

H.P. Lovecraft's Philosophy of Science Fiction Horror

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1. Introduction.

American author H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) never directly offers a philosophy of science fiction horror. However, at different points in his essays and letters, he addresses genres he calls “science fiction”, “interplanetary fiction,” “horror,” “supernatural horror,” “fantastic” fiction, “imaginative fiction”, “wonder” fiction, “marvel” fiction, and “weird fiction”. Taken together, a philosophy of what we would call “science fiction horror” emerges.

Why try to determine Lovecraft's philosophy of science fiction horror? Not because Lovecraft was a great systematic thinker. His many essays and letters reveal a keen intellect, and broad interests, including science, politics, and literature, but show no signs of brilliance. His aesthetics are instead interesting because he was so successful in writing stories that people want to read, even eighty years after his death. Other artists have used his work as the basis for stories, novels, games, films, and an upcoming HBO television series *Lovecraft Country*. From 1975 until 2015, the World Fantasy Award was a bust of Lovecraft. His popularity and influence alone would be enough to make understanding his philosophy valuable for the history of literature. However, it's also my hope that Lovecraft's philosophy will be of practical use to writers, and that consideration of his philosophy will improve their own stories.

Uncovering Lovecraft's philosophy of science-fiction horror is difficult for a number of reasons. As noted, he never explicitly presents such a philosophy, which means that it must be pieced together from comments made in various places. This is a process that must involve interpretation, especially given that his thoughts evolve over time. Another problem is that Lovecraft is prone to hyperbole. For example, he asserts in “The Case for Classicism” (1919) that “the literary genius of Greece and Rome...may fairly be said to have completed the science and art of expression.”¹ This is an absurd statement coming from an admirer of Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849), and Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951), and from an author who had already written the likes of “The Tomb” (1917), “Dagon” (1917) and “Polaris” (1918).

2. Terminology: Weird Fiction, Interplanetary Fiction, and Science Fiction

Before we hunt for Lovecraft's philosophy of science-fiction horror, we need to clarify three terms in particular: Lovecraft's terms "weird fiction" and "interplanetary fiction", and the term "science-fiction".

2a. Weird Fiction

Lovecraft's term "weird fiction" is important because, as argued below, he thought that good science fiction must be weird fiction, so the requirements of good weird fiction will apply to science fiction horror. The most explicit definition of "weird fiction" published by Lovecraft, from *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), is that

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.²

If this really is a description of what a weird tale must be, as opposed to what the best weird tales are, then it's highly restrictive. If only a tale of dread can be a weird true tale, this would rule out stories of sheer wonder, like most of the fantasy stories of Edward Plunkett, Baron of Dunsany (1878-1957), for whom Lovecraft had so much respect, and whom Lovecraft calls a "master" of the field of weird fiction.³ It may also rule out stories where dread is a subordinate theme to wonder, such as Lovecraft's own stories "Celephaïs" (1922) and "The Silver Key" (1926). Indeed, in private correspondence, Lovecraft states that a weird story need not be a horror story.⁴

Another problem for the definition is that, even in a horror story, a suspension of natural law does not have to be malign to cause dread. As Lovecraft's own stories show us, a dreadful entity might be mindless, like the god Azathoth, who rules the universe.⁵ Alternatively, a

dreadful entity might be merely uncaring, like the god Yog-Sothoth, who allows passage between dimensions, as in “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” (1933).

Joshi (2016) offers two quotes from Lovecraft as more representative of his conception of weird fiction. Firstly, in “Notes on Weird Fiction”, Lovecraft writes that he likes to write weird fiction because he enjoys the “strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law...” Secondly, he states in a private letter that the criterion for weirdness is “*a strong impression of the suspension of natural laws or the presence of unseen worlds of forces close at hand.*”⁶

Lovecraft is not consistent in his definitions, but the common element is the sense that natural law has been violated. Note that it’s not enough that the story violates actual natural law. Plenty of supernatural and science fiction stories do this without being weird fiction. The sheeted form clanking chains according to rule and the spaceship travelling faster than light according to rule are both breaking natural law, but need not be weird if the way they break natural law is taken for granted and treated as routine.

Note also that producing a sense that natural law has been violated does not require that the story contain supernatural elements. For example, Lovecraft regarded both Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* (1823) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) as classics of weird fiction,⁷ though neither science fiction novel deals with the supernatural. Such stories are weird not because natural law is violated in the world of the story, but because events in the story violate what seems natural to us. In our experience, dead body parts don’t move, and so it seems unnatural and weird when Victor Frankenstein uses advanced science to make them walk. Likewise, modern science fiction horror like Ridley Scott’s film *Alien* (1979) and John Carpenter’s film *The Thing* (1982) would qualify as weird fiction, though they contain nothing supernatural. The titular alien uses acid for blood and gestates in a live human host, while the titular thing can reconfigure its body into any shape it likes. We accept that, within the world of the story, the laws of nature allow such a thing, but it seems unnatural and weird to us.

