Re-visioning Romantic-Era Gothicism: An Introduction to Key Works and Themes in the Study of H.P. Lovecraft

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Abstract

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was an author, letter writer and poet who lived between 1890 and 1937. His works blend science fiction with Gothic themes. Lovecraft was, by the majority of accounts (including his own), a bad writer. He was also an outspoken racist for the majority of his life to a degree which makes much of his work, to a modern reader, politically grotesque. Despite the above, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Lovecraft's work can be found in the genealogy of almost all modern science fiction and horror. This essay introduces the major concepts in critical responses to the fictional prose works of H.P. Lovecraft. The author examines the recurring themes of language, genre, literary influences, xenophobia, cosmic indifferentism, dreams, time and the influence of Lovecraft. This essay does not, due to length limitations, seek to be inclusive of all Lovecraft criticism, but instead presents key themes and works. Nor does it address the totality of Lovecraft's work and focuses, instead on readings of his fictional prose works.

Classifying Lovecraft

This paper is one of three in the cluster of papers for Literature Compass which examine the legacy of Gothic-Romanticism beyond the historical time-frame of the Romantic period. As such, before we consider Lovecraft's work in isolation, we should first establish his place in the Gothic literary cannon and, indeed, to define the parameters of what constitutes Gothic Literature. The Gothic has been described by Heiland as 'one of the most formulaic of genres' (49) and, whilst each of the recurring Gothic characteristics mentioned in any introductory critical work on the Gothic (e.g. Hogel) are recognizable in Lovecraft's fiction, such an exercise of simply ticking off characteristics, yields little which can be, in isolation, interrogated to any meaningful effect. Further to this, Morgan challenges the basis of such classification, contending that '[c]riticism addressing the literature of horror is notoriously lacking in an established terminology' (60). Lovecraft's fiction, for example, has been described as horror, Gothic horror, American Gothic, science fiction or (to use Lovecraft's own terminology) 'weird fiction' without any clear distinction of those characteristics which separate one category from another. Each category appears to be inclusive almost to the extent of irrelevance. This imprecise taxonomy makes aligning Lovecraft's work within existing parameters of genre a difficult, if not impossible, task. The genre of Lovecraftian fiction, or rather, fiction which takes place in the world created by Lovecraft, is itself a sub-genre of all of the above and continues to enjoy a growing cannon and it is perhaps more practical to assign Lovecraft's work to this genre.

Rather than attempting to read Lovecraft within the context of genre, critics (most notably Sheah and Cannon) have found charting his influences to be more fruitful an exercise. Indeed, many critics consider Lovecraft to simply have clumsily reproduced

the stylistic characteristics of other Gothic authors. Punter contends that Lovecraft's 'place in the tradition is not an innovator or even modifier, but more as a latter-day reinvoker of past horrors' (44). Lovecraft's letters have been helpful in charting his literary influences. The most frequently noted comparison is with Poe to the extent that early criticism of Lovecraft, such as that of Wilson and Mabbott, was performed as an extension of critical considerations of Poe's work and influence. This connection is not unwarranted. Lovecraft not only admired Poe, but shared much of his stylistic, thematic and even, Bloch argues, personal characteristics and history. The influences of Poe can be felt to the point where Sheah laments that Lovecraft ever read *The Tell-Tale Heart* 'for that "They tell me that I am mad" opening was reprised to death by Lovecraft' (117). Lovecraft utilized the Gothic short story format which characterizes Poe's work. As similar as the two writers were, however, Lovecraft did not succeed in, or even attempt to, reproduce Poe's mastery of the unreliable narrator in his psychological horror. There is rarely the suggestion that Lovecraft's fiction might simply describe illusions which haunt the irrational mind of the protagonist. Lovecraft in direct contrast to Poe, is in Punter's words 'devoid of psychological interest; his terrors are entirely those of the unintelligible outside' (38).

