The Ordinary and the Eldritch

Contradictory narrative technique in “The Call of Cthulhu”

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the use of contradictory narrative techniques in Howard Philip Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” the effect of which are unease and investing the reader. It uses two different narrative techniques to achieve this; the first is the contradiction of the murder mystery that is never solved that turns into a fantastical tale of extraterrestrial and sunken cities; the second is a narrative structure that is both easy to follow yet surprisingly complex. These techniques are reinforced through the use of mundane on one hand and otherworldly imagery and word choice on the other.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

2. Background .......................................................................................................................... 2

3. Analysis .................................................................................................................................. 7

4. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 18

5. Works Cited ........................................................................................................................... 20
1. Introduction

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far” (Lovecraft 1). These are the rather ominous and cryptic opening words of the short horror story “The Call of Cthulhu”, published in a magazine called *Weird Tales* in 1928 (Berruti 363) and written by “arguably one of the most significant horror author[s] of the 20th century” (Kneale 108): Howard Phillips Lovecraft. This quote, in a sense, summarizes some of the common themes in Lovecraft’s work: ignorance, knowledge and the fragility of the human mind.

The impact Lovecraft made on the horror genre is simultaneously easy to trace and hard to pinpoint because of the sheer body of work he influenced in both great and small ways. He even gave rise to a genre of horror known under many names: cosmic horror, eldritch horror, weird tales and even lovecraftian horror to name a few. There are board games, video games, movies, art and literature beyond counting inspired by his work.

Lovecraft wrote many short stories and while they are too numerous to go through here, some examples include “The Rats in the Walls,” “The Horror at Red Hook” and “The Call of Cthulhu” which is the subject of this essay. It is a story about a man who starts investigating a strange cult following the death of his grand-uncle, an investigation that leads him to discover the existence of an ancient sunken city and the titular Cthulhu, a being that has slept within this city for countless millennia, waiting to rise once again. It sounds weird, and considering how Lovecraft personally called his particular form of horror “weird fiction” (qtd in Smith 830), it might not be so far-fetched to call it weird. His stories often contain madness, mysteries that should not be solved, as well as a suite of bizarre ancient beings from the cosmos. In fact, what truly sets Lovecraft apart from other writers of horror during and before his time is that “the places and entities he imagined are stranger than other, longer-established, horrific conventions like ghosts and vampires” and that “he does not draw upon recognizable religious or mythic traditions” (Kneale 108).

“The Call of Cthulhu” marks the origin of the so-called ‘Cthulhu Mythos’ described by Mark Lowell as “a series of horror tales written by [Lovecraft]… and expanded by others after his death” (47). The mythos will be further detailed in the background section, but the fact that it was continued after his death is an important point: it means that Lovecraft’s work, some of which was obscure, ‘weird’ and overlooked, survived and flourished even after he passed away. In fact his work grows in popularity as time passes
thanks to others who continue to refer to and expand on the Cthulhu Mythos. Lovecraft’s influence, both within the mythos and beyond, comes in part from his rather distinct style of writing, although it is one that is regularly criticised. Philip Smith, for example, notes that: “Lovecraft has been accused of over-use of poorly chosen adjectives and adverbs” (833). Some even go as far as classifying him as an “untalented hack writer” (Smith 832). Despite the criticism, Lovecraft’s style of writing allows readers to recognize his works as well as the works of those that imitate him.

This leads us to the essay at hand and its goals. Because of the unique position of “The Call of Cthulhu” as the de facto starting point of the sprawling Cthulhu Mythos and its influence over the horror genre, it is certainly interesting to analyse it with the mythos in mind. Because of the same reasons, however, it might also be interesting to look at it in isolation. Doing this means disregarding enormous amounts of texts, but that same amount also puts such an analysis far off the scope of this essay. Furthermore, it is actually more common to analyse “The Call of Cthulhu” in the context of the mythos, meaning that there is more merit to one that focuses solely on the text itself. Although Lovecraft himself and the Cthulhu Mythos will be touched on in the background chapter below, the analysis will thusly focus only on “The Call of Cthulhu”.

The quote that opens this essay was chosen because it could be interpreted to state that mankind is ignorant and should avoid learning too much because of what the truth might bring, but those are just the opening lines of the story. The reader continues reading and thus voyages a bit further, gaining knowledge. The text gives the reader an indirect warning not to read further, yet allows the reader to do exactly the opposite. This brings us to the thesis of this essay: I argue that “The Call of Cthulhu” uses contradictory narrative techniques to create unease while involving the reader. This is what makes the story so powerful; by looking at how the narrative is structured – and to what end – I hope to contribute to showing how a short story, published in a magazine in 1928, ended up so captivating and important that it has helped shape horror for almost 90 years and likely for many more to come.

