

American Cosmic Horror Tradition: The Theme of Existential Horror from the Lovecraftian to the Post-Millennial Phase

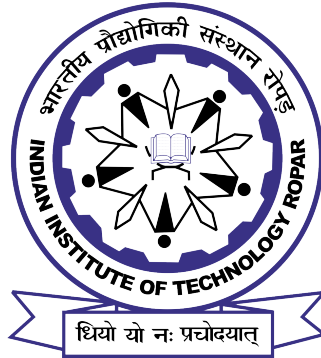
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by

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**DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
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Satvik Gupta: *American Cosmic Horror Tradition: The Theme of Existential Horror from the Lovecraftian to the Post-Millennial Phase*

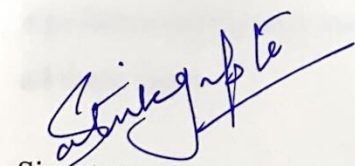
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Dedicated
to
the humbling indifference
*of the **Cosmos***

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled “**American Cosmic Horror Tradition: The Theme of Existential Horror from the Lovecraftian to the Post-Millennial Phase**” has been solely authored by me. It presents the result of my own independent investigation/research conducted during the time period from January 2021 to July 2024 under the supervision of Dr. Dibyakusum Ray, Assistant Professor, IIT Ropar and Prof. Bijoy H. Boruah, Visiting Professor, IIT Jammu. To the best of my knowledge, it is an original work, both in terms of research content and narrative, and has not been submitted or accepted elsewhere, in part or in full, for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship, associateship, or similar title of any university or institution. Further, due credit has been attributed to the relevant state-of-the-art and collaborations (if any) with appropriate citations and acknowledgements, in line with established ethical norms and practices. I also declare that any idea/data/fact/source stated in my thesis has not been fabricated/ falsified/ misrepresented. All the principles of academic honesty and integrity have been followed. I fully understand that if the thesis is found to be unoriginal, fabricated, or plagiarized, the Institute reserves the right to withdraw the thesis from its archive and revoke the associated Degree conferred. Additionally, the Institute also reserves the right to appraise all concerned sections of society of the matter for their information and necessary action (if any). If accepted, I hereby consent for my thesis to be available online in the Institute’s Open Access repository, inter-library loan, and the title & abstract to be made available to outside organizations.



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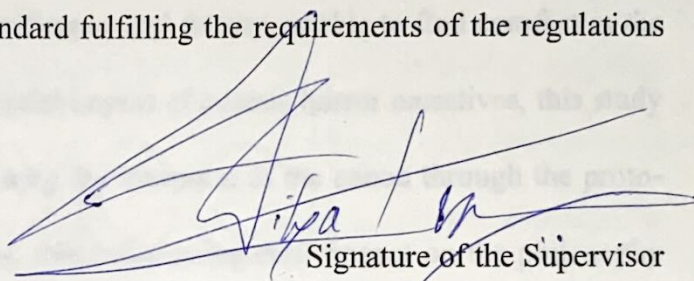
I would like to thank my parents (Lalita Gupta and Bharat Bhushan Gupta) for their unwavering love and support during the course of this academic journey. It is because of their constant encouragement that I find myself on the verge of submitting this thesis. My elder brother, Sidhant, has always been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement for all my ambitions. I would also like to express my earnest gratitude to Sonali Dub who has been my endless source of strength all these years.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**American Cosmic Horror Tradition: The Theme of Existential Horror from the Lovecraftian to the Post-Millennial Phase**”, submitted by **Satvik Gupta (2020HSZ0008)** for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** of Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, is a record of bonafide research work carried out under our guidance and supervision. To the best of our knowledge and belief, the work presented in this thesis is original and has not been submitted, either in part or full, for the award of any other degree, diploma, fellowship, associateship or similar title of any university or institution.

In our opinion, the thesis has reached the standard fulfilling the requirements of the regulations relating to the Degree.



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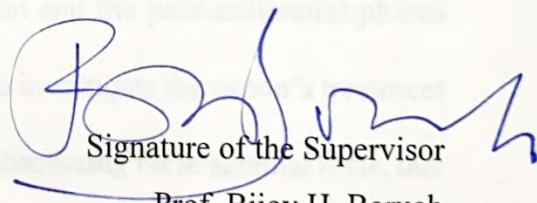
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Table of Contents

Declaration	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Certificate	vi
Lay Summary	vii
Abstract	viii
List of Publications	ix
 <i>Introduction:</i>	
The Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror	1
 <i>Chapter Two:</i>	
A Brief History of Cosmic Horror Fiction	34
 <i>Chapter Three:</i>	
Lovecraft's Cosmicism and the Inevitable Horror of Existence	83
 <i>Chapter Four:</i>	
Nature and Existence in Post-Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror	126
 <i>Conclusion:</i>	
The Future of Cosmic Horror	176
 References/Bibliography	 192

Lay Summary

This thesis traces the evolution of American cosmic horror literature from its origin in the early twentieth century to its modern post-millennial incarnation. Since the thesis is primarily concerned with cosmic horror literature, it positions the canon's progenitor—American author Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937)—at the heart of its discussion. While discussing the canon's gradual evolution, this study focuses on the existential implications of cosmic horror experiences—when confronted with the infinitude and indifference of the cosmos, the human subject is overwhelmed with feelings of insignificance and futility, unable to find comfort in the familiar. In an attempt to emphasise the existential import of cosmic horror narratives, this study begins in a chronological manner by investigating the inception of the canon through the proto-cosmic horror texts of Lovecraftian precursors, while discussing their impact on the philosophy and literary style of Lovecraft's rendition of cosmic horror. The Lovecraftian phase—the “golden age” of cosmic horror literature—enables this study to examine the existential locus of cosmic horror encounters. In order to do so, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of the Lovecraftian and the existentialist texts so that the latter may better articulate the inherent existential angst latent within the former. The post-Lovecraftian and the post-millennial phases feature diverse themes and narrative styles, enabling this study to investigate the canon's treatment of Nature and its departure from the Lovecraftian tenets. While discussing these seminal texts, this study argues that the allure of cosmic horror philosophy lies not only in its ability to frighten the subject beyond reason, but also in its capacity to provoke profound ruminations on what it means to be a human being—a being *condemned* to find meaning in a meaningless universe.

Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the American cosmic horror canon, starting from its Lovecraftian roots during the early twentieth century to its contemporary post-millennial mutations. More precisely, this study analyses how the canon has transformed in response to cultural, socio-political and philosophical developments across the span of more than a century. While tracing its evolutionary analysis, this study argues that cosmic horror is an overwhelming emotional experience that profoundly transforms/affects the existential condition of the human subject. The subject is inescapably drawn into an inward state of existential angst when it is horrified by the absolute indifference of the cosmos that does not care, rendering humanity insignificant and impotent. This study uses the notion of the “Dark Epiphany” to isolate the exact moment of absolute surrender in the narrative. In simpler terms, the objective is to examine the existential import of a cosmic horror experience that inevitably wrecks the human condition in emotionally negative and debilitating terms. Furthermore, this study examines the treatment of the Natural world across the cosmic horror canon, investigating if Nature acts as a mere conduit for cosmic insurgencies or if it becomes an autonomous cosmic entity that eludes human recognition and understanding. This study dissects the canon’s treatment of Nature through a parallel analysis of twentieth and twenty-first century cosmic horror literature. In the process, this study explores the convergence between the canon’s corruption/liberation of Nature and the severity of existential turbulence it (cosmic horror experience) entails.