Stylistic and thematic echoes of Dunsany's fantasy fiction are also visible, although Mosig contends that Lovecraft's work resembled Dunsany before Lovecraft had encountered Dunsany's work. Also evident are echoes of Melville, Twain, Conan-Doyle, Beckford and Hawthorne. Having accepted the imprecision of classification above, Lovecraft is frequently located in the tradition of 20th century Gothic authors, the characteristics of which we shall now briefly consider. Where early Gothic works were characterized by 18th century middle-class anti-Catholicism and, Hogel contends 'the modern middle-class effort at viable self-construction' (223), later Gothic works borrow the same narrative devices, but in order to address dramatically different social anxieties. Botting contends that "[i]n the twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values" (1–2). Lovecraft can be classified as Later American Gothic (in contrast to New American Gothic and simply Gothic) alongside Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers although, again, such distinctions lack precise definitions. As with Gothic as a whole, we should be suspicious of totalising statements of American Gothic. American Gothic, both New and Later, is not an entirely separate evolutionary branch of the genre. Gothic authors on each side of the Atlantic were influenced by one another and whilst specific locals and stylistic commonalities are notable in American Gothic fiction, many 19th and 20th century Gothic works share certain characteristics and explore similar social anxieties irrespective of the author's home nation. American Gothic, broadly, was a genre crafted by Brown, Hawthorne and Poe which relocated the common forms of Gothic fiction. The castle, largely, was replaced by the old house, bringing horror into the home. In American Gothic, too, Botting contends, 'romantic adventures could take place in the wilds of an uncharted continent' (114) and, indeed, many of Lovecraft's stories revolve around the discovery of ruined pre-human civilisations. Lovecraft frequently abandoned both the ruined house and the uncharted space, however, and presented the reader with entirely fictitious worlds (his 'Dunstany stories') seeking to abandon precise physical or historical location altogether. American Gothic, too, borrows Gothic forms to express new underlying social anxieties, connected less with religion and more with the Enlightenment and investigating the subtle horrors thereof, a theme which, as discussed in the section 'Cosmic Indifferentism' Madness and Science below, recurs in Lovecraft's fiction.

There is in Lovecraft's work both a progression of the genre in keeping with his own modern anxieties and an escapist desire simply to write 18th century Gothic fiction. Joshi also notes how Lovecraft's prose was littered with anachronisms and stylistic touches more typical of works from the 18th century and Michau contends that "[f]or Lovecraft, time was the ultimate foe in which both present and future worlds foreshadowed doom and degeneration" (62). Lovecraft's prose and letters describe his sense of being an individual born into the wrong time. Armand describes Lovecraft as conceiving of himself 'as an eighteenth-century English gentleman, an upholder of Nordic superiority, and a bemused spectator of the world's foibles and follies' (168). Lovecraft's 18th century authorial voice is occasionally disrupted and, as with *The Statement of Randolph Carter*, when modern speech does intrude, it seems oddly out of place. This is a product not only of Lovecraft's literary upbringing, but of his own sense of being born too late. To a degree a fixation on early European Gothic fiction is, itself, characteristic of American Gothic in that, as Punter contends, "[i]t could be said that Poe writes of American obsessions, provided we accept that the major American obsession is Europe" (184). Lovecraft has been described (no doubt referencing Joshi's thesis in *The Decline of the West*) as 'conducting a one-man battle against modernisation' (144). He viewed the early 20th century as on the brink of self-destruction through dangerous knowledge. Lovecraft's attempt to, in many ways, write 18th century Gothic fiction is notable not only stylistically, but in terms of the reception of his work as discussed in the section 'Lovecraft's Prose'.

A Brief History of Lovecraft Criticism

The canon of scholarly works on Lovecraft is dwarfed by the non-academic fiction and non-fiction which have followed in his wake. Whilst we should feel no necessity to include non-academic works in our consideration, these publications are notable for their volume and for the context they have provided for academic discourses. Amateur scholarship on Lovecraft has had, in many ways, a detrimental effect on scholarship concerning Lovecraft and the genre of weird fiction. For the first two decades which followed his death, Lovecraft was thought of as an untalented hack writer who enjoyed an unsophisticated (mostly teenage) fan following, an image which persists to a degree today. To separate the fan following from the academic responses is not an easy matter. To view Lovecraft's work in a vacuum ignores the hypertextual aspects of the work. Lovecraft's work both during his life and after, enjoyed a great deal of expansion and imitation by other authors. It is true to say that no consideration of Lovecraft's fiction can ignore his massive cultural impact and this essay will close with notes on the transformative and imitative works which followed in Lovecraft's wake.