2. Background

To begin the discussion on the work of H.P. Lovecraft it seems fitting to start with a short introduction of the author himself. Smith writes that there is plenty of information about Lovecraft, as well as his ideas on a large variety of subjects, thanks to the great number of letters he wrote, numbering around a staggering 100.000 (833). This means that many of
his personal ideas about the world, about his own writing as well as the writing of others have been preserved. He was born in 1890 and died in 1937. He was a bit of an outsider and suffered from depression, financial woes and isolation while also making a lot of friends through his writing. In 1923 he started contributing to the pulp horror and fantasy magazine named *Weird Tales* where “The Call of Cthulhu” was published in 1928. He wrote many short stories and a few longer, but was never able to live of his writing (Kneale 108-10). James Kneale explains that Lovecraft was an Atheist who believed that “the universe obeyed the principles and laws discovered by 19th-century science” while also having an “interest in the supernatural” (109). Lovecraft’s varying views leads to studies of his work having to face many contradictory ideas. Abel Alves, for example, notes that “Lovecraft seemingly wavered between racism and classism on one hand and a desire to learn about and embrace the strange and different on the other” (82). Smith adds to this duality by noting that Lovecraft seems to be condemning knowledge, but is actually critical of mankind’s “inability to cope with knowledge and not knowledge itself (Smith 835).

Alves writes that evolution is one of the key scientific theories that influenced Lovecraft, and suggests that he made use of the fear some felt when it was suggested that mankind did not hold a special place in the universe as the pinnacle of God’s creation. It is a discussion that sprang up after the theory of evolution; although it holds relevance to this day (76). This idea about evolution also leads into Lovecraft’s personal fears that manifest in his work in the form of xenophobia and racism (Smith 834-835). This is one of the more criticised aspects of Lovecraft and his writing with some scholars even going so far as “to dismiss [Lovecraft] as worthy of study” because of this (Smith 835). For example, he has ideas about “mixed blood” being something that heralds the “downfall of humanity” during the early 20th century (Smith 835). This idea is reflected in “The Call of Cthulhu” as the members of the Cthulhu Cult are being described as “mongrel” or “hybrid spawn” and being of “mentally aberrant type” while actively working to awaken Cthulhu and thus end the world as we know it.

While not relevant in the strictest sense to the upcoming analysis, a mention of the Cthulhu Mythos is in order. As stated earlier, it is made up from varied, but related, stories written by Lovecraft and many others who continued contributing even after his death. Stephen King, for example, has contributed directly to the Cthulhu Mythos and those who take inspiration from it range from “[a]rtists such as HR Geiger [to] film makers such as Guillermo Del Toro” (Smith 837). Lowell notes that these stories have elements in common, such as “names, places, gods…” He agrees with other scholars that “how a story evokes
horror is what qualifies it as part of the ‘mythos’” (47). Borrowing the definition from Sheila Fitzgerald he states that a mythos story places the character in “an expansive and devastating confrontation with the unknown” as well as the character's realization of “humanity's insignificant and unsteady place in the universe” (qtd in Lowell 47). Lowell reflects on this fact and suggests that Cthulhu Mythos stories “contain a perversion…” on Joseph Campell’s monomyth and states that; “In the monomyth, a herald calls a hero into a realm of myth and the unconscious, where he confronts various tribulations and emerges with a boon for his fellow men” (48). However, in the Cthulhu Mythos stories there is no boon and the hero only finds “sorrow, insanity and death…” (Smith 48).

With that in mind let us summarize the story of “The Call of Cthulhu”. It begins by stating that the text was found among the papers of the narrator and protagonist, Francis Wayland Thurston. His narration begins by stating that science is about to reveal things about the universe that will either cause humanity to stay ignorant or become insane. This statement sets the tone as the story then begins in proper with Thurston investigating the notes left by his recently deceased great-uncle, Professor George Gamell Agnell. This chapter, the first of three, centres on a strange clay statue depicting something with a squid-like head, dragon-like body with wings, made by a man who starts having dreams about a strange city and this particular creature.

The second chapter deals with the story of a police officer who encountered a strange cult in the swamps near New Orleans seventeen years before Thurston’s investigation. During this event the police captured several members of the cult and found a statuette eerily similar to the clay statue that Professor Agnell encountered before his death. From the captured cultists the police officer learned various things about the cult and the strange creatures they worship who are depicted as something utterly alien.

The third chapter starts with an article in a newspaper that shows another statuette, found together with the last survivor of a ship named Emma. Thurston finds out that this survivor died, but manages to find his notes from which he learns that the crew of the Emma was attacked by another ship named the Alert. The crew commandeered this ship after fighting off the hostile crew and eventually ended up on a strange shore; one covered with strange ooze and ancient structures that did not follow normal geometrical laws. Cthulhu himself, the being depicted in the statues, awakens for a short moment. Thanks to the actions of the surviving sailor the horrific creature ended up sinking back into the ocean together with the city. The story ends with Thurston knowing that the cult will eventually murder him as
they did Professor Agnell, simply for possessing the knowledge he now has. His final wish is that no one finds his notes.

Despite the narrator never encountering Cthulhu, or the sunken city, first hand, he does gain knowledge about them and starts connecting the dots. The story is built using a layered narrative with Thurston telling the implied reader what Professor Agnell found out from other characters, as well as his own findings when he makes them. In order to properly analyse this short story a brief summary of theories surrounding horror, style and narrative might be in order.

The horror genre is an interesting one and one where scholars struggle to come up with a strict definition. Noël Carroll differentiates between horror and terror as two separate types of genre (15). He classifies horror as a story that contains a repulsive, unnatural monster that does not belong in the world of the narrative (as opposed to a fairy tale where a dragon or minotaur would be seen as part of the world) (15-6), a notion that other scholars such as Jack Morgan agrees with; these monsters should “provoke not just fear, but loathing” meaning that the characters, and reader/viewer should be repulsed by their presence (66). Noël then suggest that a terror story in turn is one that will “achieve their frightening effects by exploring psychological phenomena that are all too human” (15).