Keywords: American Cosmic Horror; Weird Fiction; Lovecraftian Horror; Existentialism; Nature.

Introduction:

The Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror

1.1 The Essence of Cosmic Horror

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. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

—HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT, “The Call of Cthulhu”

This study examines the evolution of the American cosmic horror canon, starting from its Lovecraftian roots during the early twentieth century to its contemporary post-millennial mutations. More precisely, this study analyses how the canon has transformed in response to cultural, socio-political and philosophical developments across the span of more than a century. While tracing its evolutionary analysis, this study argues that cosmic horror is an overwhelming emotional experience that profoundly transforms/affects the existential condition of the human subject. The subject is inescapably drawn into an inward state of existential angst when it is horrified by the absolute indifference of the cosmos that does not *care*, rendering humanity insignificant and impotent. This study uses the notion of the “Dark Epiphany” to isolate the exact moment of absolute surrender in the narrative. In simpler terms, the objective is to examine the

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Since the thesis is primarily concerned with cosmic horror literature, its structure is inevitably dictated by the oeuvre of the canon's progenitor—Howard Phillips Lovecraft. As a result, the entire canon is divided into four major phases: the pre-Lovecraftian phase (mid-nineteenth century), the Lovecraftian phase (early-twentieth century), the post-Lovecraftian phase (late-twentieth century) and the post-millennial phase (contemporary era). This study begins in a chronological manner by investigating the inception of the canon through the proto-cosmic horror texts of Lovecraft's precursors (the pre-Lovecraftian phase) such as Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson and Robert W. Chambers, among others. This section discusses the impact of the aforementioned authors on the philosophy and literary style of Lovecraft's rendition of cosmic horror. The Lovecraftian phase—the “golden age” of cosmic horror literature (Joshi, “Establishing the Canon” 380)—enables this study to examine the inherent existential impact of cosmic horror encounters. In order to do so, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of the Lovecraftian and the existentialist texts so that the latter may better articulate the inherent existential angst latent within the former. The post-Lovecraftian and the post-millennial phases feature a plethora of authors ranging from horror veterans such as Stephen

King and Thomas Ligotti to relatively nascent contributors such as Michael Wehunt and John Langan. Due to their diverse themes and narrative styles, these phases enable this study to investigate the canon's treatment of Nature and its departure from the Lovecraftian tenets. The addition of themes such as ecocriticism and feminism make the cosmic horror canon accessible to hitherto unexplored avenues of research.

Now that the basic structure of this study has been discussed, it is important to introduce the essence of cosmic horror literature to the reader. Cosmic horror is characterised by its disdain towards humanity's anthropocentric conception of the universe. It explores the theme of humanity's insignificance and vulnerability in a cold and uncaring cosmos. Unlike traditional supernatural horror, cosmic horror does not focus on misanthropic entities with discernible motives. Instead, it underlines the indifference of the universe, often describing the latter as beyond human understanding. The experience is akin to gazing into the depths of the night sky—at the infinite pool of stars scattered across the apophatic blackness of space—and *awakening* to the vastness of a cosmos that is utterly indifferent to human survival or extinction. Such “dark epiphanies” instil a sense of resignation or submission within the human subject towards the inscrutable cosmos. All of humanity's collective efforts and ambitions pale in comparison to the scale (spatial and temporal) of a universe that does not *care*. It compels the subject to recognise the very limit of human thought and rationality, offering an ephemeral glance at a world devoid of anthropocentric beliefs and explanations—the world of the ‘nonhuman’. This is the essence of cosmic horror—a philosophy inextricably linked with the short stories of early twentieth century American writer H. P. Lovecraft (Stableford 65). In fact, cosmic horror is often referred to as Lovecraftian horror as a consequence of Lovecraft's contribution to the genesis and evolution of cosmic horror literature (Newell 163).

In *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), Lovecraft outlines the general premise of a cosmic horror narrative:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint ... of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space (14).

Cosmic horror, according to Lovecraft, is not merely limited to the onslaught of an alien threat determined to destroy the planet; instead, it challenges the very foundation of the human understanding of the universe, including humanity's own place in it: "[Lovecraft's] terrors are entirely those of the unintelligible outside, of the individual cramped by alien encroachment" (Punter 38). One of the defining features of cosmic horror is its unknowability. Lovecraft's fiction is predicated on its unknowability—the origins and descriptions of cosmic beings are deliberately obscured or altogether avoided: "Lovecraft merely alludes to realities that are impossible to describe" (Harman 270). Furthermore, cosmic encounters threaten the fixed laws of Nature and reality—unravelling truths "too terrifying for rationality to withstand" (228), transcending the confines of human cognition and rationale in the process. Cosmic knowledge, therefore, becomes a terrifying and cursed truth: "I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" 97). Awakening to this truth dissociates the human subject from its quotidian existence, driving an everlasting wedge between the human mind and the nature of physical reality.

To further elucidate and exemplify the characteristics of cosmic horror literature, the following paragraph offers a brief discussion of a Lovecraftian short story. Lovecraft's "The Nameless City" (1921) introduces the reader to an unnamed narrator exploring a ruined city that has lost its name to time. Within the dark and deep recesses of the ruins, the explorer is confronted with a luminous void calling out to him. As he is pulled towards the void, the explorer discerns dissociated shapes and grotesque physical features of what he considers to be cosmic beings. Before he is able to piece it all together, the void shuts behind a door, abandoning him in complete darkness. Rather than describing the otherworldly threat, the narrative merely alludes to it using a technique Graham Harman refers to as 'literary cubism': "numerous bizarre or troubling features of a palpable thing are piled up in such excessive number that it becomes difficult to combine all these facets into a single object" (270-1). Lovecraft's 'literary cubism' is employed frequently and deliberately throughout his oeuvre to describe the constant struggle of the human mind in piecing together those facets of cosmic reality that are beyond its understanding. Furthermore, the narrative deliberately threatens the sanity and self-consciousness of its protagonist. He can no longer trust his *limited* senses again after an experience that has annihilated his belief and understanding of the universe. He is consumed by thoughts and epiphanies challenging the very foundations of his existence: "Monstrous, unnatural, colossal, was the thing — too far beyond all the ideas of man to be believed except in the silent damnable small hours of the morning when one cannot sleep" (Lovecraft, "The Nameless City" 49).

The existence of terrible truths of incomprehensible nature destroys the Lovecraftian narrator's anthropocentric understanding of the universe and his own self, leading to what William Grey refers to as the "displacement of humanity from the predominant position in the physical, temporal and biological stage" (463). As this section draws to a close, a more holistic and cohesive

picture of cosmic horror begins to unravel. Cosmic horror is characterised by a paralysing ‘awakening’ that stems from the conflict between the infinitude of the cosmos and humanity’s futile attempts to understand it. To summarise the discussions of this section, cosmic horror may simply be defined as an experience that awakens the human mind to the indifference of the cosmos, ushering in epiphanies of human insignificance and futility which ultimately result in a loss of sanity and/or absolute resignation/submission in the face of the cosmos. Once the subject is exposed to *otherworldly* cosmic knowledge, his/her existential complacency is irrevocably altered with no possibility of reconciling with the ‘normal’. Here, the ‘otherworldly’ refers to the metaphysical realm beyond humanity’s anthropocentric perception of the universe—beyond the notion of a *benevolent* cosmos. Cosmic horror, therefore, perceives humanity and the universe with the objectivity of an outsider by speculating the existence of the ‘nonhuman’ other. This is the primary characteristic of cosmic horror philosophy and the central avenue of investigation of this thesis. However, in order to understand the evolution of cosmic horror philosophy, it is important to discuss its inception from the vestiges of Weird fiction to its contemporary mutations in the New Weird tradition. A discussion on Weird fiction becomes all the more important because its representative authors played an instrumental role in shaping and defining the Lovecraftian notion of cosmic horror. The following section acquaints the reader with these metamorphoses within cosmic horror literature, starting from the Weird and concluding with the New Weird school of thought.