In addition to the fan following, two additional factors shortly after Lovecraft's death almost killed academic criticism of Lovecraft's work in its inception. First Edmund Wilson's short review in *The New Yorker* flatly declared that 'Lovecraft was not a good writer' (47). Wilson was a hugely influential literary critic and this, perhaps not entirely undeserved, criticism was taken seriously by literary academic circles at the time. Secondly, August Derleth, the man who championed the reprinting of Lovecraft's work, produced many posthumous collaborations with Lovecraft which were, in the view of some critics, not true to the original mythology. Joshi contends that Derleth's contribution "unintentionally and certainly with no malicious intent, [...] delayed the advancement of objective Lovecraft criticism for nearly thirty years" (24). Despite these factors academic criticism of Lovecraft began in 1950 with a biographical master's thesis by James Warren Thomas. Scattered essays followed in the 1960s and 1970s, but it was not until S.T. Joshi's

landmark collected volume *Four Decades of Criticism* that a single work defined the field. Joshi not only collected the crucial works of Lovecraft criticism but contextualized each essay and measured its impact upon future criticism. Joshi remains the most prolific and articulate advocate of Lovecraft studies to the point that, after Derlet and Lovecraft himself, he has created the literary cannon of the field. Even 31 years later (the present text being written in 2011), Joshi's volume remains the defining volume of Lovecraft criticism and the main text which this essay will draw upon.

Joshi's volume was followed by the launch of *Lovecraft Studies*, a semi-annual periodical. The next major work, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study* by Donald R. Burleson (Greenwood Press 1983), followed in 1983. Joshi also produced *H.P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* in 1990 which set out to explore the recurring theme in Lovecraft's work of the pending destruction of western civilization. In the same year Joshi published *The Weird Tale*, which contextualized Lovecraft in the genre of weird fiction amongst similar authors. Aside from Joshi's *Four Decades of Criticism*, the most notable modern work of criticism on Lovecraft is Burleson's *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* which takes a deconstructivist approach to Lovecraft's work. Also of note is Don G. Smith's 2005 work *H. P. Lovecraft in Popular Culture: The Works and Their Adaptations in Film, Television, Comics, Music and Games* which documents the impact of Lovecraft on popular culture (McFarland & Co Inc 2005).

Joshi has continued to publish on Lovecraft with, amongst other works, *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft*, *The Evolution of the Weird Tale* and *The Rise and Fall of Cthulhu Mythos*. A thorough introduction to each of these texts is, regrettably, beyond the scope of this essay. Given the recurrence of Joshi's name in a list of crucial texts, it is tempting to read Lovecraft studies as the project of a single academic. Certainly, Joshi has succeeded in establishing Lovecraft's work as a subject worthy of academic discourse. Most modern encyclopedias on the Gothic, horror and Science Fiction now include a note on Lovecraft. Not only this, but a search on openstudies.org returns no less than 106 documents which reference Lovecraft in some form, suggesting that academic discourses on Lovecraft show no sign of dying out.

Lovecraft the Author

Based upon output rather than impact, Lovecraft would be more accurately thought of as a letter writer than a fiction author. He wrote an estimated 100,000 letters as well as essays and poetry. This volume of letters have allowed biographers to document Lovecraft's life in great detail and the field is characterized by, as is evident in this essay, an inseparability of the man from the fiction to the extent that, aside perhaps from Burleson's work, Lovecraft studies have largely been passed over by Barthe's *Death of the Author*. These letters also mean that works of biography on Lovecraft, by volume, are comparable to those on his works of fiction.

Lovecraft's Prose

Any consideration of Lovecraft as a writer must address the quality of his prose. Whilst Lovecraft's command of narrative structure is well-paced in terms of mounting horror, on the level of word choice he has often been accused of being, quite simply, a bad writer. As if balancing the sparse prose of his contemporary Hemingway, Lovecraft has been accused of over-use of poorly chosen adjectives and adverbs. Wilson's review of Lovecraft's work notes the repeated use of self-evident terms such as 'horrible' and 'terrible'.