Classifying Lovecraft’s horror is another point of disagreement between scholars. Smith, for example, elaborates on the classification by listing some of the labels that have been attributed to his works: “horror, Gothic horror, American Gothic, science fiction or… ‘weird fiction’” (830). Smith then criticises these attempts at classification by writing that they are done “without any clear distinction of those characteristics which separate one category from another” (830). Because of these disagreements on how to classify, and what to call, Lovecraft’s horror I will use the definition used by Jack Morgan and place it as a subgenre of Gothic horror (60). This is because Lovecraft’s horror essentially is a variation on the Gothic rather than something completely different (Morgan 60). Furthermore, due to the prevalence of cosmic entities, as well as the fact that “[h]umanity, in Lovecraft’s vision, is falsely convinced of its own importance on a universal scale” (Smith 835) I will refer to this subgenre as ‘cosmic horror’.

If we are to assume that cosmic horror is a subgenre of gothic horror then we need to answer another question: what is Gothic horror? Robert D. Hume points out that many assume that the gothic novels have been accused of being very similar and “include haunted castles, supernatural occurrences… secret panels and stairways, time-yellowed manuscripts, and poorly lighted midnight scenes” (282). J. Hillis Miller claims that narratives “make[…]
something happen in the real world…” (69), that they propose “ways of behaving that are then imitated…” (69) and that they “are a relatively safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized” (69). The Gothic genre takes the part about making something happen in the real world a step further through use of various techniques to involve the reader. This is exemplified by Hume who states that the “Gothic novel display[s] the reactions of their characters to trying or appalling situations” (283) as well as making “attempt[s] to involve the reader” (284) through “an effort to shock, alarm and otherwise rouse him” (284). This might be part of what gives the Gothic genre its staying power despite being regularly criticised for being formulaic. I suggest that in “The Call of Cthulhu” the reader is involved through contradictory narrative techniques. By this I mean that there are elements within the narrative that seem to be opposing one-another. One example is the indirect warning to the reader not to read further at the start of “The Call of Cthulhu”; the reader has the choice of heeding the warning and stopping there, or ignoring the warning and reading nonetheless. The warning is thus contradictory to the rest of the text because its mystery nature compels the reader to read on and find answers.

‘Reader’, as used in this essay, means ‘implied reader’. This term means that, when discussing the text, whenever the reader is brought up it is not an actual reader but rather a “hypothetical personage” (Leech & Short 208) whom the message in the text is aimed towards by the author. This implied reader is assumed to understand what is considered good, bad or terrifying in a given text. In this usage ‘implied reader’ exists between the text and actual reader just as the related term ‘implied author’ exists between the actual author and the text. This implied author is neither the “flesh-and-blood author… or the narrator who relates the words” (Mays 163). Leech and Short note that the use of the term implied author is important; “[o]therwise we would have to ascribe automatically the views expressed through a work to the author himself” (209). Essentially this means that while Lovecraft’s personal opinions may or may not line up with what is expressed in the story we can simply refer to the implied author.

This leads us to ‘style’. Leech and Short defines it as “the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose…” (9). They further elaborate on this by suggesting that style can be both part of the work of a particular author, as well as something that can encompass a genre (Leech & Short 10). This is why the horror and Gothic genres are important to this essay; without the context of the genre it becomes impossible to point to similarities and differences when analysing “The Call of Cthulhu”. They then demonstrate three different ways to view style: monism where the
message told in the text is inseparable from the way it is told, dualism where “there can be different ways of conveying the same content” (Leech & Short 17) and pluralism where language is seen to perform “a number of different functions, and any piece of language is likely to be the result of choices made on different functional levels” (Leech & Short 24).

The latter view is the one that this essay will be based on and essentially means that the different stylistic choices made by Lovecraft in “The Call of Cthulhu” will be analysed based on their function within the text, be they related to narrative structure, imagery or even word choice. That is not to say that the analysis will not go into the ideas and themes present in the text, but rather that it will look at them as well as the way they are presented and to what effect.

3. Analysis

The most central of the contradictory narrative techniques used within “The Call of Cthulhu” might be fact that the story begins as a mystery story where Thurston investigates the death of Agnell. Massimo Berruti writes that “‘The Call of Cthulhu’ is eminently a detective story (source’s italics), the tale developing around the protagonist's investigations and ‘piercing together of dissociated knowledge’” (364). While this classification is not true in the strictest sense, seeing as Thurston is not a detective, it does have other similarities, such as the fact that “the tale is divided into three chapters, each one with its own exemplifying-summarizing title, a typical device of the detective-investigative story” (Berruti 364). Berruti suggest that it is “not a real thriller” though, because the story does “not hinge, as in a thriller, on the protagonists will to pursue a mysterious murderer” (364). Eyewitness accounts stated that Agnell had been “jostled” (Lovecraft 2) moments before death and the doctors who examined him post-mortem state that he died from “some obscure lesion of the heart” (Lovecraft 2). Thurston states that “[a]t the time I saw no reason to dissent from this dictum, but latterly I am inclined to wonder – and more than wonder” (Lovecraft 2). Despite this information Thurston is not trying to figure out the truth behind Agnell’s death and find the murderer, but rather to find the truth behind the notes left by Agnell. What he finds is something that seems to be bigger than the murder itself, but also something that seems both implausible and weird.