1.2 Cosmic Horror—an offshoot of Weird Fiction

Whereas the previous section discussed the essence of a cosmic horror experience, this section traces a lineage of the cosmic horror canon, starting with a discussion on Weird fiction, followed

by an examination of Lovecraft's rendition of cosmic horror, and concluding with a brief investigation into the canon's modern representation in the New Weird movement. Before delving into the fundamentals of the Weird, it must be noted that this study places cosmic horror fiction within the overarching genre of Weird fiction, dealing with the "metaphysical mysteries of the cosmos stubbornly swirling in the human mind" (Newell 164). The departure of cosmic horror from Weird literature is discussed at the end of this section. In terms of the earliest examples of Weird fiction, Jonathan Newell finds "glimmers of the metaphysical vistas" in William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) (5). Michael Cisco, on the other hand, finds early traces of the Weird tale in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" (1843) and Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* (5). However, the primary authors associated with the genre are Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson, Lord Dunsany (late nineteenth century), and Lovecraft himself (early twentieth century). Later contributors (mid-twentieth century and later) such as Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, C. L. Moore, and Robert Bloch further expanded the genre (Noys and Murphy 118). The likes of Poe, Machen and Blackwood, among others, played an instrumental role in influencing Lovecraft's understanding of the eldritch. Therefore, a comprehensive dissection of Weird literature becomes paramount to understanding why and how the genre ushered cosmic horror literature into existence.

While tracing its evolution from the Gothic tradition, Jonathan Newell, in *A Century of Weird Fiction, 1832-1937* (2020), defines Weird fiction "as a tumour of sorts growing out of the gothic—composed of the same tissues but unfamiliar, alien and yet not-entirely-so, at once part of its progenitor and curiously foreign to it" (4). Newell argues that whereas Gothic fiction is characterised by its inherent anthropocentrism and "subject-affirming power of sublime fear" (5),

Weird fiction distances itself from the former through its “subject-dissolving power” emanating from the “non-human world” or the “world-in-itself” (5). Furthermore, Gothic fiction has a ‘social’ orientation which Weird fiction does not; the latter is “metaphysically rather than socially oriented” (5): “Quite distinct from the social realism or literary naturalism of late Victorian novels striving to depict everyday life with faithfulness to social reality, weird fiction estranges readers from mundane existence while remaining faithful to a deeper, profoundly *asocial* reality” (7). While Newell emphasises the distinction between the two genres, he does admit that “there are works that traffic in both gothic and weird tropes and affects” (5). While discussing Weird fiction’s liminality as a genre, Michael Cisco argues that “[i]t is supernatural fiction, but it is not Fantasy. ... It is horror fiction, but it does not depend on real-life horrors, such as murder or torture” (7). Instead, he attributes the genre’s distinctiveness to its “deterritorialization of ordinary experience”, which assails humanity’s fundamental understanding of the real world. The genre employs supernatural elements to deterritorialise ‘reality’ in an “ontological or epistemological direction” in an attempt to threaten and/or expand our understanding of “known causality” (7). Weird fiction, thus, positions itself within the ambit of supernatural literature and, therefore, must be understood in terms of the latter.

In *The Fantastic* (1973), Tzvetan Todorov deconstructs the structure of a supernatural experience into two primary conditions: in a supernatural event, “either [the human subject] is the victim of an illusion of the senses ... and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality — but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us (25; brackets mine). Todorov argues that the “fantastic” thrives within the “duration of this uncertainty”. According to him, if the subject explains the supernatural event within the ambit of his perceived reality, the work belongs to the genre of “the uncanny” (41).

Similarly, the genre becomes “the marvelous” if the subject is compelled to reject the fixed laws of Nature to articulate the existence of the supernatural (41). In a Todorovian sense, the Weird genre must, therefore, be an archetype of the marvellous. However, Michael Cisco argues that Todorov’s structuralist approach to fantastic literature cannot be superimposed upon Weird fiction. Using Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) as an example, Cisco observes that the novel can be classified as marvellous and uncanny simultaneously (20). Furthermore, Cisco notes that Weird fiction transcends Todorov’s structuralist deconstruction of the fantastic, as the former “begins with an affirmation of the greater scope of experience and then moves on to a negation of experience, in order to affirm a boundless horizon” (21). In simpler terms, Weird fiction cannot be contained within one of the two Todorovian categories. Through its transgression of the unfamiliar into the familiar, Weird fiction becomes ‘marvelous’, but, at the same time, the Weird *accommodates* the unfamiliar within its familiar context without abandoning the Natural laws altogether, becoming ‘uncanny’ in the process. Weird fiction, thus, rejects the Todorovian binary of ‘either/or’ in terms of its uncanny or marvellous character:

How can there be shadings of reality, or even of reason? Aren’t these either/or? How can there be “and”? Reason and unreason at once, real and unreal at once? Weird fiction tries to give us precisely this. Not one or the other, as Todorov would have it, but both and neither (Cisco 20).

Newell corroborates Cisco’s views and expands upon them by arguing that Weird fiction annihilates “the schema human beings use to make sense of the world, suggesting a cosmic outside always hovering just beyond the familiar world revealed by our senses” (Newell 4). Weird fiction, thus, lays the foundations of the ‘cosmic’ by focusing on a reality “radically distinct from the human mind and from an anthropocentric viewpoint” (5). Mark Fisher furthers the argument by

defining the ‘Weird’ as something “*which does not belong*” (10; emphasis original), bringing to the familiar “something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the ‘homely’” (10-11). Thus, the genre may be understood as an incursion of that which does not *belong*, entailing a direct attack on human rationale in the process—which also becomes a recurrent trope of cosmic horror fiction. However, not all Weird narratives may be considered cosmic horror narratives. The beginning of this section claimed that this study places cosmic horror fiction within the overarching genre of Weird fiction and it is so because cosmic horror may be perceived as an offshoot of the Weird with a special emphasis on the theme of humanity’s insignificance within the grand scheme of cosmos: “Lovecraft’s conception of ‘cosmic horror’ rested upon the discovery of the irrelevance of human beings to a mechanistic-materialist universe in which no other appears whose gaze we might attract or in whose approval we might bask” (Johnson 99). Cosmic horror, therefore, heightens the Weird’s incursion of the ‘unfamiliar’ by intertwining it with the theme of human insignificance in an indifferent cosmos, often characterised by a recognition of the very limit of human comprehension. The following paragraphs discuss cosmic horror philosophy in detail, with a special emphasis on Lovecraftian cosmicism.