2b. Interplanetary Fiction

The term “interplanetary fiction” will be important because Lovecraft saw “interplanetary fiction” as a type of science fiction, so his views on interplanetary fiction likely apply to science fiction in general. He introduces the term in “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction” (1935), in which he offers advice for the genre. He never provides a definition of “interplanetary fiction”, though it involves “other worlds and universes, and...intrepid flights to and from them through cosmic space.” His advice apparently assumes that the story is about a spaceship voyage by Earth folk to another planet. Yet the four works he lists as “semi-classics” of interplanetary fiction don’t fit this model. H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1897) is a tale of Martian spaceships invading the Earth. Donald Wandrei’s “The Red Brain” (1927) is a tale of alien civilization in the distant future. Olaf Stapleton’s *The First and Last Men* (1930) is a tale of far future human civilization. George Winsor’s *Station X* (1926), the tale of a mental invasion of Earth from Mars, does not even have spaceships in it.

Since Lovecraft’s advice in “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction” is directed at human interplanetary voyage stories, he was presumably not thinking of “interplanetary fiction” as covering his own stories in which Earth is colonized or visited by creatures from other planets, as happens in “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930), *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1932), “The Shadow out of Time” (1935), and many other stories. Presumably, these don’t strike Lovecraft as “interplanetary fiction” because the science fiction elements are too weak or diluted.

2c. Lovecraft as Science Fiction.

I won’t attempt to produce a definition of “science fiction”. Artistic genres are notoriously vague. However, decisions have to be made about what will count as science fiction, in order to draw examples of science fiction from Lovecraft’s work. Classifying Lovecraft’s work in terms of “science fiction” is notoriously difficult. He famously blurs the boundaries between science fiction and fantasy, and often uses elements of both in the same narrative. For instance, Randolph Carter leaves the Earth with a magic key in “The Silver Key” but returns by traversing space in a “light-beam envelope” in “Through the Gates of the Silver Key”. Often, it isn’t clear whether an astounding event is magical or not. In “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926), the god Cthulhu invades the dreams of art student Henry Wilcox. Legend states that Cthulhu can cast “mighty spells”, but

Wilcox describes himself in pseudo-scientific terms as “psychically hypersensitive”. When Cthulhu enters Wilcox’s dreams, is this a result of magic or psychic power, or is there no distinction between the two? Knowledge of science can aid spellcasting, as when wizard Joseph Curwen raises the dead in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927) by supplementing his necromancy with a thorough study of organic chemistry. Likewise, magical knowledge can aid scientific study, as when the ancient books of Wizard Whately promise “to open up new and terrible lines of research among philosophers and men of science” in *The Dunwich Horror* (1928), or when Walter Gilman learns about interdimensional mathematics from being the victim of Keziah Mason’s magic in “The Dreams in the Witch House”.

As pointed out by Joshi (2016), Lovecraft eventually sought to produce what he called “non-supernatural cosmic art” that’s “not overtly incompatible with what we know of reality.”⁸ It might be tempting to classify any such cosmic art as a form of science fiction. However, I would resist doing so. Science fiction is not simply fiction that’s consistent with science, since most fiction outside of fantasy, horror or science fiction is at least consistent with science. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliette* is consistent with science, but isn’t science fiction. Rather, science fiction must in some way be *noticeably* inspired by science or technology, even if on a cosmetic level.

When classifying Lovecraft’s stories, the mere fact that a story has been inspired by science won’t be enough to ensure that it’s science-fiction. Science inspired Lovecraft to write about the supernatural and expected it to do the same for others. He ends the book *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by predicting that supernatural horror will become more popular, in part “through the stimulation of wonder and fancy by such enlarged vistas and broken barriers as modern science has given us with its intra-atomic chemistry, advanced astrophysics, doctrines of relativity, and probings into biology and human thought.”

Thus, Lovecraft’s Darwinism and resulting atheism give birth to new fantastic gods, whose indifference or hostility to humanity better represent our uncaring universe. Lovecraft was particularly fascinated by human origins unguided by any benevolent plan. In “The Whisperer in Darkness”, we are a product of “the pits of primal life”, of which life on Earth is a “tiny rivulet”. In *The Mound* (1930, with Zealia Bishop), humans are descended from Great Old Ones, all “Children of Tulu”⁹, brought down by him from the stars. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, our ancestors “were the products of unguided evolution acting on life-cells made by the Old Ones

[more specifically, the Elder Things] but escaping beyond their radius of attention.” The horror of having evolved from something inhuman is also explored in "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family" (1920), “The Lurking Fear” (1922), “The Rats in the Walls” (1923), and “The Last Test” (1927) (with Adolphe de Castro). Lovecraft sometimes notes that humanity has been preceded on Earth by other species, as in “The Call of Cthulhu”, when he writes of “old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conceptions have no part.”