The first of these chapters is called I. THE HORROR IN CLAY. The name itself sets up both interest and tension: what is this horror in clay? The narrative begins with Thurston having a monologue about the dangers of understanding the universe, and
humanity’s place within it. Thurston’s narration bridges this monologue with the chapter at large by saying that he glimpsed “forbidden aeons” and “dread glimpses of truth” by “an accidental piercing together of separated things” (Lovecraft 1-2). To the reader the message can be summed up more or less as a warning against reading further while simultaneously stimulating curiosity. The narrative then moves on to the death of professor Agnell, Thurston’s the great-uncle. Among the items left behind by Agnell are his notes as well as a small bas-relief depicting strange symbols and some sort of creature that only a “diseased fancy could conceive” (Lovecraft 3). The second chapter is also foreshadowed as there is a reference to Agnell’s second set of notes that make up the majority of that chapter.

It is at this point that the narrative enters the second layer of narration as Thurston starts relaying the information within Agnell’s notes to the reader. Essentially there are now two narratives in tandem: Thurston’s overarching narrative and Agnell’s past investigation into the bas-relief. The bas-relief had been created by a young man named Wilcox whom had created it after having strange dreams. The chapter ends with Thurston detailing how Agnell started asking countless others if they had had similarly strange dreams, finding that during a certain window of time, March 23 – April 2, the same time that Wilcox had started having his dreams and eventually becoming sick, many of those he asked had experienced at least some sort of strange dream or feeling. Thurston, and the reader, learns a few important facts in the chapter: There seem to be a connection to an earthquake and the strange dreams that Wilcox had suffered. The reader catches on to a few other key points here as well: the monster portrayed in the bas-relief, the sudden surge in strange dreams and even some people succumbing to madness seem to be connected somehow.

Chapter two, named II. THE TALE OF INSPECTOR LEGRASSE is the most narratively complex chapter out of the three for one main reason: it is told first one, then two and finally three layers of narration away from Thurston. The chapter begins with Thurston reading through Agnell’s notes detailing something that happened seventeen years prior to Thurston’s own investigation, and he adds to the reader’s curiosity by stating that “[t]he older matters which had made the sculptor’s dream and bas-relief so significant to [Agnell] formed the subject of the second half of his long manuscript” (Lovecraft 7). During an archaeological meeting a police inspector named John Raymond LeGrasse brings a strange ancient stone statuette portraying the same being as the one in the bas-relief created by Wilcox in chapter one. The link between the two cases is thus established very quickly, giving the reader another mystery to answer: what is the connection between Wilcox’ bas-relief and this stone statuette?
It is after this point that the narrative goes down from one layer away from Thurston (Agnell’s notes) to two layers as an anthropologist named William Channing Webb tells of a strange Inuit tribe he encountered on Greenland forty-seven years before the meeting. He had found a bas-relief there with similarities to the statuette brought by Legrasse. Furthermore as Webb and Legrasse start comparing notes they find several eerie similarities. The narrative now follows Legrasse as he details a police operation near New Orleans. They had found and arrested the members of a strange cult in a swamp. These cultists had been dancing around a “great granite monolith” (Lovecraft 11) upon which the statuette had been resting. After arresting the cultists Legrasse finds out that many were seamen, and that all of them worshiped something they referred to as the Great Old Ones. Here the narrative moves to the third layer away from Thurston; one of the captured cultists, named Castro, tells Legrasse what he knows about these Great Old Ones. This tale is then relayed to Agnell, whose notes are read by Thurston. This is also where the link to Wilcox comes into play; among the information Castro shares is that these Great Old Ones supposedly communicate telepathically through the dreams of humans. Thurston states “[t]hat my uncle was excited by the tale of the sculptor I did not wonder… a sensitive young man who had dreamed not only the figure and exact hieroglyphics of the swamp-found image and the Greenland devil tablet” (Lovecraft 15). This is the point where the narrative is at its most intensive. This is because all the information the reader has been given by this point start to add up: Wilcox’s dreams, the strange tales told by Webb, Legrasse and Castro all match and start to show that there is more to all of this, and it is out of this world, which takes us to the final chapter of the story.

Chapter three, III. MADNESS FROM THE SEA is different from the two prior chapters because of one major change: Agnell’s investigation is now finished and what remains is Thurston’s own investigation that picks up when he, by chance, reads a page from a newspaper giving minor details about a single surviving sailor out of an entire crew. Again the reader is introduced to a link to the Cthulhu Cult in the form of an idol depicting the same creature once again. Thurston investigates these happenings and tracks down the surviving sailor, Gustaf Johansen, who unfortunately has died, although the circumstances point to the Cthulhu Cult being responsible. Thurston reads through Johansen’s notes and finds that the crew had been attacked by the Cthulhu Cult and had abandon their own ship and are forced to commandeer the ship used by the cultists. The crew ends up on a strange island with strange ruins that seem to defy the basic rules of geometry as the angles of the city defy logic, to the point where a member of the crew died after “he was swallowed up by an angle of masonry
which shouldn’t have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse” (Lovecraft 24).