Although the Lovecraftian notion of cosmic horror is often considered “virtually synonymous” with the Weird genre (Newell 163), Lovecraft’s cosmic rendition may be better understood as an appendage of the Weird, while also considering it a “part of a longer weird tradition invested in speculation about the non-human world at its most essential level” (163). Despite the fact that the term ‘cosmic horror’ was “already in circulation nearly a decade before his [Lovecraft’s] birth”, Lovecraft, upon the publication of his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), “popularized and re-defined” the term, until it became “almost exclusively associated with

him by the late twentieth century” (Moreland 14)¹. According to Jess Nevins, proto-cosmic horror existed before Lovecraft popularised it. Nevins finds traces of this nascent idea in early nineteenth-century fiction (38), particularly in Vladimir Odoevsky’s “The Cosmorama” (1838), where one of the characters, when encountered with the horror of the cosmos, screams out: “You can see everything—everything without the covering” (Odoevsky 193). Other narratives such as Théophile Gautier’s “Une Nuit de Cléopâtre” (1838), Lord Bulwer-Lytton’s *Zanoni* (1842) and James Malcolm Rymer’s *Varney the Vampyre; or, the Feast of Blood* (1845–1847) also exhibit vestiges of the philosophy which was to become synonymous with Lovecraft’s. Prominent authors of the Weird genre who inspired Lovecraft may be regarded as early contributors to the cosmic horror philosophy. For example, Arthur Machen’s “The Great God Pan” (1894) describes a divine being, the mere sight of whom “is enough to drive a character mad” (Nevins 38). Similarly, Robert W. Chambers’ “The King in Yellow” (1895) describes the eponymous play which renders its readers insane.

Lovecraft was cognizant of and enthralled by the works of Gautier, Machen and Chambers, “openly acknowledging their influence on him” in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Nevins 38). In this seminal text, Lovecraft builds upon the “fear of the unknown” by establishing the “genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form” (*Supernatural Horror* 11). The ‘fear of the unknown’ was integral to Lovecraft as James Machin argues that the former’s style of prose is predicated on its “*unknowability*” (28). Lovecraft viewed tales of cosmic horror as “something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains”

¹ Sean Moreland traces the earlier usage of the term ‘cosmic horror’ in his “The Birth of Cosmic Horror from the S(ub)lime of Lucretius”. However, he argues that the term had been employed in the discourse of “affective theology”, which, rather than assailing the human cogito, “melted into a sensation of awesome elevation, usually by a theistic intimation of our privileged position within that universe” (15). Lovecraft’s usage of ‘cosmic horror’ in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* deprived the term of any ‘anthropocentric’ life-affirming connotations.

(*Supernatural Horror* 14). Instead, he chose to focus on the encounters between human subjects and the cosmic ‘others’ in which the latter would forever alter the psyche of the former:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space (14).

In simpler terms, the Lovecraftian cosmic horror builds upon the “subject-dissolving power” of the Weird tale by juxtaposing it with the “limitless universe, incomprehensible to the limits of our senses” (Williams 69). The subject’s dissolution often results in the loss of their sanity, as observed in the proto-cosmic horror examples of Odoevsky, Machen and Chambers.

Eugene Thacker further elaborates upon the subject-dissolving power of cosmic horror, characterising it through its departure from humanly recognisable notions of anthropocentrism and even misanthropy (124). In fact, Thacker notes that Lovecraft’s cosmic horror transcends the existing paradigms of horror in terms of its effect. Thacker defines two pertinent philosophical paradigms of horror: the Kantian and the Heideggerian (116). Let us examine how the Lovecraftian cosmic horror transgresses beyond these two paradigms. The Kantian paradigm is characterised by an emotional state—that of fear: “Horror is the always-potential threat of the senses being overwhelmed, of something being sensed that is in excess of the sorting mechanism of the understanding, and the synthetic function of reason” (117-8). However, this overwhelming of the senses is still “recuperated by reflexive, supersensible reason” (118), which Kant describes as “the mere capability of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense” (*The Critique of Judgement* 98). Lovecraft, on the other hand, with his emphasis on the

“fear of the *unknown*” (*Supernatural Horror* 11; emphasis mine), makes his horror “less defined by emotion, and more by thought – or, to be precise, the limit of thought” (Thacker 120), thereby transcending the Kantian paradigm. Thacker sums it up perfectly: “Here [in Lovecraft] horror is not the fullness of feeling, but the emptiness of thought. Horror is not the overflowing, psychological continuum of experience, but the vacuity of any correlation between subject and object, between self and world” (121; brackets mine).

The second philosophical paradigm of horror—the Heideggerian paradigm—is defined by the fear of death (Thacker 121). For Heidegger, fear is characterised by and directed towards an object that threatens the self, which in this case happens to be death: “the human being, thrown into the world, inscribed within temporal incompleteness, struggles to comprehend the world and its being – Dasein struggles to comprehend something that is by definition incomplete. For Heidegger, Death is this incompleteness” (122). Similar to Kant’s supersensible reason, Heidegger offers a solution to this predicament through his notion of the “being-towards-death” which perceives death as “immanent in life itself” instead of “standing in contrast to life” (122-3). Heidegger, thus, offers a ‘humanistic’ essence of death to make it more *palatable* for the human subject. Like the Kantian supersensible reason, the Heideggerian humanistic notion of death attempts to position and explain mankind’s worst fears within the ambit of human cognition and rationality. Using the two aforementioned paradigms of horror (the Kantian and the Heideggerian), Thacker successfully articulates the quiescent essence of Lovecraftian horror—its refusal to be contained within the sphere of human comprehension. By deliberately describing that which cannot be described in cogent human terms, Lovecraft advocates in favour of an arguably more enigmatic and paralysing description of horror: “a strange, unhuman thought beyond even the misanthropic tendency” (128). In simpler terms, Lovecraftian horror transcends the Heideggerian paradigm by refusing to be

defined in relation to humanity. Unlike Kant or Heidegger, Lovecraft neither offers a supersensible reason to understand the sublimity of the cosmos nor indulges in life-affirming understanding of death in an attempt to ‘humanise’ it, thereby attributing a ‘beyond-human’ character to cosmic horror:

For Lovecraft, one does not leave a tale of supernatural horror feeling better, or, for that matter, feeling anything at all. There is no truth to horror, in the sense that one ultimately discovers a state of being-there that is the exclusive provenance of human beings and their capacity to seek out authentic lives. If anything, supernatural horror is, for Lovecraft, defined by an anti-humanism, one that questions the entire ontic and ontological apparatus in which we as human beings grant ourselves privileged points of access to the real (Thacker 123).

Having discussed the fundamental nature of Weird literature and the Lovecraftian brand of cosmic horror, it is important to discuss the canon’s contemporary status while raising pertinent questions such as: How do the Weird and the New Weird differ from one another? How does cosmic horror mutate into the New Weird? The following paragraphs address these queries. Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy regard the period “between 1880 and 1940” as “The Old Weird” (118). This “golden age” of Weird fiction “collapsed for nearly two generations [1940-70] after the death of Lovecraft” (Joshi, “Establishing the Canon” 338). Joshi attributes this collapse to the gradual displacement of pulp magazines, such as *Weird Tales*, “due to the emergence of the paperback book” (338). Genres such as “the detective story, the romance, the western, and science fiction” grew more profitable, and consequently, “those American writers who had flourished in the pulps either turned to the mystery or suspense story” (339). This collapse was followed by the “horror ‘boom’ of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s”, which saw the “sudden popularity of such writers

as Ira Levin, William Peter Blatty, Thomas Tryon, and Stephen King” (339). New Weird, a nascent genre, found its earliest footing during this period. Noys and Murphy trace the genre’s origins as far back as the 1980s but argue that it “gained its most explicit articulation in the 2000s” (119). The evolution of the New Weird as a genre is marked by interesting developments in terms of incorporating aspects of fiction-making from diverse sources, including world-making fantasies, all put together to align itself with contemporary social and political temper.

