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Weird Tales and Monstrous Subversions: Comparing the Mythic Cycle and H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos

ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS

This paper surveys select aspects of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, a model developed in his now-iconic work The Hero with a Thousand Faces *(1949) and compares it with the weird fiction of author H.P. Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu Mythos'. Throughout, it is argued that Lovecraft's writing shares superficial similarities with the monomyth, ostensibly or actually mirroring certain stages, yet Lovecraft's work is ultimately subversive of this model. The only triumph in Lovecraft's work is the continuance of the loathsome entities encountered within his stories. It is argued that Lovecraft's portrayal of the monstrous can be viewed as an outworking of what Campbell terms 'horrendous Divine Comedy'. Accounting for this type of storytelling, Lovecraft's recurrent portrayals of annihilation, the monstrous and cosmic horror could be illustrative of the metanarratives of his own life. In this sense they reflect his experiences and evolving beliefs in early-twentieth century North America. Despite the personalized anxieties of these works, they have endured, continuing to appeal to present-day audiences.*

KEYWORDS

H.P. Lovecraft

Joseph Campbell

monomyth

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H.P. LOVECRAFT'S 'CTHULHU MYTHOS' AND THE MONOMYTH

H.P. Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu mythos' can be seen to be comprised of three notable facets: (1) fictional locations superimposed with real world locations – such as 'Innsmouth' and 'Arkham', Massachusetts, (2) artefacts of horror – such as the *Book of Eibon* or the dreaded tome *Necronomicon*; and (3) mythic beings who are disturbing to humanity – examples of which include Cthulhu, Yuggoth, Tsathoggua and the Black Winged Ones (Joshi 1990: 192; Lovecraft 2006a; Lovecraft 2011a). From a generic point of view, weird tales – which Lovecraft's work has been categorized as – include elements of horror, terror, supernatural, science fiction,

fantasy fiction and the ghost story (Joshi 1990; Benefiel 2008). In many respects, these stories reflect the transgressive and anxious trappings of Gothic fiction, an argument that will be developed later in this paper. During the course of Lovecraft's short stories the protagonist faces the initially insidious but gradually culminating threat of death, insanity or oblivion in the face of cosmic horror (Lowell 2004). There is no promise of a happy ending: quite the contrary.

The themes of Lovecraft's work provide an ideological counterpoint to the monomyth. At its core Joseph Campbell describes the monomyth as a 'magnification of the formula represented in [human] rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*' (Campbell 2008: 23, italics in original). The 'hero' ventures from the quotidian into the supernatural where they encounter a fantastic force and must win a decisive victory. If proven successful, the hero returns from the adventure with the power of a boon, able to bestow this boon among their people (Campbell 2008).

The monomyth requires a hero where Lovecraft offers only a victim. Campbell's mythic cycle has been widely implemented to explore and explain the mythologies, sagas and fables of humanity (2008). Due to the universality of this model, it continues to be prevalent in popular media, an occurrence especially evident in the last forty years of film studies (Koh 2009; Palumbo 2013; Hardy 2015).

Throughout this paper, it is argued that Lovecraft's writing shares superficial similarities with the monomyth, ostensibly or actually mirroring certain stages, yet Lovecraft's work is ultimately subversive of this model. The only triumph in Lovecraft's work is the continuance of the loathsome entities encountered within his stories. It is argued that Lovecraft's portrayal of the monstrous can be viewed as an outworking of what Campbell terms 'horrendous Divine Comedy'. Accounting for this type of storytelling, Lovecraft's recurrent portrayals of annihilation, the monstrous and cosmic horror could be seen as illustrative of the metanarratives of his own life: they might be seen as reflecting his experiences and evolving beliefs in early-twentieth century North America. Despite the personalized anxieties of these works, however, they have endured, continuing to appeal to present-day audiences.

NARRATIVE DEVIATIONS

One way to understand the prevalent anxieties in Lovecraft's writing is to observe them through the lens of the Gothic modality. Fred Botting notes that Lovecraft's work employs conventions of the Gothic tradition, although it exceeds these limits

with its preoccupation with cosmic horror (2014: 167,168). Yet horror – whether cosmic or more mundane – can be an effective means of critiquing and subverting the culture that one occupies. By way of example, Neil Gerlach notes that *The Omen* horror films of the late 1960s and early 1970s undermine 'the dominant myths and certainties of modern life' and offer a 'profound critique of [the] fundamental mythic element of American culture, providing a reverse image of its heroic premise' (2011: 1027, 1028).