One member of the crew somehow manages to open an enormous door and Cthulhu, the creature depicted in the various bas-reliefs and statuettes, emerges. Only Johansen and one other crewmember, who goes insane from the experience and dies, manage to get back to the ship. Johansen then turns the ship and pierces Cthulhu in a last ditch effort to escape as the creature chases after him. These events are followed by a great storm that ends with the city disappearing beneath the waves and Johansen being rescued. The narrative ends with Thurston saying that he is aware that the cult will kill him, stating that “[a]s my uncle went, as poor Johansen went, so I shall go. I know too much, and the cult still lives” (Lovecraft 25). This is also where the warning at the beginning of chapter one comes into fruition as Thurston hopes that no one will find the notes he has written, the very same notes that the reader has just finished reading.

If one of the goals of the Gothic is to make the reader invested, then this is exactly what “The Call of Cthulhu” does through this narrative structure. As readers we are following Thurston’s investigation, so when he finds a source of information both answers given, and questions raised, are of interest. Moreover, this also leaves room for the reader to, as Thurston does, start connecting the different events to each other. There are expectations put on the reader to think for himself/herself and consider the information that has been provided. For example, the reader is expected to draw the horrifying conclusion that Cthulhu almost ended the world as we know it, and this happened before Thurston even begins his investigation. Hints towards this fact include Wilcox becoming sick without warning on the same day that the sunken city, R’lyeh, rose from the sea (the source of the earthquake) and suddenly returns to health when the city sinks back to the bottom of the ocean. Everything has already happened; Thurston is simply putting the fragments of truth together, but the reader can go further than he does and draw his/her own conclusions.

This involvement from the reader brings us to the ‘twist’ at the end, one that make the narrative structure more impressive in regards to conveying its message: as stated above, the narration ends by Thurston saying that he fears that the Cthulhu Cult will find him and kill him, and that he hopes that the very story the reader just finished will never be found. The implied reader is thus suddenly part of the narrative in a sense. After all, just as Thurston has pieced together knowledge, so is the reader expected to do the same. Just as Thurston continued Agnell’s research, so is the reader expected to continue Thurston’s research. Agnell, Thurston and even Johansen are assassinated for knowing too much – suggesting that
the reader is next in line, something that suddenly diminishes the gap between reader and text. This parallelism in narrative and meta-narrative might be one of the most subtle, yet most impressive ways that the narrative structure of “The Call of Cthulhu” delivers its message. The effect is enhanced by the fact that the narrative begins with Thurston’s indirect warning to the reader not to read further “I hope that no one else will accomplish this piercing out; certainly, if I live, I shall never knowingly supply a link in this so hideous a chain” (Lovecraft 2). Berruti quotes scholar Stefan Dziemianowicz who summarise “The Call of Cthulhu” as “a horror story about the hazards of reading horror stories” (qtd in Berruti 368). The reader is drawn in by the mystery, and it is an intriguing horror mystery, but the most effective horror is conveyed by drawing attention to the act of reading itself.

Here the similarities to the Gothic within “The Call of Cthulhu” might be the strongest as it makes great efforts to involve the reader. This way of using an investigation as the basis of the narrative might not be new, but it is utilized in a fairly unique fashion. The different narrative layers all serve as ways to make the reader question the information within them. For example, in both the case with Legrasse and the newspaper article we are initially given limited or partially faulty information. However, even though both of these examples give such limited information they both include an idol portraying Cthulhu, so for Thurston and the reader the portrayal of Cthulhu hints at the importance of these seemingly minor events. Then Agnell and/or Thurston investigate further and are given strange and improbable stories (strange winged creatures and other things talked about in the swamp, as well as the description of the impossible geometry of the sunken city as examples). Taken out of context these strange accounts are just that, strange. Taken as a whole, however, they present a pattern with information that match up too well to be coincidental.

The narrative structure is one of the aspects of “The Call of Cthulhu” that often gets praised by scholars because it is surprisingly complex yet remains rather easy to follow for the reader. Smith states that Lovecraft has a firm grasp of narrative structure that “is well-placed in terms of mounting horror” (Smith 833) and Massimo Berruti quotes Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi who attributes this ease of reading to the fact that “we are always aware of the presence of the principal narrator, who has both assembled the various other narratives and repeatedly comments upon them” (qtd in Berruti 370). Thurston narrates the entire story in first person, something that further eases the reading as it becomes clearer to distinguish between his thoughts and the information given by other characters. Had the story been written in a third person perspective it would have been a lot harder to distinguish the various layers of narrative contained within the three chapters of “The Call of Cthulhu”.

11
To link back to the thesis, that there are contradictory narrative techniques within “The Call of Cthulhu”, there are actually two conflicts within the narrative. One is that it is a mystery story that begins with a murder, but the murder itself is never solved or of great importance: what Thurston learns later becomes so otherworldly and grand in scale that the death of Agnell becomes a side note in the greater picture. “The Call of Cthulhu” starts out as a small story that grows until it suddenly is about sunken cities and ancient undying creatures from the stars that threaten to destroy humanity.

