

Comparison of Monstrous Figures in The Works of H.P Lovecraft and China Miéville through Lovecraft's Five Definitive Elements

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Abstract

The present study compared selected works of H.P. Lovecraft and China Miéville in terms of the representations of monster figures by creating a theoretical framework using Lovecraft's "Five Definitive Elements of Weird Literature". A comparative foundation was first laid down by examining the etymology of the word monster throughout history, as well as touching upon Saussure's theories of language. Following this, an intrinsic analysis of Lovecraft's three selected works was made. The analysis highlighted the importance of factors such as cosmicism, and fear of the unknown, as well as the importance of human insignificance in the narration. Additionally, the uncanny in both Jentsch's and Freud's definition was included for a later comparison. The lack of context in details regarding the monsters was also highlighted in accordance with the established importance of fear of the unknown in Weird Literature. Then the same analysis was done on Miéville after a glimpse of his past with tabletop games such as "Dungeons and Dragons", and the importance worldbuilding has for him. Following an analysis of Bas-Lag, a comparison was made based on the five definitive elements by first interpreting them on what could they refer to, and how the two works handled them in this context. The results from examination through the monster representation, cosmicism, fear of the unknown and the five elements helped the study argue the point that; The monster representation functioned as the source of paranoia and uncanny in both the works. Yet, while Lovecraftian narrative's monsters achieved the feeling of uncanny by presenting a small piece of the whole; Miéville's Bas-Lag did the same with a mirrored approach of a key piece missing from the whole.

Keywords: Cosmicism; cosmic horror; fear of the unknown; human insignificance; lack of context; uncanny; worldbuilding

INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of creation, sentient life forms that are capable of differentiating danger from safety have always treated their surroundings in a binary manner. In this context, what we can't recognize and categorize has always been associated instead with danger, sometimes also with curiosity. It is this notion that I believe underscores the monsters in H.P. Lovecraft's work. The portrayal of these otherworldly beings in his stories, and in their movie and media adaptations, inspirations, as well as the source material itself, has always emphasized their unfamiliarity. This trait of not being associated with the massive lexicon of human vocabulary or centuries-old knowledge reflects the greatest source of immersive fear that Lovecraft made use of within his works, the fear of the unknown. A saying frequently found amongst several commentators and critics of modern-day horror media is along the lines of the phrase: "What you can't see, is always scarier than what you can." . And to a great extent, this has been proven, as this is what stems from the aforementioned primal urge of self-preservation, and the mental state of recognizing the unknown as a threat. This can be seen in movies and stories alike along the history of storytelling. Thus, movies like *The Blair Witch Project* by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo [Sánchez](#), or *Bird Box* by Susanne Bier have greatly made use of an unknown or incomprehensible figure as have short stories such as *It Comes Out At Night* by Dennis Etchinson or *The House On The Borderlands* by William Hope Hodgson. Lovecraft's intricate toying with this part of the human psyche is equally easy to see when it is understood in the context of the period in which the stories were composed. Before and during the two World Wars, humanity had already discovered all the landmarks and regions of the globe, except for the two other planes of inhabitation, the deep ocean, and space, which remained beyond human reach. If we take time to thoroughly examine the depictions of the Lovecraftian horrors, the distant aquatic physique that's akin to no known fish or sea creature is apparent in some original stories with their tentacles, fins, scales, and deep dark purple color schemes. This apparent aquatic resemblance, I believe, can be greatly attributed to the fact that mankind, more so at that time, had little to no information on what lies beneath the deep bodies of water. This can be connected to thalassophobia, a fear of deep bodies of water and the ocean, , as the primal urge of concern and dread is mostly attributed to two things that are equally apparent in the horror depicted in Lovecraft's works; firstly the feeling of incapability, of being unable to do anything and being completely defenseless, and secondly the feeling of being at a complete loss regarding