Lovecraft himself uses the expression “science fiction” twice in his essays, in “Some Notes on a Nonentity” (1933) and in “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”. He does not explicitly classify his stories in terms of “science fiction” in either. However, if, as I supposed above, Lovecraft didn’t classify his own interplanetary stories “interplanetary fiction” because the science fiction elements are too weak, this may mean that Lovecraft would not classify stories of his as “science fiction” either.¹⁰ His reference to “science fiction” in “Some Notes on a Nonentity” is more cryptic. He concludes a paragraph about his difficulty finding venues for his work by writing, “Of my products, my favorites are ‘The Colour out of Space’ and ‘The Music of Erich Zann’, in the order named. I doubt if I could ever succeed well in the ordinary type of science fiction.” This may indicate that Lovecraft saw all of his stories as science fiction of a non-ordinary variety, including the likes of “The Music of Erich Zann” (1921), the tale of an old man whose viol playing mysteriously keeps at bay an abyss “of motion and music” that appears out of nowhere into the heart of Paris. Like many of Lovecraft’s stories, Erich Zann has no explicit connection to science, and as such, no claim on being science fiction. If Lovecraft meant to use the term “science fiction” so broadly, he used it too broadly. More likely, Lovecraft contrasted his work with ordinary science fiction not because he thought of his work as non-ordinary science fiction, but because ordinary science fiction is what pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* (1923-1954) and *Amazing Stories* (1926-) were looking for.

I won’t offer a litmus-test for “science-fiction”, beyond noting that a science-fiction story must be inspired by science in some way that can be noticed without background knowledge about the author. Nor will I be offering a canonical list of which of Lovecraft’s stories qualify as “science-fiction”. Rather, it suffices to note that many of his stories contain elements of science fiction to varying degrees. When discussing science fiction, I’d draw examples first from stories with the strongest science-fiction elements, such as “From Beyond” (1920), “Herbert West—

Reanimator” (1922), “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930), *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1932), and “The Shadow Out of Time”.

3. Science Fiction as Weird Fiction

In “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, Lovecraft maintains that science fiction stories must be weird fiction to be legitimate. Regarding interplanetary fiction, he writes, “The function of the story is to express a certain human mood of wonder and liberation...” In all science fiction, the mood is to be cultivated through a “violation of what we know as natural law.” He writes, “Over and above everything else should tower the stark, outrageous monstrosity of the one chosen departure from Nature.”

Lovecraft was contemptuous of what he called “romantic” literature, being literature driven by convention, with unrealistic characters and plots. He explains in “In Defense of Dagon” (1921), that it’s “...for those who value action and emotion for their own sake; who are interested in striking events which conform to a preconceived artificial pattern.” Lovecraft acknowledges the romantic tradition of interplanetary fiction, spearheaded in literature by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950), and in comics, radio and film by the character Buck Rogers (1928-), but rejects such fiction as worthless. In doing so, he rejects in principle all the romantic interplanetary fiction that was to come, such as the beloved film *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977)¹¹ and whatever films in the genre are assuredly doing big box-office right now. By implication, Earth-based romantic science fiction, such as the adventure films *The Terminator* (1984) and *Jurassic Park* (1993), are likewise illegitimate.

As evidence for Lovecraft’s view, it may be that weirder interplanetary fiction has more staying power than more romantic interplanetary fiction. While the genre of space adventure is more popular than ever, very little from Lovecraft’s day or earlier remains popular. Burroughs and Buck have their admirers, but today’s popular touchstones for the genre don’t appear until 1960’s television telecasts the likes of *Doctor Who* (1964-) and *Star Trek* (1966-). Strikingly, while both of these are highly romantic, both tend to feature more realistic characters and more focus on mystery and awe, than the numerous popular interplanetary adventures stories that preceded them on radio and television. Even the *Star Wars* saga, more romantic yet, has more of

the weird in the form of “force” powers and diverse bizarre aliens than it’s less-loved romantic forebears.

Lovecraft’s model rules out not just romantic science fiction, but science fiction that does not focus on wonder over a central abnormality. In interplanetary fiction, it would rule out a tale focused on the technical aspects of space travel within the bound of known science, such as Poe’s story “The Unparalleled Adventures of one Hans Pfaall” (1835), or a character study of a space-farer, like Douglas Trumbull’s film *Silent Running* (1972), or a comedy set against an interplanetary background, like Douglas Adams’ *Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* novels (1979-1992), or political sagas, like Isaac Azimov’s *Foundation* novels (1946-1993) and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* novels (1965-1985). Likewise illegitimate would be science fiction art that focusses less on wonder at what a technology can do than on the social ramifications of the technology, such as the novels *Brave New World* (1932), *1984* (1949), *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), and the television series *Black Mirror* (2011-). The model would likewise rule out social satire or comedy that just uses a highly technological future as a backdrop.

Lovecraft’s restrictive attitude to science fiction is at odds with his more inclusive attitude to literature in general. While he believed that weird literature is the best form of literature, he accepted that realist literature could be excellent. This includes realist horror fiction, such as the murder stories of Poe, the Civil War stories of Ambrose Bierce, and scenes of non-supernatural horror in Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).¹² It is odd, then, that science fiction must be weird in order to be legitimate.