The second contradictory narrative and stylistic technique is the way the narrative itself is constructed. While easy to follow because everything is seen through Thurston, the narrative itself is built on several layered narratives all the way through. This also means that while Thurston does comment on some things, he also does not comment on others that are left to the reader to figure out. There is thus a greater, more complex, hidden narrative, one that is easy to miss when simply reading. Simply put, the story is easy to follow, but doing so means that one risks missing out on the more horrifying details and connections. The effect is one that means that the more one starts to put things together within the story, the more effective it becomes as a horror story.

These contradictory techniques do not stop at the narrative though; they are present in most aspects of “The Call of Cthulhu” and serve to enhance the narrative in different ways. For example, the characters of “The Call of Cthulhu” can be divided into two categories, those with knowledge and no power and those with power and no knowledge. Thurston, for example, is unable to do more than piece together knowledge: knowledge that there are beings older than the planet that could at any moment end our existence. His role within the story is to convey the research he finds to the reader and little more, at least until the end. John Raymond Legrasse, on the other hand, arrests many members of the Cthulhu cult, but dismisses what they tell him because of how strange it sounds. He thus possesses power and ignorance. He does, however, serve as what leads to professor Agnell to becoming involved with the Cthulhu Cult. This is true for all characters in the story. Each of them brings a small piece of the grand puzzle. This is their function within the story: not to be round and dynamic characters but to be people who, on their own, are rather uninteresting but put together contribute to a narrative where events separated by time and space is slowly put together into something horrifying.

Furthermore, the characters all turn out to be insignificant in their own way; either ignorant to the larger picture or, like Agnell and Thurston, not ignorant but powerless to change their fates; they are doomed the moment the truth starts dawning upon them. They
convey the narrative and *seem* to be important, but are not actually important to the story at large except for providing information to the reader. After all, everything that Thurston finds out had already happened before he even began his investigation. Interestingly, while the cult itself is a dangerous antagonistic force, the cultists also suffer from the same fate as the other characters. They worship Cthulhu and the Great Old Ones, they receive their telepathic messages. Yet in the end it is not they who release Cthulhu, but the crew of the *Emma* who does it without knowing. Thus even the cult, despite worshiping the Great Old Ones, are also insignificant even if they may not think of themselves as such. The gods they worship seemingly do not think anything of them and do not need them.

While the narrative techniques of “The Call of Cthulhu” are contradictory, the imagery used within the text serves to enhance the effect of these contradictions in two ways: one way through juxtaposition, as the imagery of the mundane is contrasted with the otherworldly, and one way through vivid descriptions of the inability to describe. These two are closely linked, but let us start with the juxtaposition of mundane and otherworldly. The first description of Cthulhu as he appears on the bas-relief goes, in the words of Thurston; “If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing” (Lovecraft 3). His attempts to compare what he sees with his own frame of reference and paints a rather comical image. However, he then continues the description by applying the features of these beings as they appear on Cthulhu, explaining that the creature has “[a] pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings” (Lovecraft 3). Later, when Johansen encounters Cthulhu, the description changes drastically; “The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order… A mountain walked or stumbled” (Lovecraft 23).

This last description tells us nothing about Cthulhu, other than the fact that the creature is colossal and impossible to describe, but that part of the analysis will be dealt with later. There is a progression though these descriptions. First they are simple: Octopus, dragon, human caricature. In the end the descriptions are manic, giving but small fragments of information about what Cthulhu actually looks like. The first description still remains with the reader through all of this, meaning that imagining what Cthulhu truly looks like is left to the reader. This, in a sense, triggers curiosity because the information presented is not complete; Cthulhu is never fully described, something that is vital to keeping the reader actively
engaged in the story. If the descriptions never changed through the story, or started out as they are at the end, chaotic and undescriptive, then that effect would have been lost.

There is one more aspect to all of this though, the descriptions of mundane things. Let us take the description of officer Legrasse as an example: “[A] commonplace-looking middle-aged man who had travelled all the way from New Orleans” (Lovecraft 7). The simplicity of this description and other similar ones, like Johansen’s widow who is described as “[a] sad-faced woman in black” (Lovecraft 20), may perhaps be one important key to the effectiveness of the juxtaposition because in contrast to the descriptions of Cthulhu they are easily dismissed as unimportant and plain, but do in fact serve a very important function: to ground the story in a realistic world. Kneale agrees on this point, citing Tseram Todorov who states: “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 one given marvel” (qtd in Kneale 110).

If we take a look at the imagery surrounding the sunken city of R’lyeh its architecture is described as not following the rules of geometry. The stones that make up the city are covered in ooze, the angles and geometry described as being wrong and misleading. Thurston, thinking back to Wilcox who dreamed of R’lyeh, narrates: “I mention [Johansen’s] 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” (Lovecraft 22). When the crew of the Emma finds the door that leads to Cthulhu they are not certain if it is horizontal or slanted at an angle “…they could not decide whether it lay flat like a trap-door or slantwise like an outside cellar-door” (Lovecraft 23) When a crewmember tries to open it they likewise cannot tell if he is climbing up or crawling alongside it (Lovecraft 23). What happens in the city is, however, prefaced by descriptions of how the crew’s adventures and misadventures on the sea. Everything is not ordinary but there is initially nothing supernatural about it either and Johansen even supplies the latitude and longitude of the city’s location to add another layer of Realism. Realism is thus paving way for the fantastical and enhancing its effect, just as with the description of Legrasse as compared to the description of Cthulhu.