In regard to defining the ‘evolved’ genre, Jonathan Newell notes: “While consciously in the tradition of the original weird, the New Weird frequently incorporates elements from science fiction, urban fantasy and secondary-world fantasy, often taking place in wholly invented universes, and inflecting the weird with a contemporary and politically radical sensibility” (7). The trope of the Weird is thus exploited with new transformative intents that, at the same time, manage to advance the legacy of Weird fiction in innovative directions. Carl H. Sederholm expands Newell’s argument by observing that “the New Weird was never simply about combining genres but was more interested in transforming them in ways that created something new while also preserving certain key questions fundamental to the weird itself” (“The New Weird” 161). Thus, the New Weird continues the subject-dissolving tradition of the Weird through a commingling of genres of horror, science fiction and fantasy, whilst staying “connected to questions concerning the nature of the world and the cosmos and whether they are truly knowable” (162). China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, K. J. Bishop, Caitlín Kiernan and Steph Swainston are the primary authors associated with this genre. It is to be noted that since the New Weird is an expansive genre (covering elements from science fiction, fantasy and horror fiction), the texts belonging to this genre are characterised by a sense of heterogeneity: they are “[s]ecular, politically informed, eclectic and detail oriented” (Weinstock, “The New Weird” 184). Thus, elements of cosmic horror

philosophy become one of the many appendages of the New Weird literature. As a result, not all New Weird texts belong to the cosmic horror tradition of Lovecraft and his predecessors. The authors mentioned above, though briefly discussed in the coming chapters, do not come under the purview of this study.

1.3 The Existential Import of Cosmic Horror

Thus far, this study has discussed the predominant nature of cosmic horror, while also tracing its evolution from the Weird to the New Weird tradition. However, to engage in a comprehensive cosmic horror discourse, its effect on the human subject needs to be analysed. A traditional cosmic horror encounter may be understood using the subject-object dynamics of horror (Carroll 28). For example, in a conventional cosmic horror tale, Lovecraftian Elder Gods become the object of horror and the human protagonist who is *awakened* to their existence becomes the subject of horror. Following the conflict, the human subject is existentially *wrecked*, and can no longer contextualise the meaning of his existence in a cold and indifferent universe, resulting in acute existential crises and a refusal to reconcile with the familiar. Thus, cosmic horror philosophy may be better examined by studying its effect on the human subject. This section, therefore, focuses on the existential implications of a cosmic horror experience to articulate its impact. This study has already made the claim that encounters of cosmic proportions, as described in the fiction of Lovecraft and his successors, have a significant impact on the psyche of the human subject by exposing it to irreconcilable cosmic truths. As a result, the human subject is thrown into an existential *limbo* and can no longer find solace or comfort in its quotidian existence. Cosmic horror fiction makes use of the inscrutability and indifference of the cosmos to threaten the existential ‘complacency’ of human subjects, entailing an inevitable sense of the ‘horror of existence’.

Lovecraft's notion of cosmicism emphasises "that the universe is not built for human exploitation, that people are things among other things, and that there is more to things than meets the eye" (Sederholm and Weinstock, "Lovecraft Rising" 7). Lovecraft's inscrutable 'cosmic' undermines all human accomplishments as they will "inevitably disappear into the unplumbable depths of deep time" (8). Brian Johnson corroborates this argument by suggesting that "Lovecraft's conception of 'cosmic horror' rested upon the discovery of the irrelevance of human beings to a mechanistic-materialist universe in which no other appears whose gaze we might attract or in whose approval we might bask" (99). This tendency of cosmic horror to reduce the human subject to a primordial irrelevance and unimportance "resides not in some physical manifestation of terror" (Campbell, "Cosmic Indifferentism" 169), but in "man's recognition of his own motelike unimportance in a blind and chaotic universe" (Burleson 12).

These dark epiphanies breed existential aporia and suffering, as is corroborated by David Simmons in the introduction to his edited volume *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft* (2013), where he notes that the Lovecraftian cosmic horror is "reliant on a kind of existentialist terror" (2). Similarly, Jess Nevins argues that Lovecraft's cosmic horror narratives describe a conflict between humans and cosmic beings, with the former almost always "driven mad by the experience" (38). Nevins further observes that "numerous later horror writers" employed the same concept of cosmic horror and the meaninglessness of the universe "without resorting to alien beings" and otherworldly creatures (38). This study discusses how the existentialist viewpoint of universal meaninglessness falls within the ambit of cosmic horror in Chapter Two. Existential crises, loss of agency, madness, and the annihilation of the quotidian are some of the recurring motifs of cosmic horror fiction. Moreover, Brian Stableford observes that cosmic horror presupposes human insignificance within the grand scale of the cosmos:

The Lovecraftian idea of cosmic horror is founded in the supposition that the human mind is, ultimately, the helpless prisoner of the macrocosm, the futility of all its microcosmic ambitions and self-delusions being illustrated and defined by the magnitude and strangeness of a cosmos to which the principle of “as above, so below” is flatly inapplicable (91).

Cosmic horror, therefore, perceives humanity with the objectivity of an outsider by discarding the anthropocentric viewpoint while speculating the existence of the ‘nonhuman’ other. Lovecraft, however, was not unique in taking this philosophical stance on the nonhuman.

The tradition of speculating the existence of the nonhuman other predates Lovecraft by more than a century in the works of Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. For instance, Kant’s bifurcation of the world into phenomena (the world as it appears) and noumena (things-in-themselves) entails a divide between the human and the nonhuman world. Similarly, Schopenhauer divides the world into ‘will’ and ‘representation’—the latter is the “phenomenal instantiation” of the former, which is an “uncaring totality beyond time and space” inaccessible to human senses (Newell 164). Building upon Kant and Schopenhauer’s ideas of ‘noumena’ and ‘will’, respectively, Nietzsche argues that humanity must be protected from the ‘terrible truths’ that it cannot comprehend—the existence of the nonhuman realm. He even suggests, in a Lovecraftian fashion, that “[i]t could even be part of the fundamental character of existence that people with complete knowledge get destroyed” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 37; brackets mine). Nietzsche advocates that for the welfare and survival of humanity, these terrible truths ought to be “thinned out, veiled over, sweetened up, dumbed down, and lied about (37). The ‘real truth’ of the horror of existence must, therefore, be concealed by the creation of illusory, *comforting* truths that prevent the former from overwhelming the human subject: “Besides *real*

truth, the horror of existence, Nietzsche regularly talks about what we *take to be true*, truths we have *constructed*, truths whose function it is to mask the real truth—that is, illusions” (Kain 50; emphasis original). Nietzsche argues that humanity has always found myriad ways of *veiling* the horrible truth [described as an ‘evolutionary must’ by Philip J. Kain (48)] through a pantheon of gods, the promise of the afterlife, or even the ephemeral escape from reality offered by fleeting pleasures. The notion of the terrible truths of human existence is further expounded using Kain’s three different versions of the cosmos.

In his article “Nietzsche, Truth and the Horror of Existence”, Philip J. Kain, building upon Nietzsche’s notion of the “*Socratic or artistic or tragic*” culture (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* 85; emphasis original), offers “three different versions of the human condition” (Kain 42). These versions are the *designed*, the *perfectible*, and the *horrible* cosmos. A designed cosmos is one that has been exclusively crafted for human beings. Our existence complements the existence of a designed cosmos and vice versa: “It is as if it were purposively planned for us and we for it. We fit, we belong, we are at home in this cosmos. We are confirmed and reinforced by it. And our natural response is a desire to know it, to contemplate it, and thus to appreciate our fit into it” (42). The perfectible cosmos is “malleable” and “neutral”, allowing human beings to explore and *perfect* it: “Here the cosmos is neither alien nor is it designed for us. It is neither terrifying nor benign” (42). The final variant—the horrible cosmos—becomes a hostile and alien abode for humanity who neither fit nor belong in it: “It is a place where human beings suffer for no reason at all. Best never to have been born” (43). This study argues that the Lovecraftian cosmic horror is situated in the third category—the horrible cosmos—which is neither designed for humans nor malleable to our will and/or effort. It does not *care* for humanity’s anthropocentric conceit and, thus, renders the latter insignificant, hopeless and irrelevant:

The cosmic horror belongs to a different order of existence, which lies beyond the phenomenal world of ordinary perception, separated from it by a threshold that the human mind can breach in dreams with relative safety, although the consequences of a crossing in the other direction would be dire (Stableford 80).

