap, melodramatic puppet-show without saying what I wanted to say in the first place."<sup>287</sup>

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286. H. P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence, December 13, 1933, in *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017), 494.

287. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, Providence, December 13, 1933, in Schultz and Joshi, *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, 494.

But even if weird fiction were not the ideal vehicle for Lovecraft's changing goals, his fiction does have much to say about the environment, particularly the role of the urban landscape in our lives. Indeed, as discussed above, everything Lovecraft wrote after 1924 can be read as a condemnation of urban modernity, his New York tales offering an overt critique, his Cthulhu Mythos tales a covert or symbolic one. Lovecraft's work demonstrates, in other words, just how much we, as human beings, need stable environments—or, to use Lovecraft's terminology, “points of reference”—and how lost we would be without them. In his fiction, it is knowledge, specifically the knowledge that alien gods exist, that threatens to deprive characters of their points of reference, their sense of belonging to a specific and much-loved environment. Once characters learn of the existence of these entities, they can no longer view their former environment, which also harbors such strange and otherworldly entities, as human or friendly to humanity.<sup>288</sup> To say, as many scholars have, that this knowledge threatens their sanity is to oversimplify, as Lovecraft's characters suffer from a very specific psychological malady: the oppressive realization of their own atomization, of the absence, that is, of “any fabric of which [they] could conceivably form a part.”<sup>289</sup> In reality, of course, it is not the existence of alien gods

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288. In “Dagon” (1917), for instance, the narrator claims that “I cannot think of the deep sea without shuddering at the nameless things that may at this very moment be crawling and floundering on its slimy bed.” Albert N. Wilmarth makes a similar claim in “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930): “When I left Brattleboro I resolved never to go back to Vermont, and I feel quite certain I shall keep my resolution. Those wild hills are surely the outpost of a frightful cosmic race. . . .” Lovecraft, “Dagon,” 58; Lovecraft “The Whisperer in Darkness,” 530.

289. Jay McRoy, whose views reflect the current scholarly consensus, provides an example. In the following passage, he explains the connection between Cthulhu and Lovecraft's other monsters and madness: “The very intrusion of these largely indeterminate or unfathomable physicalities within the realm of the human—a realm composed of the knowable and the easily compartmentalized—is, for Lovecraft, the moment of horror. It is an event that cannot be described by something as rigidly structured as language, an event momentous and disturbing enough, in the case of a number of Lovecraft's more unfortunate protagonists, to elicit an immediate state of ‘madness.’” Of course, McRoy is not wrong, but I would contend that these “indeterminate or unfathomable physicalities” not only disrupt how characters understand reality, but how they feel about their environment. “There Goes the Neighborhood: Chaotic

but the destruction wrought by urban modernity that threatens our sanity and promotes alienation. After New York, Lovecraft devoted most of his career to fighting this multifaceted foe, this “juggernaut of alien and meaningless forms and feelings” that continuously undermines those “inherited folkways which alone give us enough of the illusion of interest and purpose to make life worth living.”<sup>290</sup> Though as amorphous and difficult to define as one of Lovecraft’s monstrosities, this “juggernaut” seems to consist of several related social and structural trends, including industrialization, commercialization, egalitarianism, democratization, and immigration, all of which spread from the city outward, the urban being the antithesis of the rural, which, in Lovecraft’s later fiction, preserves those connections to the past that the city severs.

And yet, in 1935, at the end of his career, Lovecraft would return to the city, to College Hill, describing the city not as a threat to the country, but as a source of those “inherited folkways which alone . . . make life worth living,” thereby distinguishing between two very different types of urbanism. In “The Haunter of the Dark,” the last work of original fiction that Lovecraft ever wrote, he suggests that, though urbanism is a problem, it may also be a solution. That is, it is not urbanism, in and of itself, that erodes our sense of meaning and belonging, but a certain type of urbanism, which does not value or even acknowledge the need we have for permanence. Federal Hill, of course, represents this type of urbanism, there being no connection between its current residents and the historic environment in which they now live. As a result, the inhabitants of Federal Hill cannot love the district, for its urban landscape signifies nothing to them.<sup>291</sup> Their first memories, unlike those of Charles Dexter Ward or Lovecraft himself, were

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Apocalypse and Monstrous Genesis in H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Street,’ ‘The Horror at Red Hook,’ and ‘He,’ *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 13, no. 4 (2003): 335.