The second aspect of imagery as stated above is the vivid descriptions of the inability to describe. This was touched on briefly above with the description of Cthulhu as the creature appears before Johansen, but the description does not end there. There are references to claws and tentacles, but when Johansen steers the ship to collide with Cthulhu head-on the resulting crash is described as: “There was a bursting as of an exploding bladder, a slushy
nastiness as of a cloven sunfish, a stench as of a thousand opened graves, and a sound that the
chronicler would not put on paper” (Lovecraft 24). Here the description is vivid when
describing the smells and sounds, but descriptions of physical features are left out or only
hinted at. This is something very typical through the entire short story. Some details are
described, others are left vague, like in this passage during Johansen’s escape from Cthulhu:
“Slowly, amidst the distorted horrors of that indescribable scene, [the ship] began to churn the
lethal waters; whilst on the masonry of that charnel shore that was not of earth the titan Thing
from the stars slavered and gibbered” (Lovecraft 24).

These indescribable things are what make the core of “The Call of Cthulhu.”
The reader is alienated in a sense, not being allowed to get a full grip on the workings and
appearances of certain elements within the story. It leads to a conflict between what the reader
wants to find out and the cryptic nature of what is presented. At the same time the reader is
invited to try to understand, given a taste of things that are supposedly beyond understanding.
This invitation, I argue, is a crucial part of what makes “The Call of Cthulhu” stand out. It
suggests to the reader that the things within it that are beyond human understanding and
creates this effect through veiled hints and contradictions. Yet, when placed together the
pieces of information start to fit together. Information and imagery that is omitted in one place
may be described somewhere else. The reader is given partial information, but each piece
functions as a catalyst for further understanding. Each gap that is left out makes the reader
want to fill it in; each new strange feature awakens curiosity as well as horror.

The fact that the reader is expected to fill these intentional blanks is closely
linked to the story: it means that the reader goes through the same journey as Thurston did.
The more the reader understands, or realizes that he/she does not understand, the scarier it
becomes. This is because the Great Old Ones become more enigmatic with each new hint.
The descriptions are vague, hard to understand or simply omitted in favour of explaining that
they cannot be described. This does not mean that the reader is left entirely in the dark though,
because that is essentially the point; to make the reader want to put the facts together, to
understand something that the story claims to be impossible to understand. This is what makes
the imagery so important at the end of the story: the reader realizes that Thurston has died and
his last wish was never fulfilled because the story has been read by the reader. The more
invested the reader is in trying to understand the Great Old Ones the stronger the effect
becomes: It creates investment and then turns that investment into the crux of the story by
saying that this knowledge is dangerous and becomes more dangerous the more one learns.
Even the way Cthulhu and his kin operate is alien to human understanding of communication, life and matter. Berruti calls this ‘outsideness’, denoting the way the Great Old Ones are completely alien to humanity (376). For example, the descriptions of R’lyeh fit into this idea of ‘outsideness’. We expect geometry to work in a certain way. A cube is a cube, a flat surface is a flat surface. Within R’lyeh these rules, as understood by mankind, is challenged by suggesting that there is more to the world than humanity knows or understands. When it comes to Cthulhu there is an even stronger sense of this ‘outsideness’ as the reader learns that the creature is essentially eternal: he is dead but death does not have any finality over his race. This defiance of death is described to Legrasse in the form of a couplet; “That is not dead which can eternal lie, And with strange aeons even death may die” (Lovecraft 14). Cthulhu and the Great Old Ones simply lie and wait for a suitable time to wake again, Castro tells Legrasse: “They all lay in stone houses in Their great city of R’lyeh, preserved by the spells of mighty Cthulhu… But at the same time some force from the outside must serve to liberate Their bodies” (Lovecraft 13). Furthermore Castro also sheds light on the Great Old One’s method of communicating: “Their mode of speech was transmitted thought… the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among [mankind] by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshly minds of mammals” (Lovecraft 14). Not even their forms behave in a relatable way “These Great Old Ones… were not composed altogether of flesh and blood. They had shape… but that shape was not made of matter. When the stars were right they could plunge from world t world through the sky” (Lovecraft 13). From the descriptions, as well as Johansen’s account, it seems that humanity is physically and mentally unable to fully comprehend their appearance, language, and existence. This means that these creatures are alien to humans in every respect; everything about them is different to human understanding of what constitutes language, form, life and time.

In fact, the words spoken by the cult and those who are involved with the Great Old Ones are nearly impossible to pronounce because they are not meant to be words spoken by humans; they are the above mentioned telepathic messages that the affected humans try to make into words, as with Wilcox who “attempted to render by the almost unpronounceable jumble of letters, ‘Cthulhu fhtagn’” (Lovecraft 4). ‘Cthulhu fhtagn’ reoccurs several times, in different situations with different people involved, and is one example of repetition that functions both to remind, intrigue and horrify the reader. The repeating pattern also serves to highlight things that were not known before, like when the ‘Cthulhu fhtagn’ phrase is expanded to: “Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’ nagl fhtagn” (Lovecraft 10). Legasse explains that it supposedly means: “In his house at R’lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming”
(Lovecraft 10). These words seem almost randomly put together, but there is consistency between each use of them, this phrase for example was shared between the Inuit tribe on Greenland and the cult in the swamp.