Possibly, Lovecraft is being hyperbolic in “Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”. If not, his philosophy of science fiction is too restrictive. In any case, it will be assumed here that Lovecraft sees good science fiction horror as weird art, and hence that any rules that apply to weird art apply to science fiction horror.

4. The Mysterious and Unnatural

Lovecraft believed that the scariest threats are mysterious ones. He writes in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”¹³ Lovecraft famously discards traditional monsters

like ghosts, vampires and werewolves,¹⁴ who tend to operate according to well-known rules, in favor of original and unfamiliar creatures. When Lovecraft does include traditional figures, he reinvents them, like the witch Keziah Mason from “The Dreams in the Witch House”, who performs her sorcery with the aid of “an insight into mathematical depths perhaps beyond the utmost modern delvings”, and the legendary headless apparition in *The Mound* who turns out to be a half-corpse half-robot guardian of the secret civilization of subterranean Kn’Yan. The power of mystery extends to location, and especially unknown worlds. He writes, “Uncertainty and danger are always closely allied; thus making any kind of an unknown world a world of peril and evil possibilities.”¹⁵ True to his word, visiting other worlds is a trademark of Lovecraftian fiction, including fiction with strong science-fiction elements such as “From Beyond”, “The Dreams in the Witch House”, and “The Shadow Out of Time” .

It seems likely that Lovecraft would condemn the modern zombie genre, which usually follows well established rules regarding the nature of zombies. He might be more appreciative of modern weird horror that retains an air of mystery about their monsters, such as the science fiction films *Alien*, *The Thing*, and *The Mist* (2007).

Lovecraft writes in “In Defense of Dagon” that “The essence of the horrible is the *unnatural*.”¹⁶ ¹⁷ The most powerful horror fiction, in his view, relies on an emotion he calls “cosmic fear,” caused by violations of nature by mysterious and foreign entities. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, he equates “the literature of cosmic fear” and “the true weird tale”.¹⁸

Lovecraft’s creatures are, appropriately, highly unnatural. The “colour” from “The Colour out of Space” is described as “...just a colour out of space—a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it...” It’s not found on our spectrum and “...obeyed laws that are not of our cosmos.” Lovecraft’s aliens routinely violate physics. When they traverse space, they may fly through it by flapping their wings, as the Mi-Go do in “The Whisperer in Darkness” and the Elder Things do in *At the Mountains of Madness*. Or they might mysteriously levitate as the polyps do in “The Shadow out of Time”, or take over a human body remotely as the Yithians do in the same work. Otherwise, they may cross dimensions by walking, burrowing, or swimming.

The difficulty of inventing creatures that are sufficiently alien often leaves Lovecraft declaring his creatures to be “formless”, like the shoggoths of *At the Mountains of Madness*, the polyps and the “life outside of all universes” from “The Shadow out of Time”, and the iridescent

bubbles from “The Dreams in the Witch House”. On other occasions, alien creatures, or aspects of them, can’t be described at all. For instance, in “From Beyond”, “Indescribable shapes both alive and otherwise were mixed in disgusting disarray”. The shape of the Mi-Go in “The Whisperer in Darkness” is similarly indescribable. When Walter Gilman enters another dimension in “The Dreams in the Witch House”, he finds that “All the objects—organic and inorganic alike—were totally beyond description or even comprehension.”, while the shoggoth in *At the Mountains of Madness* “was a terrible, indescribable thing”.

Lovecraft often uses the unusual adjective “nameless” to describe that which is so alien, we have no words for it. The Mi-Go in “The Whisperer in Darkness” are “nameless things from abysmal space”, a creature in “The Dreams in the Witch House” is “a larger wisp which now and then condensed into nameless approximations of form”, the shoggoth in *At the Mountains of Madness* is an “ultimate nameless thing”, and the narrator of “The Shadow out of Time” fears “the nameless entities which might be lurking in the black abysses”. The adjective “nameless” appears twenty-four times in *At the Mountains of Madness* alone. Some things are so alien that they are “unnameable”, such as the “unnameable evils” threatened by the ruins in *At the Mountains of Madness*, or the titular creature of “The Unnameable” (1923).

Lovecraft notes the importance in interplanetary fiction of giving aliens alien appearance, society, and psychology. He writes that aliens “must be definitely non-human in aspect, mentality, emotions, and nomenclature...wholly apart from human motives and perspectives.”¹⁹

In insisting on unnatural aliens, Lovecraft seems to be rejecting not only the romantic tradition of creating anthropomorphic aliens, but also the realist tradition of having the nature of aliens determined by their environments in ways that make sense to humans. The Martians of Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1897) are weak in our gravity and deaf in our dense atmosphere, because they evolved in the low gravity and thin atmosphere of Mars. Their biology is strange, but largely makes sense from our perspective. The nature of Lovecraft’s aliens is never extrapolated from real science in this way.