Wilson goes on to contend that “[s]urely one of the primary rules of writing an effective tale of horror is never to use any of these words” (48). Penzoldt similarly contends that when Lovecraft describes his monsters “[t]he reader is often amused rather than frightened” (69) and ascribes to Lovecraft’s descriptions an almost exclusive reliance on ‘the phonetic transcriptions of hideous idiotic cries’ (72). Rather than bemoaning is perceived lack of talent (as he frequently did), Lovecraft might have taken heart in the fact that in being regarded so poorly his work followed a tradition of the early Gothic fiction. There is a (perhaps appropriately uncanny) doubling to the criticism of early and late Gothic. Gothic works have almost always been regarded in their respective time as formulaic, poorly written and of no literary merit. Botting contends that “[b]etween 1790 and 1810 critics were almost univocal in their condemnation of what was seen as an unending torrent of popular trashy novels” (21–2). Criticism of the Gothic, and before that romance, genres tended to center upon ‘failure as representations of human life and manners and their lack of moral instruction’ (45) rather than, specifically, the quality of prose although the criticism which Lovecraft enjoyed was not out of place for the genre. Even Poe, in his time, was regarded as low-fiction, Fisher contends that “many readers presumed that Poe had no originality, and therefore that his fiction was never first rate” (22).

Leiber takes a more positive view of Lovecraft’s prose, using the term ‘orchestrated prose’ (57) to describe Lovecraft’s propensity to repeat sentences with what some might see as superfluous additional adjectives. Leiber, demonstrating the subjective nature of what constitutes good prose, finds in such a writing style ‘ever-mounting excitement’ (57). Leiber’s description invokes connotations of earlier Gothic literary eras. Radcliffe famously distinguished between horror and terror in that, in simple terms, whilst the former paralyzes, the latter elevates, or, in Botting’s terms ‘If terror leads to an imaginative expansion of one’s sense of self, horror describes the movement of contraction and recoil’ (10). Latter American Gothic is generally assigned the role of horror fiction, abandoning the sublime of terror.

A recurring theme in Lovecraft’s prose is that which is beyond description. A collection of Lovecraft’s work includes the following prose, ‘unheard of’ (47) ‘inconceivable’ (42) ‘nameless’ (46), ‘indescribable’ (39), ‘unmentionable’ (49), ‘inexplicable’ (64) ‘unexplainable’ (70) ‘useless to describe’ (83) ‘no pen could even suggest’ (84) and ‘unknown’ (84). Burleson reads this use of language, or the demonstration of the failure of language as follows:

[e]verywhere the workings of the text operate to differentiate, to divide the pointings of the signifier, to deny any recoverably single signified in a signifier, to deny semantic fixity or center, or origin of any signified in any single signifier. (111)

Lovecraft’s prose, in other words, orchestrates a failure in signification, satisfying the deconstructivist thesis that in language, meaning, rather than being a transparent medium, relies upon negotiation and translation in order to establish a system of signification.

Xenophobia

Joshi contends that whilst Lovecraft’s xenophobia was unremarkable for his time, his racist views were ‘repeatedly, coordinately and strongly expressed on paper’ (14). Lovecraft’s xenophobia, or rather, how as critics we should respond to his xenophobia, has been frequently debated. The majority of critics of Lovecraft (and particularly his non-academic following) seek to explain, contextualize or otherwise contain his xenophobic tendencies, with the implication that we should not offer a full consideration of Lovecraft’s work

until we have addressed the more repulsive aspects of his politics. Other critics have taken an opposing view, citing Lovecraft's racism as grounds to dismiss the author as worthy of study. Punter and Byron describe Lovecraft's work as playing host to an undercurrent of 'political attitudes which have power to horrify all on their own' (144) and go on to describe Lovecraft's work as 'an unhealthy but fascinating growth on the body Gothic' (Punter and Byron). The issue of how we read xenophobia is an ethical debate which is not limited to Lovecraft studies. Irrespective of the view we take, Lovecraft's xenophobia ties in to his recurring theme of the early 20th century heralding the downfall of humanity.