what lurks beneath the deep dark unlit bodies of water. The combination of the uncertainty of the situation with the apparent lack of struggle for survival is something we can see in Lovecraft's work. The antagonistic force of the monsters in Lovecraft's work is depicted in such a way that even the mere sight of them strikes fear and madness into the minds of feeble human beings, producing the very same incapability of acting that is caused by a phobia such as thalassophobia. Similarly, if we consider the elements of cosmicism and cosmic horror, the similarity between these two is strong enough to further facilitate this argument. Scientifically speaking, space is comparatively the least habitable place for mankind. These days space is "least habitable" rather than uninhabitable, as we've already established space stations and are gradually working towards life outside the borders of Earth, ushering in a new space age perhaps within the current century. However, on that thought, the fact remains that at the time of these stories' writing, such things were nothing more than conceptions and what ifs. Therefore it is easy to attribute space and the cosmic forces of the universe in these stories to the complete unknown. The concept of the sleeping city in Lovecraftian narrative, as well as the depiction of the old gods as ancient and otherworldly beings that exceed planets in size, emphasize the same feeling of powerlessness, in addition to describing a completely unknown environment where human beings cannot even exist. One thing the deep dark oceans and the limitless space share is incapability, the very same theme that can easily be considered one of the key pieces of cosmic horror. Places such as space or deep bodies of water are domains where the limits of the human body are evident, as these places are where we are not able to breathe, let alone traverse, nor live for longer than seconds without assistance. The second characteristic of these Lovecraftian horrors has always been the unrecognizable physique of what can essentially be called a mass of squirming dark flesh and several mouths and eyes (eg: *The Fiend of a Thousand Faces*). Similarly, the human characters that are occupied with the unusual traits of the universe within the narrative are also often portrayed as residents of the Orient, the eastern part of the world, or anything culturally distant from the "norm". The fictional "Mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred from the first of the trio of short stories is one of the reasons I've brought up this example, as Lovecraft's choice for portraying a mad character who is involved with the elements of cosmic horror in the universe is from the Middle East. While whether if this is an example of minority misrepresentation or not can be a debate for another paper, his choice of character design for an insane character is perfectly in line with the Orientalist discourse, as Edward W. Said has described in his book *Orientalism*:

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice. (Said, 1978)

Whether this cultural opposition, reflecting the other and the monster alike, can be perceived as a notion of orientalist mentality or not could be a research topic for another paper. However, due to the focus of this research, the example was primarily brought up with the author's portrayal of an insane character in mind.

Thus, the importance of the unknown should be apparent enough from our previous paragraphs, it is within this field of comparison that the depictions of monsters in the "New Weird" genre can be differentiated from more traditional depictions of monsters by introducing culture, knowledge, and context into its forms. The races of Bas-lag in Mieville's stories, as well as their names (which when compared to Lovecraftian monsters sound like incomprehensible rambling), possess a certain cultural and historical significance. They share both human and animal characteristics, there is little unfamiliar about them, as the resemblance to our world and mythology is strong. Importantly, at the time these stories that belong to the New Weird genre were written, humans were already able to explore beyond the boundaries of space and sea. What was previously left unknown in Lovecraft's period has now been almost completely, if not totally explored thanks to scientific and technological development. As the unknown is gradually erased, there is less and less scope for writers to create an atmosphere that thrives on the fear of the unknown. It is for this specific reason that I think Weird Literature's elements that emphasize the fear of the unknown are a byproduct of its period. And once again, it is for the very same reason that I can hypothesize that New Weird, as a genre, is the inevitable evolution of the Weird Literature genre, as it is a continuation of the predecessor, with the removal of the unknown, as culture, knowledge, history, and context is further weaved into the narrative of the "other".

Lovecraft's Five Definitive Elements primarily refer to a specific paragraph in his essay "*Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*", where he states:

Each weird story—to speak more particularly of the horror type—seems to involve five

definite elements: (a) some basic, underlying horror or abnormality—condition, entity, etc.—, (b) the general effects or bearings of the horror, (c) the mode of manifestation—object embodying the horror and phenomena observed—, (d) the types of fear-reaction pertaining to the horror, and (e) the specific effects of the horror in relation to the given set of conditions. (Lovecraft, 1937)

Almost in a guidebook fashion, he tells the readers what to look for when reading a fictive work of weird literature, and what to aim to achieve when writing one. The expansion and analysis of the five elements, then, serves as a structural basis in order to examine both his own work and Miéville's work through the same scope. The structure of this research starts by building sufficient background information, primarily in the area of semiotics in order to examine the historical usage of the word "Monster", along with a few examples from contemporary and modern works. Here, I intend to reaffirm the idea that the word itself has not only shifted in terms of the kind of unnatural creatures it describes in fiction, but the fundamentals of the word have undergone variation as both the figurative and literal meanings gradually changed over time. Following this, the thesis focuses on the primary concepts that make up the body of horror writing in the case of Lovecraft, and to an extent, Miéville. Here, the research includes information about the concepts of cosmicism, and attempts to build connections to various phobias, such as thalassophobia, a fear of deep bodies of water. The importance of human insignificance and inability against something they can't comprehend is also thoroughly explained here to explain the idea behind cosmicism. Then this established information is once again examined, this time through the concept of the uncanny, according to the interpretations of both Jentsch and Freud. Finally, the importance of the fear of the unknown is also explained, as this concept will be the centerpiece of the research for both authors. The research will then shift focus to Lovecraft's primary works concerning the Cthulhu mythos, using the five elements, as well as the concept of cosmic horror and fear of the unknown to examine what the monstrous figures and the monster idea is used for extensively in the works, emphasizing the importance of the lack of context. Thus, the analysis of Miéville's work focuses on the concept of the uncanny. Finally, the concluding chapter compares both authors' works based on the five elements, and, thus, cosmic horror and fear of the unknown. The conclusion is reached that while monsters in Lovecraft's work, as horrors that are not meant to be understood, bring their sense of the unknown and lostness by showing a fraction of the whole, the opposite often takes

place in Miéville's work as the majority of complete races and monsters of Bas-Lag are understandable and comprehensible, albeit lacking key and distinct features so that most of them never ever truly resemble humans. Regardless of their differences, this research interprets both the works through their usage of monsters, builds towards the same concept of the uncanny, one by only showing a fraction of the whole, and the other the opposite.