In Lovecraft’s work, human bodies are often violated in unnatural ways. In “From Beyond”, insane scientist Crawford Tillinghast cries, “You see them? You see them? You see the things that float and flop about you and through you every moment of your life?” In *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927), botched resurrections from partial remains leave scores of people in hideously incomplete condition but unable to die, while “Cool Air” (1926) and “The Thing on

the Doorstep” (1933) feature characters imprisoned in animate but decomposing corpses. It’s little wonder that Lovecraft took such gruesome delight in Poe’s "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845) in which “the unutterable M. Valdemar, kept together by hypnotism for seven months after his death, and uttering frantic sounds but a moment before the breaking of the spell leaves him ‘a nearly liquid mass of loathsome, of detestable putrescence.’”²⁰ Mere contact with alien life may corrupt nature, as when the “colour out of space” poisons the soil around its lair, making the vegetation and animals diseased and mutated, eventually turning them grey and brittle until they crumble away while still alive.

5. Realism

Lovecraft stands out among his contemporary weird writers for his efforts to be realistic. He wrote that “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 given marvel.”²¹

Lovecraft saw Poe as the first of “the real weavers of cosmic terror”²², in large part because of Poe’s realism. He wrote that it’s to Poe that

...we owe the modern horror-story in its final and perfected state. Before Poe the bulk of weird writers had worked largely in the dark; without an understanding of the psychological basis of the horror appeal, and hampered by more or less of conformity to certain empty literary conventions such as the happy ending, virtue rewarded, and in general a hollow moral didacticism, acceptance of popular standards and values, and striving of the author to obtrude his own emotions into the story and take sides with the partisans of the majority's artificial ideas.²³

Lovecraft regarded the rise in realism in weird literature to be an integral part of its improvement in recent history. He wrote that

The best horror-tales of today, profiting by the long evolution of the type, possess a naturalness, convincingness, artistic smoothness, and skilful intensity of appeal quite

beyond comparison with anything in the Gothic work of a century or more ago... Serious weird stories are either made realistically intense by dose consistency and perfect fidelity to Nature except in the one supernatural direction which the author allows himself, or else cast altogether in the realm of phantasy.²⁴

Maintaining realism requires maintaining realistic characters. Lovecraft writes of weird fiction that "...the characters and events must be consistent and natural except where they touch the single marvel. In relation to the central wonder, the characters should shew the same overwhelming emotion which similar characters would shew toward such a wonder in real life."²⁵ Lovecraft's characters, even the heroic ones, frequently respond to the alien by fainting, screaming hysterically, or panicking and running, and they routinely suffer memory loss, or temporary or permanent insanity from their experience. Psychological scarring is routine, as in the case of the unnamed narrator of "From Beyond", who complains "I never feel alone or comfortable", or the unnamed narrator of "Cool Air", who can no longer tolerate cool air because of the terrible associations it has for him.

Lovecraft acknowledges in "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" that characters might be accustomed to a wonder, and so not show astonishment at it. What he objected to was characters who, realistically, ought to be overwhelmed by the weirdness of what they are experiencing, but are not.

Lovecraft emphasized the importance of realism in science fiction in particular. He writes in "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction" that "Inconceivable events and conditions form a class apart from all other story elements, and cannot be made convincing by any mere process of casual narration. They have the handicap of incredibility to overcome; and this can be accomplished only through a careful realism in every *other* phase of the story..."²⁶

He was scathing about the lack of realism in interplanetary fiction of his day, writing, "Insincerity, conventionality, triteness, artificiality, false emotions, and puerile extravagance reign triumphant..."²⁷ while "a good interplanetary story must have realistic human characters; not the stock scientists, villainous assistants, invincible heroes, and lovely scientist's-daughter heroines of the usual trash of this sort."²⁸ Rather, "We must select only such characters (not necessarily stalwart or dashing or youthful or beautiful or picturesque characters) as would naturally be involved in the events to be depicted..."²⁹ However, he himself didn't tell stories

about ordinary folk. He notes in “In Defense of Dagon”, “I do not write about “ordinary people” because I am not in the least interested in them.”³⁰

Conventional story devices must be avoided when dealing with the inhabitants of other planets. He writes that there must be “no over-facile language learning; no telepathic communication; no worship of the traveler as deities; no participation in the affairs of pseudo-human kingdoms, or in conventional wars between factions of inhabitants; no weddings with beautiful anthropomorphic princesses; no stereotyped Armageddons with ray-guns and space-ships; no court intrigues with jealous magicians; no peril from hairy ape-men from the polar caps; and so on and so on.”³¹

Just as in any weird fiction, realism in science fiction requires that the characters remain focused on the weird element itself. Lovecraft writes, “The emphasis, too, must be kept right—hovering always over *the wonder of the central abnormality itself*. It must be remembered that any violation of what we know as natural law is *in itself* a far more tremendous thing than any other event or feeling which could possibly affect a human being.”³² In interplanetary fiction, characters must respond appropriately to “...the voyage through space and landing on another world. Here we must lay primary stress on the stupendous emotions—the unconquerable sense of astonishment—felt by the voyagers as they realize that they are *actually off their native Earth...*” As in any weird fiction, it can be appropriate for a character to be used to a marvel. Indeed, in Lovecraft’s only story that’s unequivocally interplanetary fiction, “In the Walls of Eryx” (1939, with Kenneth Sterling), the narrator is familiar enough with space travel not to be awed to be on Venus.