290. Lovecraft, “An Account of *Charleston*,” 82.

291. Needless to say, many would find Lovecraft’s claim that immigrants cannot love their new homeland outrageous.



not of “the great westward sea of hazy roofs and domes and steeples and far hills which he saw one winter afternoon from that great railed embankment, all violet and mystic against a fevered, apocalyptic sunset of reds and golds and purples and curious greens,” but of some other place.<sup>292</sup> From Lovecraft’s perspective, these newcomers to the city are akin to those “shrewd strangers” he describes in “He,” who are “without dreams and without kinship to the scenes about them” and “who could never mean aught to a blue-eyed man of the old folk, with the love of fair green lanes and white New England village steeples in his heart.”<sup>293</sup> The mean-spirited ethnocentrism of this passage has, quite understandably, prevented scholars from addressing or even noticing the radical environmentalism that underlies it. According to Lovecraft, our environment imprints itself on us. When migration or urban development separates us from our ancestral environment, when we become, that is, “without kinship” to the landscape around us, then we can no longer dream, for the landscape that birthed us is the source of our dreams. Like Randolph Carter, no matter how outrageous our dreams may appear on the surface, they are always, deeper down, dreams of home. Elsewhere, we can never be more than a visitor, a “shrewd stranger,” whose ideals, whose memories of “fair green lanes and white New England village steeples,” no longer match anything in our surroundings. In story after story, Lovecraft documents, perhaps better than any nature writer could, how painful this sense of deprivation is. Urban modernity both contributes to this separation, as it continuously incorporates the rural landscape into itself, and benefits from it, for those “without kinship to the scenes about them” lose the will to resist modernization.

And yet, in his depiction of College Hill in “The Haunter of the Dark,” Lovecraft presents another model of urbanism, one that, perhaps even more so than our conceptions of the

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292. Lovecraft, “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,” 222.

293. Lovecraft, “He,” 507.

country, has the potential to inspire a sense of belonging. Unlike New York, where unchecked growth has erased all signs of the past, prompting Lovecraft to note that “this city of stone and stridor is not a sentient perpetuation of Old New York as London is of Old London and Paris of Old Paris, but . . . is in fact quite dead,” College Hill has preserved its past, which, even to this day, is enshrined in its Colonial architecture.<sup>294</sup> Also, unlike Federal Hill or Red Hook or New York in general, whose “sprawling body [is] imperfectly embalmed and infested with queer animate things which have nothing to do with it as it was in life,” College Hill has retained its original population, the descendants of those who built the district.<sup>295</sup> From Lovecraft’s perspective, to remain alive and avoid New York’s fate, a city has to retain its people and protect its architecture. As an ardent materialist, Lovecraft, quite curiously, did not mind if a community rejected its *invisible* vestiges of the past, such as Christianity, so long as it retained its *visible* ones, the appearance of continuity being more important to Lovecraft than a perpetuation of past traditions.<sup>296</sup> One recalls Lovecraft’s claim that “it may be taken as axiomatic that the people of a place matter absolutely nothing to me except as components of the general landscape & scenery. . . . My life lies not among *people* but among *scenes*—my local affections are not personal, but topographical & architectural. . . .”<sup>297</sup> Many, I suspect, would find Lovecraft’s emphasis on the outward appearance of things, as opposed to the inward sentiments of people,

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294. Lovecraft, “He,” 507.

295. Lovecraft, “He,” 507.

296. Despite being a devout atheist, Lovecraft, quite tellingly, choose to get married in St. Paul’s Chapel because he wanted “to put Colonial architecture to all of its possible uses.” He wished to make himself, so to speak, a component in a panorama, the aesthetics of the experience being more important than the experience itself. As Joshi puts it, “his sense of aesthetics had overwhelmed his rationality.” H. P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton, New York City, March 12, 1924, in *Selected Letters*, eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, vol. 1, 1911-1924 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965), 325; Joshi, *I Am Providence*, 496.