The subversions of the Cthulhu mythos provide a similar ontological critique, or 'reverse image', of Lovecraft's perception of American culture in the 1920s and 1930s. To illustrate his conscious departure from common literary convention, Lovecraft's essay 'Some Notes on a Nonentity' – penned in 1933 – is recalled (2006a). In it Lovecraft explains that it is the event or phenomenon that purposely receives the focus in his stories rather than the importance or heroism of the protagonist. This is directly at odds with Campbell's thesis where the protagonist is offered a central importance.

In this way Lovecraft subverts conventional narrative styling. In doing so, as both Callaghan and Lowell argue, he provides commentary about the perceived futility of existence, expressing personal apprehensions through the veneer of fiction (Lowell 2004; Callaghan 2013). Lovecraft's work, while not strictly limited to the Gothic tradition, does lend itself towards themes and motifs of the Gothic framework, namely the observance of societal decay, the expression of fears and anxieties, the impinging of the past on the present and one's relationship with the 'Other'. Catherine Spooner addresses the timelessness of Gothic texts by situating them in contemporary popular culture (2006); from this perspective Lovecraft's tales need not be relegated or constrained to their historic roots but can be brought forward to the present moment. As multiple Gothic theorists have surmised, one reason why the Gothic continues to perpetuate itself in public consciousness is because its themes mirror current societal preoccupations and developments (Spooner 2006; Piatti-Farnell and Brien 2015).

By employing a Gothic reading to Lovecraft's work, the timelessness, relatability and potentially cathartic nature of his stories become apparent: readers can vicariously experience their worst fears through the safer vehicle of fiction. This is a far better alternative than the possibility of these disasters occurring in reality; or rather, external to the fantastic framework. While fictionalized and transfigured

through the metaphors of fiction, these stories lose the personal immediacy and intimacy of Lovecraft's own domestic and social experience without diluting the more universalized apprehensions they depict.

COSMIC ONENESS AND THE MONSTROUS

A unifying theme of the monomyth is the notion of oneness with the universe. During the course of The Hero's Journey the protagonist endures a crisis which may threaten to momentarily overwhelm, defeat or even destroy them. Nevertheless, heroism is probable for the protagonist is ultimately one with the universe (Campbell 2008). Campbell's position provides an almost humorous contrast with Lovecraft's counter-beliefs of cosmic ambivalence, atheism and the insignificance of the individual in the wider universe (2006b). Protagonists exploring the world of the Cthulhu mythos face a similar crisis to the heroes of mythology, but that is where the story ends: the poor souls of Lovecraft's tales are doomed from the outset of their quest.

This is exemplified in the short story 'The Haunter of the Dark', when the protagonist Blake's death is revealed during the first sentence of the story (Lovecraft 2011b). Protagonist annihilation is punishment for the character's meddling, the result of the universe's ambivalence or both. The fundamental difference it seems lies within the philosophies of both authors. Where Campbell possesses a hope in the human spirit and its ultimate security within the cosmos, Lovecraft does not share this optimism.

Lovecraft's protagonists often face what Campbell terms 'the belly of the whale' (2008: 28), where the individual is annihilated by a figurative deity or parental figure. Lovecraft's annihilative stage has every appearance of permanence rather than being a transitory waypoint on the road towards enlightenment as would generally be true of the monomythic story. Lovecraft's depiction, however, is not immediately at odds with the monomyth: even among world mythologies the protagonist is not always heroic and union with the divine is not always guaranteed. As unlikely as it may seem, Lovecraft's portrayals of annihilation could therefore be demonstrative of such cosmic metanarratives, inferring annihilation to be a temporary state instead of one of true damnation.

To provide some context for Lovecraft's perspective of cosmic horror it is worth noting his shifting metaphysical beliefs. As a child he would 'build altars and offer sacrifices to Pan, Diana, Apollo, and Minerva' though his later discovery of

science 'removed [his] belief in the supernatural' (2006a: 208-209). Campbell explores the means by which transformation from the sacred to the profane may occur: 'A god outgrown becomes immediately a life-destroying demon' (2008: 289). Dealing death to the monstrous demon – the expired god – is a necessary mythological moment of the monomyth, releasing social or spiritual vitality in the cycle of self-transformation to 'carry the human spirit forward' (Campbell 2008: 7).

Arguably Lovecraft's tales signify the crucifixion of his youthful religious world as he replaced it with the 'monstrosities' of a lonely and ambivalent scientific universe. As S.T. Joshi has theorized, Lovecraft 'found his cosmicism a strong weapon against the notion of godhead and teleology' (1990: 175). The extent of Lovecraft's existential philosophy is explored in his 1919 essay entitled 'Idealism and Materialism–A Reflection' in which he speaks deprecatingly about human thought and the processes of cognition through which the nature of the universe comes to be understood (2006b). It is therefore not a stretch to interpret his stories as disparaging religious allegories, conceivably representing abstracted critiques of salvation and redemption, or mapping the darker frustrations of his life. Using the monomythic framework as a guide, Lovecraft's allegorical stories could be figurative explorations as – perhaps inadvertently – he comments on 'the hardness of God' (Campbell 2008: 37).