In the interests of maintaining an air of realism in interplanetary fiction, Lovecraft suggests that the story should ideally take place in the present, or be about secret events from the past, though he recognizes that stories set in the future can be artistically valid. Indeed, not only does “In the Walls of Eryx” take place in the future, but so do two of the four works he lists by name as semi-classic of the genre of interplanetary fiction: “The Red Brain” and *The First and Last Men*.

Lovecraft claims that realism in interplanetary fiction requires scientific accuracy. He writes: “[A] strict following of scientific fact in representing the mechanical, astronomical, and other aspects of the trip is absolutely essential.”³³ Likewise, alien planets must be scientifically plausible.

However, if we were to be strict about following scientific fact in interplanetary fiction, this would rule out almost all interplanetary fiction so far produced. Most obviously, it's not scientifically realistic to allow spaceships to exceed the speed of light, yet almost all interplanetary fiction relies on faster-than-light travel. Though Lovecraft refers to relativity, he may not have appreciated the limits it puts on our motion.

Strikingly, though "In the Walls of Eryx" doesn't require faster than light travel, its technology seems to owe more to genre conventions than real science, even the science of the early 20th century, as the narrator hunts for energy crystals, while consuming food capsules. Rather than providing scientifically plausible technical details, Lovecraft and Sterling cultivate an atmosphere of realism by having the narrator show technical familiarity with imaginary technology—comparing the merits of the heavy, tube-based Carter oxygen masks with the lighter sponge-reservoir based Dubois model.

On other occasions, Lovecraft generates atmosphere by genuinely being scientifically realistic. For instance, in *At the Mountains of Madness*, the narrator provides technical details about geology and biology to make the story sound real. On the other hand, Lovecraft's super-technology is generally scientifically implausible, such as the *y'm-bhi* of the people of Kn'Yan—"organisms which had died, but which had been mechanically reanimated for industrial purposes by means of atomic energy and thought-power."

Might it be enough to maintain an atmosphere of scientific realism even while being scientifically unrealistic? It isn't clear what Lovecraft would say, though he is consistently critical of pseudo-scientific occultism in supernatural horror stories, which he thought makes the alien too familiar.³⁴

In "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction", Lovecraft appeals to realism as a reason for non-human aliens to be non-human in their motives and perspectives. The amorality of his own alien races reflects his conviction that morality is mere convention. He writes, "...good and evil are local expedients—or their lack—and not in any sense cosmic truths or laws."³⁵ Regarding interplanetary fiction, he notes in particular that "...it is not at all likely that more than a fraction of the exotic races would have lit upon the especial folk-customs of royalty and religion." This is striking in light of the tendency of Lovecraft's aliens to engage in religious worship. For instance, The Mi-Go offer praises to a variety of gods.³⁶ The Elder Things raised many temples

in the mountains³⁷, while the Deep Ones likewise pray “monstrously at their evil sea-bottom temples”.³⁸ Cthulhu himself is not only a God, but a “great priest” to boot.³⁹

6. Maintenance of Atmosphere

Lovecraft recognized that the power of a story relies as much on how the events are related as on what those events are. A weird story relies on building up the appropriate atmosphere. Regarding science fiction, he notes that “...the handicap of incredibility can only be overcome if there is “a gradual atmospheric or emotional building-up of the utmost subtlety.”⁴⁰ Again, it’s possible that Lovecraft is exaggerating his view. After all, he held a positive opinion of the weird stories of M.R. James (1862-1936), whom he described as “an artist in incident and arrangement rather than in atmosphere, and reaches the emotions more often through the intellect than directly.”⁴¹ Still, the insistence on atmosphere is at least close to a universal rule.

Three of Lovecraft’s principles for producing atmosphere particularly stand out. The first is to ensure that the mood is consistent. Lovecraft praises Poe for, among other things, “his influence in such things as the maintenance of a single mood and achievement of a single impression in a tale.”⁴² Regarding supernatural weird fiction, Lovecraft writes, “the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere the better it is...”⁴³ He writes of science fiction that “The emphasis...must be kept right—hovering always over *the wonder of the central abnormality itself*.”⁴⁴ Drama, adventure and action are permissible in a weird story, but not to the point that they distract from the atmosphere. He states in “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”, “Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can be is *a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood*.”⁴⁵ In “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, he reaffirms the rule regarding interplanetary fiction in particular, writing, “Atmosphere, not action, is the thing to cultivate in the wonder story.”⁴⁶ Social and political satire are unacceptable distractions in interplanetary fiction. Lovecraft writes, “Social and political satire are always undesirable, since such intellectual and ulterior motives detract from the story’s power as the crystallization of a mood.”⁴⁷