This knowledge of humanity's insignificance in the all-engulfing cosmic order (which is later defined as the Dark Epiphany in Chapter Two) becomes the primary source of the horror of existence, having a paralysing effect on its subjects. This 'truth' thus becomes malevolent knowledge; those who seek it inevitably perish. We find many such instances in Lovecraft's short stories, where it is suggested that the 'awakened' ones "shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age" ("The Call of Cthulhu" 61). The objective of the above three sections was to acquaint the reader with the philosophy of cosmic horror. Section 1.1 discussed the primary essence, recurrent motifs and defining traits of the canon. Using the example of Lovecraft's "The Nameless City", the section articulated the stylistic and thematic underpinnings of cosmic horror literature. Section 1.2, on the other hand, traced a lineage of cosmic horror tradition by focusing on the aesthetics of its predecessor, i.e. Weird fiction. Finally, Section 1.3 further elaborated on the complexities of a cosmic horror experience by converging on the existential implications of such an encounter on the *fragile* psyche of the human subject.

1.4 Chapter Summarisation

Chapter One: A Brief History of Cosmic Horror Fiction

The thesis's first main chapter serves as the entire study's literature review. It discusses the evolution of cosmic horror literature—beginning with the precursors of Lovecraft and concluding

with the contemporary proponents of the canon. The chapter is divided into three major sections based on geographical context. The first section comprehensively analyses the American tradition of cosmic horror fiction. Since this study is primarily situated within the American context, this part becomes the centrepiece of the chapter. It begins with a discussion of proto-cosmic horror literature, focusing on the pre-Lovecraftian phase of the canon. Works of Lovecraft's primary inspirations, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers, are discussed at length in this section to examine their influence on cosmic horror philosophy. Authors such as Francis Marion Crawford, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Irvin S. Cobb and Leonard Cline, who had a peripheral influence on Lovecraft's cosmicism, are also briefly discussed. In a chronological progression, the section then analyses the works of Lovecraft's contemporaries—the likes of August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long, Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber, Donald Wandrei, Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith, who attempted to extend the legacy of Lovecraftian cosmic horror following the death of Lovecraft. Finally, The post-Lovecraftian phase (late twentieth century) emphasises the works of William Sloane, Ira Levin, Fred Chappell, William Peter Blatty, Brian McNaughton, T. E. D. Klein, Robert R. McCammon and Stephen King to examine the impact of the “horror boom” in America between 1970 and 1990 on cosmic horror literature (Joshi, “Establishing the Canon” 339).

The first section of the chapter concludes with the contemporary representatives of American cosmic horror fiction—Caitlín R. Kiernan, Laird Barron, Darrell Schweitzer, John Langan, Michael Wehunt, T. E. Grau and Brian Evenson. It is pertinent to mention here that some of these writers are often associated with the New Weird tradition as well. It is because these two strands of horror fiction (cosmic horror and the New Weird) often intersect and overlap (discussed in detail in Chapter One) due to their intersecting themes. This study, however, focuses only on

the cosmic horror literature produced by these authors. The second section of the chapter explores the British tradition of cosmic horror literature as it enables a deeper understanding of its American counterpart since Lovecraft was heavily influenced by the works of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson, Lord Dunsany and M. R. James. The section focuses on the representatives of British cosmic horror literature, including the works of Robert Aickman, Ramsey Campbell and Clive Barker. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief exploration of cosmic horror literature beyond America and Britain in a non-chronological structure to examine the canon's impact across the globe. Through an extensive literature review, this chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of cosmic horror fiction in America, Britain and beyond to lay the foundation for a discourse on the canon's inevitable and irrevocable impact on the human subject's existential condition.

Chapter Two: Lovecraft's Cosmicism and the Inevitable Horror of Existence

Whereas the first chapter offered a literature review of the cosmic horror canon, the second chapter focuses on the oeuvre of the canon's progenitor—H. P. Lovecraft. In an attempt to isolate the essence of Lovecraft's cosmicism, the chapter provides an 'existential' understanding and interpretation of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror and philosophy. The chapter, therefore, offers a comparative analysis between the schools of cosmicism and existentialism. The need for this comparison stems from the innate convergence between cosmic horror philosophy and existential thought. This study argues that cosmic horror is an overwhelming emotional experience that profoundly transforms (affects) the existential condition of the human subject. The subject is inescapably drawn into an inward state of existential angst when it is horrified by an extremely aversive appearance of a cosmic entity or condition, resulting "in a dissipation of the self, a loss

of ego kin to madness” (Newell 20). Thus, in order to examine the existential import of a ‘cosmic’ experience, the very nature of existential angst needs to be understood first, and no other form of literature deconstructs the effect of an existentially torn human condition as gravely as existentialism. Moreover, a detour towards existentialist texts enables this study to better articulate how the human subject, irrevocably affected by a cosmic experience, still goes on with his/her existence. Consequently, the chapter begins with an analysis of existentialist texts by the likes of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, who, similar to Lovecraft, produced the majority of their texts in the first half of the twentieth century.

The case studies—Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925), Camus’ *The Plague* (1947) and Sartre’s “No Exit” (1944)—possess an inherent cosmic dimension that entails the resignation and/or annihilation of the human condition (discussed in detail in Chapter Two). By comparing these texts with prominent Lovecraftian narratives such as “Polaris” (1920), “The Rats in the Walls” (1924), “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), “The Dunwich Horror” (1929), “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931), “The Dreams in the Witch-House” (1933), “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933), “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936) and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936), the chapter explores the convergence between the two schools of thought. The chapter majorly focuses on a specific moment in the narrative that destabilises the human complacency of the ‘horrificed’ subject. This particular moment, thus, becomes a terrifying self-revelation for the subject, *acquainting* it with its own insignificance in the cosmos. This study finds it plausible to call it the ‘dark epiphany’—a moment in the narrative when the characters are awakened to recognise their own insignificance and purposelessness while encountering the overwhelming cosmic, often resulting in unconditional surrender and endless despair. The chapter claims that the dark epiphany becomes the primary thread of connection between cosmic horror and existential literature, cementing and

rationalising, in the process, the impact of cosmic horror encounters on the quotidian and complacent human existence.