297. Lovecraft to Lillian D. Clark, New York City, March 29, 1926, in Joshi and Schultz, *Letters from New York*, 289.

bizarre and unnatural, perhaps even immoral, but as long as Lovecraft could access the “topographical & architectural,” he could conjure up that illusion of permanence, of continuity, that makes our meaningless lives seem important—and worth living. When Lovecraft first saw Marblehead, Massachusetts, for instance, that well-preserved Colonial seaport north of Boston, he felt a momentarily sense of transcendence, which banished his awareness of his own insignificance and connected him to his environment: “In a flash all the past of New England—all the past of Old England—all the past of Anglo-Saxondom and the Western World—swept over me and identified me with the stupendous totality of all things in such a way as it never did before and never will again. That was the high tide of my life.”<sup>298</sup> Cities, then, have the power to alienate people, to reduce them to individual atoms in an environment without meaning, *and* to connect them “with the stupendous totality of all things.” Whether they do the former or the latter depends on how much of the urban landscape they preserve for posterity and how much they strip mine in order to provide materials for the present. Beneath the monsters and the spell books and the cults, Lovecraft’s fiction explores the nature of the landscape, both urban and rural, and its effect on our wellbeing. In the end, he advocates not a retreat into arcadia, but a different approach to urbanization, one that values “crumbling-looking gables, broken small-paned windows, and archaic chimneys that [stand] out half-disintegrated against the moonlit sky” for the same reason it values old-growth forests and tall-grass prairies.<sup>299</sup> Deprived by “a

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298. H. P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton, Providence, March 12, 1930, in *Letters to James F. Morton*, eds. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 222.

299. De Camp goes so far as to claim that Lovecraft hated change itself, preferring the old to the new regardless of quality, a condition de Camp calls “neophobia.” Though there is truth in what de Camp says, such a perspective encourages us to dismiss Lovecraft’s critique in its entirety—including those aspects of his philosophy that, I would argue, are widely shared, such as the sense that, as a result of continuous “development,” modern urban landscapes never develop a strong sense of place. *H. P. Lovecraft: A Biography*, 205.

callous age” of these links to the past, we become like the strangers in Lovecraft’s poem, who, stopping to stare at a vacant lot, “miss some vital thing they cannot name.”<sup>300</sup>

Scholars have acknowledged the “topographical realism” present in Lovecraft’s fiction, but few have expressed any interest in its evolution or its significance. The degree to which, in this regard, Lovecraft’s early fiction differs from his later fiction indicates that Lovecraft’s values changed over time, the catalyst for this transformation being, without a doubt, his experience in New York. By the time Lovecraft wrote “The Haunter of the Dark” in 1935, he had spent ten years ruminating on the influence of the natural and urban landscapes on our psyches. By tracing the route which Lovecraft’s approach to description took, I have tried to demonstrate that the landscape plays a critical role in Lovecraft’s story; that is, it both reflects his own evolving views and shapes how we interpret the stories themselves. And yet, to fully understand Lovecraft’s perspective and its evolution, one must also examine his poetry, which, long before his fiction, takes an interest in the New England landscape; his collaborations with other writers, both professionals and amateurs; the influence of his contemporaries, specifically Clark Ashton Smith, whose otherworldly landscapes may have encouraged Lovecraft to abandon his comparatively feeble attempts at Dunsanian fantasy; and his essays, particularly his travelogues, which provide detailed descriptions of natural and urban environments, ranging from Charleston, South Carolina, to Quebec. Those interested in urbanism must also attempt to unravel the different strands of Lovecraft’s beliefs, isolating his racism from beliefs and values amenable to modern Americans, though one fears that such a project may not be possible. There is still much to do, but at this point, it should be clear that, unlike his Gothic predecessors, Lovecraft considered the landscape much more than a way to bolster verisimilitude or to foster

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300. H. P. Lovecraft, “The East India Brick Row,” in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013), 309.

dread in his fiction: he perceived it, much as many radical environmentalists do, as the only solution to the existential despair that modernity promotes, as the only remaining source of wonder and mystery in a world remade by “the engulfing barbarism of mechanised life, democrattick madness, quantitative standards, and schedule-enslaved uniformity.”<sup>301</sup>

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301. Lovecraft, “An Account of *Charleston*,” 82.

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## IX. Appendix



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**To:** Dylan Lee Henderson  
**From:** Douglas James Adams, Chair  
IRB Committee  
**Date:** 03/14/2019  
**Action:** **Exemption Granted**  
**Action Date:** 03/14/2019  
**Protocol #:** 1901169230  
**Study Title:** Reader-Response Survey to H. P. Lovecraft's Fiction

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

cc: Sean T Teuton, Investigator