With this in mind, let us take a look into the prose and word choice within “The Call of Cthulhu” and how the contradictory techniques are present even on that level of the text. Here the conflict present in the prose is an extension to the imagery, just as the imagery was an extension of the narrative. Many of the words and phrases seem to serve only to make the reader unsure of exact meanings. Clarity of meaning is usually important in order to tell an effective story. In “The Call of Cthulhu” we are instead made to wonder about the meanings of words and sentences. The reader may have to re-read a passage or may even have to do some research on the meaning of a specific word. In the case of “The Call of Cthulhu” I would argue that this is actually beneficial to the goals of the narrative: the story is about concepts that are strange, alien and hard to grasp and the language reflects this.

R’yleh is described as “cyclopean” (Lovecraft 4) for example, but for the uninitiated it is far from obvious that this refers to a certain type of masonry, and even less obvious what that sort of masonry even would look like. In the description of Cthulhu the word “eldritch” is used (from which the alternate name of cosmic horror called eldritch horror is derived). Eldritch means eerie, otherworldly, but to many readers it might as well be a made up word. While some readers may be turned off by the prose, it also means that trying to decipher the language is more rewarding. The reader is seemingly expected to do some research when reading “The Call of Cthulhu”. The word choices themselves create an uncertainty that works against a fully cohesive narrative but towards the kind of narrative that “The Call of Cthulhu” intends to be, one that wants the reader to take an active part.

There is more to the prose than being hard to read, however. Just as there are descriptions of the mundane to contrast with the fantastic, so is the prose easier to read at certain times while harder to read at others. When the prose is easy to read, it does not stick in the mind in the same way it does when it is hard to read, so the contrast between the parts that are easier to read and the ones that are harder is easily overlooked. I would argue that the prose within “The Call of Cthulhu” is reminiscent of poetry at times. Perhaps it does not do it in the sense that every line is perfectly chosen to have an effect, or that the words chosen are there for a very specific and metaphorical reason that allows for a lot of personal interpretation. Rather I would point towards the fact that words are chosen and placed in ways that do not match expectations; in ways that surprise and sometimes confuse the reader while also eliciting a response from them – just like poetry does. “The call of Cthulhu” may not be
beautifully written with colourful prose, but it uses a similar method, even though it comes off as rough and perhaps even ill-conceived. The narrative aims for a response from the reader, so if there is no response then the story loses much of its power and “The Call of Cthulhu” turns into what it is often criticised as: badly written. If there is a response, however, the reader is exposed to a thought-provoking set of ideas about unknown horrors, the nature of knowledge and even mankind’s place in the universe.

4. Conclusion

This essay aims to show how the narrative techniques in “The Call of Cthulhu” are used in contradictory manners to simultaneously create unease while involving the reader. The use of contradictory technique is present through the story in two ways: a murder mystery that turned into a story about otherworldly creatures and the use of a complicated narrative that is simultaneously easy to follow. Even the imagery is contradictory; the humans are described plainly throughout while Cthulhu turns from strange to something that cannot even be described.

The narrative leaves much of the investigating to the reader, so it has to create involvement in some way. It has to make the reader want to investigate and simultaneously hinder and evoke curiosity in him/her through the use of these various contradictions. Of course, this method of writing is not without drawbacks. If the reader does not become involved in the investigation, the effectiveness of both the narrative and the ending is greatly diminished and the story may come off only as strange and barely readable. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Lovecraft’s writing became so influential and led to the creation of the Cthulhu Mythos; those who read it and became intrigued may have wanted to know more or fill in the blanks. The grim outlook of “The Call of Cthulhu” may also be a reason. It is not grim in the sense that it is a tragedy or that everyone is killed. Rather it is grim in the sense that it paints mankind as unable to handle knowledge.

Looking at the time when “The Call of Cthulhu” was published and Lovecraft’s position as both an atheist and believer in science, it perhaps becomes easier to understand a possibility behind this way of looking at knowledge. The backlash against the idea that mankind were descended from animals was great and the debate has certainly not ended yet. “The Call of Cthulhu” becomes a story of ignorance or knowledge, but the knowledge comes at the expense of power and life. Strangely though, I think there is some hope within the story as well. Johansen does manage to halt Cthulhu, making the creature sink back to the bottom
of the ocean together with R’lyeh, after all. The danger is not over, but mankind is clearly not outright doomed either.

There are many issues with “The Call of Cthulhu” though. From a postcolonial perspective it becomes very problematic, especially because of the way the cultists are described as degenerated, almost animal-like. They worship the Great Old Ones to overthrow the white Anglo men who strive for science and order. From a gender perspective there are also a lot of troubling signs. There is but a single female character, Johansen’s widow, who makes a brief appearance in the third chapter, so it is a story about white Anglo men in more ways than one. These issues may turn a modern reader off, but it would also be interesting to consider how these issues were handled in the Cthulhu Mythos as time went on.

To conclude, this essay has shown that “The Call of Cthulhu” uses contradictory techniques to make the reader invested, to awaken his/her curiosity and to create horror through this investment; especially through juxtaposition between the expected and unexpected, the mundane and the otherworldly. It is a story that uses its Gothic roots and uses them in a way that appears both foreign and familiar: it is a story of contradictions.
5. Works Cited