Chapter Three: Nature and Existence in Post-Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror

The third chapter builds upon the claims made in the second and chronologically progresses from the Lovecraftian to the post-Lovecraftian phase of cosmic horror literature. In doing so, this chapter utilises the thematic plurality of post-millennial cosmic horror literature. Specifically, the canon's reliance on the treatment of Nature and the themes of ecocriticism and the Anthropocene during the post-millennial phase enable this chapter to engage in a discourse concerning the intertwining of Nature and existential horror. By presenting Nature itself as a cosmic entity—and ushering it into the territory of the 'unfamiliar'—the post-millennial phase offers an interesting opportunity to gauge the severity of a cosmic horror encounter induced by estranging an entity as familiar as Nature itself. To achieve this, the chapter divides the post-Lovecraftian phase into two major periods: the twentieth century phase and the post-millennial phase. The chapter hypothesises that in the first phase, Nature is almost always corrupted by an outside cosmic force. Nature, in this phase, is compliant and submissive to the threat posed by the cosmos and, thus, needs to be saved or redeemed to its former glory through human intervention. However, in the second phase, Nature is no longer submissive to an outside threat. In this phase, Nature itself *becomes* the cosmic force—indifferent to humanity's anthropocentric beliefs. The chapter begins with an emphasis on Thomas Ligotti, who serves as an interstitial presence between the two phases. Moreover, Ligotti is considered to be a direct successor to the Weird tradition of Poe and Lovecraft by many critics (Reyes and M'Rabty 125). This section focuses on three short stories by Ligotti: "The Sect of the Idiot" (1986), "The Mystics of Muelenburg" (1986) and "Nethescurial" (1991). "The Sect"

describes humanity as hypnotised by a group of cosmic gods. The existential condition of the protagonist is ‘wrecked’ as he realises that “my life was of no matter” (“The Sect” 203). “The Mystics” describes Nature and physical reality as easily manipulated and corrupted by cosmic beings: “and all the shapes we once knew contorted into nightmares and nonsense” (“The Mystics” 365). Finally, “Nethescurial” is Ligotti’s cosmic evil pervading all conscious and physical life: “Nethescurial is not the secret name of the creation” (“Nethescurial” 333).

Across these three narratives, Ligotti presents a form of divine transcendental unity between humanity and Nature (the physical world), but with a caveat: “What if this unity is not blissful, but nightmarish? What if the god who is our very self turns out to be a monster?” (Cardin 77). The cosmic forces (the unfamiliar), thus, corrupt the natural world (the familiar) in Ligotti’s stories. This study argues that this seems to be a trend across the twentieth century phase – Nature is *bent* to the will of the cosmos. To cement this argument, this section of the chapter employs both Lovecraftian (“The Colour Out of Space” (1927) and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936)) and post-Lovecraftian (“Children of the Corn” (1978) by Stephen King, *The Ceremonies* (1984) by T.E.D. Klein and *Swan Song* (1987) by Robert R. McCammon) case studies from the twentieth century cosmic horror canon. However, the post-millennial phase witnesses a decline in this trend as it *arms* Nature with its very own agency instead of describing it as a mere conduit for cosmic insurgencies. In this phase, rather than being corrupted by the cosmos, Nature *becomes* the cosmos—utterly alien, unfamiliar, inhospitable and indifferent to anthropocentric ideology. Thus, the second half of the chapter investigates this transition in the post-millennial texts ranging from the later works of Thomas Ligotti to those of John Langan, Michael Wehunt and T. E. Grau. Although these narratives struggle in varying degrees at describing the true indifference of Nature, they nonetheless progress towards its fruition. The chapter concludes with the claim that the post-

millennial phase affects the existential complacency of the human subject more gravely than the twentieth century phase because the former describes something as familiar and tangible as Nature to be entirely indifferent and alien to human existence—thereby dismantling the very foundations of human understanding and beliefs.

Conclusion

Through a thorough analysis of the selected texts, this study discerns that the horrifying emotional reaction to the cosmic condition is not just a bipartite relation between the human subject and the cosmic object or an emotional transaction between the human subject and the cosmic order. Rather, it is a tripartite relation involving (1) the human subject, (2) the cosmic order or object, and (3) the human ‘existential’ condition. The human existential condition is the casualty in this transaction between the human subject and the cosmic object. When the human subject experiences cosmic horror, the latter is irrevocably ‘damaged’ by such a debilitating experience. Its existential condition is ‘wrecked’ because of the terrifying revelations concerning human insignificance and cosmic indifference. Cosmos’ assault on anthropocentrism becomes an assault on the existential condition and self-understanding of the human subject. This study, therefore, concludes that it would be impossible for a human subject to be affected by a cosmically induced horror without, at the same time, feeling any existential disturbance in that process. The conclusion of this study concerning the evolution of the American cosmic horror tradition is twofold. First, this study scrutinises the cosmic horror philosophy to discern its latent existential impact on human subjects. Cosmic horror and existential horror are distinct categories of horror: the locus of the former is the cosmic condition, whereas the locus of the latter is the human condition. However, even cosmic horror has ultimately to be understood as another kind of *existential* horror because the horrifying

experience caused by the cosmic condition inevitably affects the subject's existential condition. The subject is existentially altered by the horror that it experiences at the sight of, say, tentacles presented by the cosmos. Therefore, this study plausibly concludes that, apart from existential horror induced by the anthropocentric perspective on the human condition, the human subject may also experience existential horror induced by a species-neutral or species-transcendent view of the cosmic condition.

Second, this study also claims that the Lovecraftian cosmic horror is imbued with malevolence, and the subservient character of Nature propels the anthropic redeemer to subdue the former either by sagacity or by distancing himself. On the other hand, instead of invasion and misanthropy, the post-millennial authors attempt to grasp Nature's autonomy and inscrutability, pushing the bewildered anthropos into "a residue that is simply not-human, or better, unhuman" (Thacker 125) – an 'unhuman' character endemic to Nature. This study offers an exhaustive discourse on the evolution of cosmic horror fiction in America. Using existentialist texts, this study unfolds the existential impact of cosmic horror narratives. Nature, as witnessed in the Lovecraftian phase, has been perceived as pliant and submissive—easily corrupted by the cosmic outside. The post-millennial canon, however, transforms the 'outside cosmic' into something endemic—that is, Nature becomes the cosmic. Finally, this study ruminates on potential literary works for incorporation into the broadly defined canon of cosmic horror fiction. Based on the case studies used in Chapter Two, this ruminative discussion touches on the plausibility of a 'cosmic' reading of certain existentialist texts as well as the fictional texts of other authors, such as Jorge Luis Borges.

1.5 Gap in Literature, Research Questions and Objectives of the Study

While there exists a substantial amount of analysis dedicated to cosmic horror fiction, there remains a notable gap in the discourse dedicated to the convergence between cosmic and existential horror. The existing literature does not throw any significant light on the nature of existential angst born out of cosmic horror. This study aims to explore this unexplored area by examining the existential import of cosmic horror narratives across the Lovecraftian and post-Lovecraftian phases. Furthermore, representative works of existentialist literature, such as those of Kafka, Camus and Sartre, have never before been interpreted as archetypes of cosmic horror philosophy. I argue that there are good reasons to provide such an interpretation. Apart from this, it is noticed that the discourse on cosmic horror literature does not offer a comprehensive analysis of the canon's treatment of Nature—a submissive Nature in the Lovecraftian phase and an agential Nature in the post-millennial phase. Finally, since there is a continuous intersection and overlap between cosmic horror and its peripheral genres (the Weird and the New Weird), the existing literature does not offer an evolutionary analysis of cosmic horror from its Lovecraftian inception to its post-millennial departure. In terms of its research questions, this study examines the evolution of the American cosmic horror tradition from its Lovecraftian roots during the early twentieth century to its contemporary mutations. As discussed above, cosmic horror fiction has undergone numerous thematic and stylistic transitions across the American and British literary landscapes. This study sets out to explore the extent of these transitions—which began with the Weird phase marked by the narratives of Poe, peaked during the Lovecraftian phase, and, finally, contemporised by the post-millennial phase—by raising pertinent questions. How and why was Lovecraft influenced by the Weird narratives of the nineteenth century? What separated the

Lovecraftian cosmic horror from the works of his predecessors? How do the post-millennial cosmic horror narratives contemporise Lovecraft's philosophy in the age of the Anthropocene?