Even too much characterization can distract from the focus on the violation of nature. Lovecraft wrote of interplanetary fiction that “The characters, though they must be natural, should be subordinated to the central marvel around which they are grouped. The true “hero” of

a marvel tale is not any human being, but simply a set of *phenomena*.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, this seems to be the opposite approach of the most popular author of weird horror today, Stephen King, who emphasizes characterization. Lovecraft was bad at writing realistic dialog, and his stories contain remarkably little direct speech. His protagonists are almost always thinly disguised versions of himself, or some idealized version of himself: richer, better educated, and more respected. The independently wealthy antiquarian Jervas Dudley who explores his family vault in “The Tomb” (1917) is interchangeable with the independently wealthy antiquarian Randolph Carter who goes hunting for the gods in “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath” (1927); and with the independently wealthy antiquarian and author of weird fiction Robert Blake, who explores the ruins of an old church in “The Haunter of the Dark” (1935); and with most other Lovecraft protagonists.

Elements of humor disrupt the mood of weird art and are so should not be present. The work of Washington Irving (1783-1859) and Dunsany, for instance, are regarded as being diminished by humorous elements.⁴⁹ Yet Lovecraft acknowledges that it’s not impossible to mix humor and the weird. Humorous elements in the work of M.R. James “serve in his skilled hands to augment the general effect rather than to spoil it, as the same qualities would tend to do with a lesser craftsman.”⁵⁰ The ban on humor does not apply to literature from the Middle East, like *The Thousand and One Nights*. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft writes of, “The sly humour which only the Eastern mind knows how to mix with weirdness...”⁵¹ It’s odd that Lovecraft both champions realism and regards humor as unacceptable. Presumably, Lovecraft didn’t find much funny about real human behavior.

In support of Lovecraft, we should note that humor has often ruined the mood in weird horror fiction. The most obvious example from popular culture would be the decline of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series of films (1984-2010) as Freddy Krueger became progressively more of a wiseacre. Having said that, art that mixes weird horror with comedy has shown lasting appeal, such as Poe’s science fiction horror story “The Man that was Used Up” (1839), and cult films such as Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* series (1981-1992) and Peter Jackson’s *Braindead* (1992). Indeed, Stuart Gordon’s film *Re-Animator* (1985), based on Lovecraft’s novella “Herbert West—Reanimator”, is a cult classic, though the comedy introduced would have disgusted Lovecraft.

The second principle is to rely on suggestion, rather than explicit detail. He writes in “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction” that “Prime emphasis should be given to *subtle suggestion*—imperceptible hints and touches of selective associative detail which express shadings of moods and build up a vague illusion of the strange reality of the unreal.” In “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, he quotes himself almost exactly, writing of science fiction that “...prime emphasis goes into subtle suggestion—the imperceptible hints and touches of selective associative detail which express shadings of moods and build up a vague illusion of the strange reality of the unreal.”

Lovecraft committed himself early to refraining from clearly describing horrific entities. Given his belief that fear stems from the unknown, this is hardly surprising. As noted, some phenomena aren’t able to be described at all. Other phenomena can only be described with a vague impression. In “The Festival” (1923), the protagonist enters ancient catacombs and encounters “hybrid winged things that no sound eye could ever wholly grasp, or sound brain ever wholly remember. They were not altogether crows, nor moles, nor buzzards, nor ants, nor vampire bats, nor decomposed human beings; but something I cannot and must not recall.”⁵²

Late in his career, Lovecraft changed his mind about never offering clear descriptions. For instance, one of the highlights of *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931) is a detailed account of the dissection of an Elder Thing, as the arctic explorers who found the corpse strive to make sense of its weird biology.

However, Lovecraft never gave up emphasizing suggestion, and the suggestive power of his work is perhaps its most distinctive feature. Lovecraft was a consummate worldbuilder who developed a new mythology, but his universe is described in vague hints. His stories routinely gesture at wonders that are unnecessary to the plot, to give the reader the sense that they are glimpsing a vast, secret universe. For example, in *At the Mountains of Madness*, the traumatized graduate student Danforth “has on rare occasions whispered disjointed and irresponsible things about “the black pit”, “the carven rim”, “the proto-shoggoths”, “the windowless solids with five dimensions”, “the nameless cylinder”, “the elder pharos”, “Yog-Sothoth”, “the primal white jelly”, “the colour out of space”, “the wings”, “the eyes in darkness”, “the moon-ladder”, “the original, the eternal, the undying”, and other bizarre conceptions...” In “From Beyond”, the narrator is driven to explore the unknown, “To shake off the maddening and wearying limitations

of time and space and natural law—to be linked with the vast *outside*". The story is intended to make readers feel that they, too, have been linked with the vast outside.

The third principle is to maintain a sense of scale. Lovecraft never offers this as a principle, but I think that it can be inferred from his comments on space and time, and is illustrated by his work. In "In Defense of Dagan", he writes: "Probably the worst thing is *solitude in barren immensity*."⁵³ He routinely exposed characters to vast, often inter-dimensional spaces,, as in "Dagon", "From Beyond", and "The Dreams in the Witch House".