Instead set literary method, this intrinsic approach of the research was done by comparing the unnatural, supernatural, and hybrid characters under the umbrella term "monster" in Lovecraft's and China Miéville's storytelling. This was done by examining the two authors monstrous and unnatural characters function in their respective stories, and what they represent in the greater narrative overall. Furthermore, this research also looked into what these beings represent for human characters in regards to feelings of paranoia, fear, and human insignificance. Additionally, how they are presented and in the case of Lovecraft, not presented, and my interpretation of the philosophy behind their decisions is included. In order to differentiate my work from the similar researches that compare these two authors regularly, I aimed to make my own theoretical framework instead of applying a known literary theory, which was done so by creating a theoretical framework instead. This was first done by examining the etymology of the word itself throughout history, it's different interpretations, and comparing figurative, literal and symbolic meanings, as well as providing a variety of modern, contemporary and historical examples for side-by-side comparisons. Afterwards, on the foundation built by the etymology, the research attempts to incorporate Lovecraft's Five Definitive Elements of Weird Literature to examine the cultivation and effects of fear brought on by their respective monsters while trying to tie their way of producing fear of the unknown, or paranoia, closely intertwined with the feeling of uncanny. The uncanny itself is also a prominent topic in this research, as it tries to explain whether if the description of Jentsch or Freud is more applicable to each story and author in their way of representing the human fear against a supernatural force or figure. This is all done so to compare the function of these monster characters, which include demi-humans, or half humans, hybrid beings, and unexplainable creatures present in both worlds, and to look for the presence of fear of the unknown, and the uncanny that is displayed through the presence of which. Additionally, their function in the narrative, and their role inside the universe are also emphasized on, while focusing on key strengths of both authors, namely Lovecraft's excellent portrayal of human insignificance and powerlessness by showcasing the frail nature of

their mind and body, creating a strong narrative of cosmic horror through deliberate omission of information from the readers; and Miéville's excellent worldbuilding on a completely new universe bringing along with it a completely new set of natural laws of a universe with a myriad of new races, which leaves the readers at an equal amount of unknown.

RESULTS

Based on the comparison done within the methodical framework created by the etymology, Lovecraft's Five Definitive Elements, comparison and examining of the uncanny and fear of the unknown, and the opposites of immense worldbuilding and deliberate omission of information, the following conclusion was achieved; In an effort to focus on a niche that contributes to this literature in a unique way, in my theoretical framework, I've given sufficient examples of the history of the word monster, how it stands out from the rest, and how a simple word can signify an entirely different notion despite seeming identical on the surface. The resulting comparison with its meaning in Lovecraftian narrative, both to its contemporary and historical usage, made it possible to make the argument that monsters in Lovecraft were never meant to be understood. This point also brings forth one of the key concepts of this paper, the fear of the unknown, and to an extent, cosmicism, or cosmic horror.

In Lovecraft's storytelling, fear of the unknown has been proven to be integral in portraying the horror of his works, as he said so himself in his papers on cosmic horror. For this reason, much of the reasoning behind the lack of visibility and on-screen representation of these horrors has been attributed to the development of cosmic horror through the fear of the unknown. Human insignificance, in parallel with this narrative, has also been a factor that empowers cosmic horror, which is based on human powerlessness and insignificance in the face of something far beyond our understanding. In this regard, the uncanny feeling stemming from the Lovecraftian monsters falls in line with Ernst Jentsch's description of the uncanny where a particular figure raises uncertainty, provoked by the anxiety about the unknown. Lastly, the focused was on the importance of an unreliable narrator, and its function in enhancing the fear of the unknown, supported by the Oregon State University article "What is an Unreliable Narrator?".

When it comes to Miéville's work, the thesis has focused on the key factor that sets it apart from Lovecraftian narrative, creating a new genre called "New Weird". As an apparent fan of

Dungeons and Dragons, his usage of maps for his fictional locations, and avid focus on worldbuilding gave his work immense context and background. I've then provided examples of his worldbuilding fleshing out and removing most of the "unknown" away from the world of Bas-Lag, while still leaving enough unfamiliarity with the depictions of monstrous races. The resulting uncanny portrayal was more akin to Sigmund Freud's description of the uncanny, where an individual may find strangeness in the ordinary, such as a single detail off and away from an otherwise whole object. This however, varied with each race of Bas-Lag, as some of them were easily distinguishable.