'Cosmic Indifferentism' Madness and Science

Lovecraft employed the (somewhat clumsy) term 'cosmic indifferentism' to describe his worldview. Humanity, in Lovecraft's vision, is falsely convinced of its own importance on a universal scale. Rather than placing humanity at the center of his universe, his fiction takes what Mosig and Tierney term a 'cosmo-centric' (106) approach. Lovecraft's world is populated with creatures far older than humanity which, rather than seeking to manipulate, frighten or otherwise interact with humans, are utterly indifferent to them. Much of Lovecraft's horror draws upon what Burleson terms 'denied primacy', an awareness that civilizations and intelligences preceded our own, a theme which Julia Briggs traces back to the literary influence of Machen. The fundamental horror of Lovecraft's world is this sense of humanity's utter insignificance, this realization produces a terrible enlightenment and madness in his characters, Lovecraft realizes the astronomer Carl Sagan's revelatory passage "[t]he universe is neither benign nor hostile, merely indifferent to such puny creatures as we" (275). This theme in Lovecraft criticism of the horror in the vastness of the universe and the relative fragility of humanity was first identified by Fritz Leiber who saw in Lovecraft's work a "universe consisting of light-years and light-millennia of black emptiness" (51).

Lovecraft thus shifts the Gothic from discourse on religion (specifically anti-Catholicism) to a discourse on science, utilizing the genre, as with every Gothic work, to examine the recurring social anxieties of his time. Botting contends that, irrespective of era

Gothic terrors activate a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable and overwhelming power which threatens not only the loss of sanity, honor, propriety or social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of those terms. (7)

The concept of cosmic indifferentism is, at heart, a scientific one and Mosig contends that 'Lovecraft is *not* deploring knowledge, but rather *man's inability to cope with it*' (105). Lovecraft's interest in science was certainly not tempered by the dread to which he ascribed discovery. He had a lay fascination with astronomy and chemistry and submitted work to several scientific journals. There is a recurring 'science' to the mythology he built. Whilst the creatures in Lovecraft's works are clearly fictional, the age of the universe, evolutionary theory and humanity's very recent arrival on a cosmic scale speak to the expanding awareness of humanity's place in the cosmos in terms of time and biology in the early 20th century. Writing at the same time as the Scopes Trial and the Shapely Curtis Debate, Lovecraft captured a time when science provided an increasingly cosmo-centric model of the universe, moving away from the Judeo-Christian model which privileged humanity.

This allegiance to science is reflected in factual continuations (or auto-citations) between Lovecraft's works. Mabbott notes that whilst Poe, for example, was happy to

endow the horrors in his fiction with powers appropriate to the specific story, Lovecraft insisted on consistency throughout his fictions (44). Lovecraft's universe was a concrete one with established and unchanging laws. Lovecraft thus combines the gothic with science fiction or, as Leiber puts it, provides 'supernatural dread [...] with out any medieval trappings' (52). Scientific discovery in Lovecraft's work is both fascinating and terrible and he sees in scientific progress not the potential for the enlightenment of humanity, but, as Joshi contends, humanity's destruction. Lovecraft, of course, was not the first or the only Gothic author to draw upon scientific discovery as a source of horror. Poe's works, Fisher contends, referenced evolution in their 'stories in which human-animal characteristics are delightfully ambivalent' (23) and in both Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1823), horror springs from the laboratory. A closer literary ancestor to Lovecraft, Brown, too, drew upon, Punter contends, 'superstition and its scientific counterparts' (185).

Dreams

Dreams are recurring theme in Lovecraft's work, particularly dream quests where the protagonist gains information from dreams. In *In Defense of Dagon* Lovecraft mentions that many of his stories came to him in his sleep. The role of dreams intersects with Lovecraft's preoccupation with time and history. Michau contends that in Lovecraft's work "the past is accessed through dreams, pseudo – memories, or acts of possession revealing, in nightmarish modes, the futility of the belief in progress and linear time" (62). Dreams, in Lovecraft's world, are windows into forbidden knowledge and forces beyond humanity's understanding. Given the large role of dreams in Lovecraft's work, it is unsurprising that both Mosig and Burleson have employed psychoanalysis in their critical approach. Dreams are, of course, a common theme in Gothic Romance from Coleridge's opium-induced dreams, by way of the wild dreams of Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1823) to Mike Noonan's haunting dreams in Steven King's *Bag of Bones* (1998). In Lovecraft's pantheon of influences the dream stories borrow most strongly from Lord Dunstany's work.

