

Reyland Davitz

Novel Scenes and Piquant Conditions

LOVECRAFT OFTEN BEGINS HIS STORIES WITH CYNICISM. Indeed, most often than not, the characters opening the stories are in the middle of an emotional panic, their minds teeming with psychotic notions of the world around them. Their circumstances are often simple: the awakening of some long-dormant horror that threatens to bring back to existence a distant fear of some old, cosmic mythologies. What is most interesting is the iconoclastic nature of such a fear and how it comes about. In most stories ("At the Mountains of Madness", "The Strange High House in the Mist", "Beyond the Wall of Sleep", among others), the characters are not simple folk. In fact, most are doctors, educators, historians, and men (and only men, usually) of superior intellect. Contrasting them are characters who Lovecraft often describes as *decadent*, backwoods individuals who hardly speak proper English, and often are quick, staunch believers in the ethereal madness that invades Lovecraftian scenes.

In the middle of his story, "The Hound", the nameless narrator describes his and his comrade's addiction to grave robbing as a need for "novel scenes and piquant conditions." I doubt Lovecraft intends this as a meta-reference to his works. Nevertheless, it is the case, as the stories often surpass a realistic view of pre-war New England life, opting instead for a view that is utterly gothic, slightly twisted, or touched by an unnamable air of weirdness.

These traits are often hinted via description, such as the beginning of "The Colour Out of Space" where the "moss-coated cottages brooding over old New England secrets" are all vacant, "the wide chimneys crumbling and the shingled sides bulging perilously beneath low gambrel roofs." In other instances, as in "The Dunwich Horror," the scenes of the Massachusetts countryside are outright stated to convey a "strange uneasiness." Interestingly, there is great significance in the description of the levels on which these spaces exist. Lovecraft's New England exists on the best possible plane of existence. Yet, this is not a hopeful place to be as it is connected to other spaces, other places of existence that harbor dark entities: the Great Old Ones. Humankind has the ability to, not so much awaken these gods, but to break through the barrier that keeps them from invading our plane of existence.

Lovecraft often presents situations in which humans are linked to lower planes, sometimes in literal cases. The townspeople of Innsmouth are half-human, their ancestors having bred with undersea monsters, the Deep Ones, which are more directly connected to the Great Old Ones. In fact, the separation of these two types of existence is necessitated by human sacrifice, and, later, by human's ability to breed with the aquatic monstrosities.

The contradiction of placing humankind in the scheme of existence is that, despite Lovecraft orientating humans at the top, presently, they have not always been there and are, actually, at the bottom of the chain of existence. The cynicism of characters in Lovecraft's fiction often arises from this realization, a glimpse into entities that exist endlessly. The panic in most of his stories does not come from facing the unknown, but facing

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

the knowledge that humankind is utterly insignificant on a cosmic scale. It is quite comical, then, that his learned characters, who respect knowledge of the natural world, are often driven mad by what they perceive, not as plainly supernatural forces, but supernatural forces that can destroy, or supplant, the natural universe.