DISCUSSION

This literal comparison of what monsters refer to answered the first of the five elements, the basic, underlying horror or abnormality, condition. The second element, the general effects or the bearings of the horror, were observed to be vastly different in my analysis, as the horror of a character unable to even have eye contact with something without going insane far outweighed a vivid and morbid world of races living in unison. The following mode of manifestation, or the third element was also explored in the earlier comparison, focusing on the key aspect of Lovecraftian narrative, i.e. the lack of context. The fear reaction pertaining to the horror was where another important key factor that set Bas-Lag's universe apart from cosmicism was brought forth. While all forms of grotesque and non-grotesque monsters populated the world of Bas-Lag, the existence of which did not drive human characters into a state of madness or a struggle for survival, but where the races actively cooperated and lived together in a civilization. For the last element, the specific effects of horror in relation to the given set of conditions, and also to an extent for the previous elements, I've asked the question "What is at stake?" to both the narratives, as the answer of which would be the comparison of this element. And while the failure of humans would possibly either mean their complete extinction or assimilation in most of Lovecraft's stories, the triumph of antagonistic monsters in Bas-Lag would mean a lot less on the grand scale of things, on par with Méville's worldbuilding-focused narration that focuses on the individual character struggles more, rather than a complete struggle between two or more races like Lovecraft's humans.

The result that this research aimed for, and hopefully achieved was the conclusion that examining

the stories through the scope created by Lovecraft's five definitive elements and the concept of the uncanny from both Jentsch's and Freud's definition, we can observe that the fear of the unknown is an integral part of the representation of the monster in both stories. While they approach the same feeling of the uncanny, Lovecraft's world of cosmic horror that heavily relies on a constant lack of understandability does this by showing a fraction of the whole, and Miéville's *Bas-lag* trilogy, which brims with context and worldbuilding achieves the same effect by leaving out key pieces from the whole picture to portray their horror. Thus, despite their differences, the uncanny built from the fear of the unknown is the primary drive for the horror present in both sets of works to their respective degrees.

The conclusion that highlights some of the differences regarding horror in terms of weird literature and new weird can also point towards future research topics; The importance of human insignificance and human incapability in Lovecraft's work that's present throughout all three main stories, and the civilizations in the world of *Bas-Lag* that live in varying degrees of peace brings up the question whether the monsters of both works have post-humanist features, in this case, especially Lovecraftian horror where the inefficiencies of the human body and mind are a key element in its narrative. An example question for a potential future research paper would be whether Lovecraft portrayed the human body as flawed, insignificant, or weak in any way, and whether the monsters in his horror in their incomprehensibly vast and powerful civilization signify a perhaps utopic and unachievable lifeform. This can be purely intrinsic, focusing within the boundaries of the stories alone, or perhaps looking into the troubled life of Lovecraft. From a different angle, the differences between Weird Literature and New Weird, and the latter's dependence on fantasy elements and diversion from clear usage of fear of the unknown into a subtle one, may also highlight a search for other spiritual successors to the genre of weird literature that emphasize cosmic horror. By deviating from the comparison to the new weird genre, other genres can be the subject of an analysis focusing on how they portray their horror through monsters. Analog horror, the form of horror media that utilizes old VHS recording effects and attempts of gritty realism for immersion and expression of the uncanny, is a genre that, by its low-budget nature, forces indie artists across the world to utilize the fear of the unknown for their artistic medium. Analyzing the monster representations in a few works of this genre may yield supportive evidence that analog horror is also a spiritual successor to cosmicism, and to an extent, Lovecraft's work in general.

Moreover, aside from specific examples, this research can also function as a resource to look into the horror portrayed through the monsters of any fictive work to create yet another comparative research between the work in question and Lovecraft's and Miéville's portrayal of a monster race. Finally, while not entirely plausible, looking into any fictive work of horror where no monster character is utilized within the same theoretical framework can yield research that compares these two genres to the portrayal of horror where no monster figure is apparent, but instead, the horror is portrayed through fully comprehensible humans. Examples of these can be horror fiction where the antagonistic forces are either humans or man-made things, such as murderers, serial killers, an oppressive regime, an invading force, or perhaps a synthetic race created by mankind that revolts against it. As well as this, even the human insignificance or inability to change things emphasized in cosmic horror can be searched for in these potential fictive works in order to draw parallel lines.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion this research examined the monster representation in Lovecraft and Miéville's works through five definitive elements and the fear of the unknown, and the results highlighted their similarities despite their drastic difference in approach, and will hopefully inspire future research on the subject of what the supernatural monsters can represent, and how each author handles them in their respective works.

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