Time

In keeping with Lovecraft's sense of being out of time is his sense of place. Armand (Joshi) sees Lovecraft as worthy of study by those 'deeply interested in Rhode Island history, especially its traditional genealogical, political and literary dimensions' (167). Lovecraft's vision of Rhode Island history should only be understood in the context of his xenophobia and, as such should be viewed with due skepticism. Texts such as *The Street* offer a version of American history which privileges white Anglo-Saxon protagonists. Irrespective of his politics, there is a recurring theme in Lovecraft's work which expresses an affection for the historical geography of Providence, particularly 18th century architecture, his descriptions of which Buhle describes as 'among his most carefully developed prose' (200). Lovecraft's interest in historical geography (as well as consistency between texts) is evident in the recurring fictional place names in his prose.

Lovecraft's cosmo-centric view of the universe also engages with time as a concept. Lovecraft fans use the term 'deep time' to describe Lovecraft's concept of time on a universal, rather than human, scale. Describing the Lovecraftian mythos, Leiber writes "[t]he continents begin their long drifts. New lands rose from the Pacific in time to receive the Cthulhu spawn or cosmic octopi sifting down from infinity" (148–9). This is history on

a scale against which the entirety of human history does not measure, history on a scale which the human mind cannot conceive.

The Influence of Lovecraft

Perhaps the greatest contribution Lovecraft made to literature has been in shaping the genres of horror and science fiction (to the extent that either genre can be clearly defined). It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that all contemporary works in those genres from the mid-20th century onwards can be traced through Lovecraft in some way. Even a partial list of creators who has been influenced by Lovecraft would require the equivalent length of this essay and would provide uninteresting reading. Lovecraft actively encouraged his contemporaries to contribute to his mythos and this tradition has continued after his death. Even subtler methodological and narrative, rather than thematic, evidence of his style can be found in various modern works. Writers such as Ramsey Campbell and, famously, Stephen King show a strong influence from Lovecraft. Artists such as HR Geiger, film makers such as Guillermo Del Toro and even song writers such as Metallica and Black Sabbath have all taken stylistic inspiration and direct quotations from Lovecraft's fiction in their creative work.

Writer Jerry Holkins wrote of his horror-pastiche *On The Rainslick Precipice of Darkness* 'I could never decide if I wanted to be Douglas Adams or H. P. Lovecraft when I grew up, and now that I'm grown up, I've decided that I don't have to choose.' Holkins' prose combines Lovecraftian themes with deliberate slips in register. The text illustrates the pervasiveness of Lovecraft's work, where, as Genette observes, a mutual understanding of the original text between author and reader (the pastiche contract) is required for hypertextuality, and the inherent comedy therein, to function. Lovecraft's work is so easily subject to imitation and transformation because its stylistic themes, even for those who have never read Lovecraft, are so pervasive as to be instantly recognizable to a modern English-speaking audience.

The Future of Lovecraft Studies

Since Joshi's volume there has been no single work which has shaped Lovecraft criticism. This is hardly surprising given that few authors or topics ever enjoy such a collection. In terms of future directions, there are many unexplored connections between Lovecraft and contemporary theories on trauma. As noted by Burleson, Lovecraft's horrors often defy description. A reading which considers these in terms of the inexpressibility of the traumatic event would yield an interesting reading. Lovecraft wrote in a time when understanding of trauma was in its infancy, suggesting an unusually sophisticated understanding of the traumatized mind. A reading of Lovecraft in the context of the September 11th terrorist attacks, drawing upon the recurring imagery of the city, Lovecraft's portrayal of the Middle East and of alien horror would provide grounds for interesting criticism.

Whilst many critics have contextualized Lovecraft in terms of his literary influences and some work has gone into mapping the extent of his influence on the horror and science fiction genres, the author has yet to encounter a study which applies Genette's taxonomy in terms of exactly how these works have been transformed and imitated. A study which classifies those authors who have followed Lovecraft in terms of how, exactly, they have used his work, would make an excellent contribution to the cannon.

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