In addition to his changing metaphysical perspective, Lovecraft's worldview noticeably evolved over his lifetime from that of a racist and conservative aristocrat to a more liberalized stance. Contemporaneous to his changing worldview is an observable development in the way he treated the monstrous (Callaghan 2013: 5): in earlier works there is neither salvation nor redemption for the Other. It is tenuous to conclude that the monster ceased to be monstrous in Lovecraft's later writing but there is some indication that the monster becomes less absolutely 'evil' as a greater level of sympathy is exhibited towards the monster.

Diminishing the absolutely evil nature of the monster suggests that it is at least worthy to receive partial absolution for its acts. Monstrous absolution is implied in 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' (2011c) when as the story concludes the narrator succumbs to a monstrous transfiguration. At first the narrator battles against the unwanted changes until finally he welcomes the impending metamorphosis and the everlasting era of oneness with the batrachian people of Innsmouth (Lovecraft 2011c: 361). Compare the Innsmouth episode with an early tale of Lovecraft's penned in

1921: in this story, entitled 'The Nameless City' (2011d), the finale spells an eternal fate of suffering in a hell-like place filled with horrible fiends. Here there is no possibility of coexistence or union with the monstrous; the only option is oblivion. John Lawson McInnis suggests that Lovecraft's later work employed the Grecian metaphor of the maze and the Minotaur, attempting to consolidate order amid 'Minotaural chaos' (1975: xviii). In Lovecraft's earlier works the protagonist is commonly devoured by the Minotaural chaos, whereas in later stories some form of resolution and order is actualized amidst the chaos.

Despite Lovecraft's changes as a writer, satirical overtones never failed to depart from his work. His treatment of the monster may have shifted but it does not align completely with the monomyth. To illustrate this point consider Lovecraft's cynicism regarding the state of humanity: although 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' has the appearance of greater sympathy towards the monster, it is part of a larger narrative within the Cthulhu mythos in which Lovecraft critiques the cultural atavism he perceives in the world. As Joshi suggests, this motif is explored through an evolutionary metaphor of humanity rising from the waters only to return to them in monstrous form (Joshi 1990: 197). Symbolically, this motif is a subversion of the cleansing, communal and baptismal nature of water found in monomythic texts, an act which can ward against the monstrous and provide union with the divine (Campbell 2008: 214).

Jeffrey Weinstock notes the usefulness of the monster particularly within an American context (2014). Weinstock suggests that the monster serves a variety of purposes and is able to provide 'a kind of omen that gives shape to moral vice, reveals the will of the gods, and forecasts the future' (2014: 41). Additionally, the monster reveals and is representative of our collective societal fears, embodying 'culturally specific anxieties and tabooed desires' (2014: 42).

In Gothic terms, Fred Botting suggests that monstrosities are depicted as 'figures of vice' whose 'deformities' become 'visible and repellent' to society (2014: 8). These notions align with the present discussion because Lovecraft's societal criticisms could be seen as a classicist and conservative backlash against the optimisms of social progress and technological innovation and the mindlessness of the First World War (Lovecraft 2006c). The monomyth describes an overall optimism in humanity, while Lovecraft's portrayal of the monstrous describes humanity in terms of nihilism and the decline of civilization.

The monster is thus a narrative mechanic to explore self and society: the things we might be, the things we wish not to be and the fears of what we might become (Weinstock 2014: 42). Through this framework, the ongoing applicability and relevance of the Cthulhu mythos is evident: monstrous explorations can be seen to be part of the wider human experience, not constrained to the period in which Lovecraft was writing or to his unique situation or context. Generally speaking, monstrous symbolism is ubiquitous in Lovecraft's work; protagonists are either transformed into monsters or encounter the monstrous at some point during the narrative. While the monomyth typically ends in a phase of cosmic unity for those involved – which amidst the various uncertainties of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have proven culturally useful for the consumer – other audiences clearly find comfort or enjoyment in the expression of their worst fears realized through the safety of literature or other media.

CONCLUSION

This paper has compared Campbell's monomythic template and the literature of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. As has been argued, there are significant similarities between both forms of storytelling but Lovecraft's work is ultimately subversive – a distortion of the monomyth. Although subversive, Lovecraft's stories remain compelling for certain 21st century audiences because they mirror social concerns not solely located within a fixed time period. These divergent stories facilitate explorations of horror and existential anxiety, an ultimate departure from the victorious heroisms of Campbell's cosmic monomyth.

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