Lovecraft emphasizes the vulnerability of humans by contrasting our small size and brief existence with the vastness and age of the universe. Just as we are dwarfed by space, our little lives and civilizations are dwarfed by time. He writes, "The reason why *time* plays a great part in so many of my tales is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. *Conflict with time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression."⁵⁴ The inevitable extinction of humanity is a recurring theme in Lovecraft's work. It's threatened in many stories and is described in "Memory" (1919), "The Shadow Out of Time", and "Till A' the Seas" (1935, with R.H. Barlow). Lovecraft likewise depicts civilized alien species being wiped out by *other* alien species, generally leaving only ruins behind. The Earth was once ruled by Elder Things, but they were exterminated by shoggoths. Likewise, the Yithians also once ruled Earth, but were overthrown by "polyps" from yet deeper reaches of space, while the Yaddithians, who live too far away to bother Earth, are doomed to be annihilated by bholes, gigantic worms.

NOTES

¹ Lovecraft, H.P., "The Case for Classicism" in *Collected Essays of H.P. Lovecraft*, vol. ii, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2008), 37.

² Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1973), 15.

³ Lovecraft, H.P., "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" in *Collected Essays of H.P. Lovecraft*, vol. ii, ed. S.T. Joshi (NY: Hippocampus Press, 2008), 176.

⁴ Joshi, T.S., *H.P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (Cabin John, MA: Wildside Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, location 2180.

⁵ See, for instance, Azathoth's description in "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932).

⁶ Joshi, T.S., *The Decline of the West*, op. cit., location 2176.

⁷ Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 38-39, 43.

⁸ Joshi, T.S., T.S. *The Decline of the West*, op. cit., location 2233.

⁹ Tulu being Cthulhu.

¹⁰ Lovecraft did co-write one story that is clearly science fiction and clearly planetary fiction: "In the Walls of Eryx" (1936) with Kenneth J. Sterling.

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- ¹¹ My choice of examples of modern art might reasonably be criticized for being non-inclusive, low-brow, and skewed towards cinema. My intent is to pick examples most likely to be familiar to the reader.
- ¹² All three of these are praised, along with other realist horror fiction, in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*.
- ¹³ Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 12.
- ¹⁴ Lovecraft does write about Werewolves at least twice. Once in the poem “Psychopompos” (1918) and once in the disappointing story “The Ghost-Easter” (1924) with C.M. Eddy. These werewolves are traditional not representative of Lovecraft’s work.
- ¹⁵ Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 14.
- ¹⁶ Lovecraft, H.P., “In Defense of Dagon” in *Collected Essays of H.P. Lovecraft*, vol. v, ed. S.T. Joshi (NY: Hippocampus Press, 2008), 48.
- ¹⁷ Lovecraft presumably gets the idea from Ambrose Bierce’s short story “The Damned Thing” (1893), in which the narrator notes, “We so rely upon the orderly operation of familiar natural laws that any seeming suspension of them is noted as a menace to our safety, a warning of unthinkable calamity.”
- ¹⁸ Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 15.
- ¹⁹ Lovecraft, H.P., “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, in *Collected Essays of H.P. Lovecraft*, vol. ii, ed. S.T. Joshi (NY: Hippocampus Press, 2008), 181.
- ²⁰ Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 56.
- ²¹ Lovecraft, H.P., “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”, op. cit., 177.
- ²² Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 25.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.
- ²⁵ Lovecraft, H.P., “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”, op. cit., 177.
- ²⁶ Lovecraft, H.P. “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, op. cit., 179.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.
- ³⁰ Lovecraft, H.P., “In Defense of Dagon”, op. cit., 11.
- ³¹ Lovecraft’s own story “Polaris” (1918) revolves around peril from hairy ape-men from the polar caps.
- ³² Lovecraft, H.P., “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, op. cit., 179.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 180.
- ³⁴ See, for instance, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 101.
- ³⁵ Lovecraft, H.P., “Nietzscheism and Realism” in *Collected Essays of H.P. Lovecraft*, vol. v, ed. S.T. Joshi (NY: Hippocampus Press, 2008), 69.
- ³⁶ “The Whisperer in Darkness” in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 218-220.
- ³⁷ “At the Mountains of Madness” in *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Tales of Terror* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 74, 76, 99.
- ³⁸ “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 333.
- ³⁹ “The Call of Cthulhu” in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 153.
- ⁴⁰ Lovecraft, H.P., “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, op. cit., 179.
- ⁴¹ *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 102.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 54.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ⁴⁴ “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, op. cit., 179.
- ⁴⁵ “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”, op. cit., 177.
- ⁴⁶ “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”, op. cit., 179.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ⁴⁹ *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, op. cit., 40 and 19 respectively.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 101-102.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36-37.
- ⁵² Lovecraft, H.P., “The Festival” in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 116.

⁵³ Lovecraft, H.P., "In Defense of Dagon", op. cit., 48.

⁵⁴ Lovecraft, H.P., "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction", op. cit., 176.