In the process, this study also explores cosmic horror literature as a form of existential horror rather than a mere instance of the otherworldly eldritch. This study investigates the overlap between the cosmic and the human condition on the nature of existential horror—an inevitable consequence of humanity's encounter with the cosmic—by analysing the Lovecraftian and the post-Lovecraftian case studies: How does the experience of cosmic horror affect the existential complacency of the human subject? Could an existential interpretation of cosmic horror narratives offer a deeper understanding of the latter? Does there exist an obscure and hidden cosmic dimension within certain representative existential texts such as those of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre? Finally, this study also emphasises the treatment of Nature and human existence during the Lovecraftian and the post-Lovecraftian phases to discern the evolution of the American cosmic horror tradition, raising questions such as: How does the treatment of Nature differ between the two phases? Does an agential, indifferent and cosmic Nature entail a stronger impact on the complacency of the human subject? This study explores all these questions in detail. This study formulates its three primary objectives based on the aforementioned gaps in literature along with the research questions discussed above. These are:

- To trace the evolution of cosmic horror fiction from its inception during the early twentieth century Lovecraftian phase to its post-millennial contemporary state.
- To establish cosmic horror fiction as innately existential in nature. Cosmic horror must be understood as another kind of existential horror because the horrifying experience caused by the cosmic condition inevitably affects the existential condition of the subject.

- To emphasise the treatment of Nature in cosmic horror fiction and trace its departure from a cosmically corrupted Nature in the Lovecraftian phase to a cosmically agential Nature in the post-millennial phase.

1.6 The Specifics of the Study

Motivation, Scope and Limitations

The motivation behind this research project is to engage in a serious academic discourse on cosmic horror literature, which is often relegated to the fringes of pulp fiction. Specifically, the objective is to trace the evolution of the American cosmic horror tradition since there is a lack of comprehensive historiographical analysis of the canon (since it often overlaps with the Weird and the New Weird genres), starting from its inception to its contemporary mutation. In the process, this research project also examines the existential implications of how the cosmic order presents itself to the human subject. Phenomenologically speaking, the paralysing emotional experience of cosmic horror profoundly transforms (affects) the existential condition of the human subject. The subject is inescapably drawn into an inward state of existential angst when he or she is horrified by extremely aversive truths implying the insignificance of human beings in an utterly indifferent cosmos. Finally, the evolution of cosmic horror fiction has never been analysed from the perspective of Nature—that is, how Nature is construed in relation to human existence. There is a lack of academic research in these areas, allowing this study to address the existing research gaps. Furthermore, this research project is primarily focused on the American tradition of cosmic horror fiction, specifically using the texts of H. P. Lovecraft, Thomas Ligotti and John Langan, among others. Although this study discusses the cosmic horror literature of Britain in Chapter One, it does so only to establish the historical connection between the former and its American counterpart.

Furthermore, this study only deals with works of cosmic horror fiction and, consequently, does not extensively discuss the contemporary New Weird genre, as the latter borrows elements from science fiction, fantasy and secondary-world narratives. The absence of British and non-Anglophone cosmic horror narratives, along with the exclusion of New Weird fiction, may be construed as a limitation of this study, which could perhaps form the basis of future research endeavours.

Methodology

The methodology behind this study employs qualitative analysis of cosmic horror fiction by dividing the canon into two major phases: the Lovecraftian and the post-Lovecraftian. The first phase examines Lovecraft's short stories while establishing them as the canonical works of cosmic horror philosophy. The second phase comprises the late-twentieth century and the post-millennial cosmic horror narratives, which offer partial reverence to Lovecraftian cosmicism in the sense of adherence to the tenets of cosmic horror philosophy engendered by Lovecraft. At the same time, it offers a departure from his style of fiction by exploring themes of gender, climate change and sexuality. Furthermore, the texts from both phases are analysed using the theory of New Historicism, which enables a parallel reading of the text and the cultural milieu it belongs to. A parallel exploration of fiction and history achieves a more nuanced analysis. Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist theories, therefore, have been employed to deconstruct the meaning and context embedded in these texts. Since this study deals with the theme of existential horror, the philosophy of existentialism has been used to interpret the case studies. Specifically, the theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have been used to examine the impact of cosmic conflicts on the existential comfort and complacency of human subjects. Finally, ecocritical

themes by the likes of Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell have also been used to understand the treatment of Nature in cosmic horror fiction (Chapter Three).

Significance of this study

Cosmic horror fiction delves into the bleaker aspects of human existence and its insignificance in an utterly indifferent cosmos. It accentuates the conflict between humanity's anthropocentric search for meaning and order in an uncaring and silent universe. As this study argues, there exists a profound sense of dread that is born out of the confrontation between the incomprehensible nature of the universe and humanity's place therein across cosmic horror narratives. Therefore, a deeper exploration of cosmic horror literature yields a better understanding of the universal nature of human fear and existential angst. Moreover, themes such as the fragility of human existence, the limits of humanity's scientific capacities and the inevitability of cosmic entropy deeply resonate with current concerns about ecological destruction and the hubris of technology. A discourse on cosmic horror can, therefore, stir critical and cultural critique of these contemporary problems. Finally, this research project facilitates philosophical inquiries into the nature of perceived reality, the human condition, and a meaningless cosmos devoid of an omnipresent, benevolent entity. Such a study is characterised by a significant ontological implication inasmuch as it affords a more nuanced understanding of the universe and humanity's place therein. Finally, this study offers an exhaustive analysis of the evolution of cosmic horror fiction in America. By doing so, this study enables a better contextualisation of the canon within specific cultural and historical ethos by examining how cosmic horror responds to the anxieties and preoccupations of its time. Moreover, an analysis of cosmic horror narratives substantiates their aesthetic conventions while offering an

enhanced understanding of their themes and narrative complexities, as we shall observe in the coming chapters.

Chapter Two:

A Brief History of Cosmic Horror Fiction

2.1 Introduction

The Introduction to this thesis discussed the fundamentals of cosmic horror fiction: its essence, definitions and a brief overview of its origins and history. It also addressed some key concepts peripheral to the notion of cosmic horror, such as that of Weird fiction, the New Weird and the onslaught of the horror of existence as an inevitable consequence of a cosmic encounter. Finally, it concluded with a detailed account of this thesis's overall scope and structure. This chapter, on the other hand, serves as a compendium of cosmic horror fiction and philosophy, offering an exhaustive literature review of this study. Before analysing the Lovecraftian and post-Lovecraftian texts, it is important to situate them in a literary landscape to understand the historical and socio-political milieu of the time. This chapter, therefore, introduces the reader to the heterogeneity of cosmic horror literature in a chronological fashion. Thus, it has been divided into three major sections: the American, British and beyond anglophone tradition of cosmic horror fiction. The first section provides an exhaustive literature review of American cosmic horror fiction, detailing the canon's origins and evolution within the American context. While discussing the works of almost all the American cosmic horror writers, this section enables this study to define and enunciate its scope by highlighting the writers who will serve as the primary case studies of this thesis. The section begins with an analysis of the pre-Lovecraftian phase of cosmic horror, focusing primarily on the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers, while also discussing the texts by Francis Marion Crawford, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Irvin S. Cobb and Leonard Cline.

Upon discussing Lovecraft's precursors, his contemporaries are examined next – the likes of August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long, Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber, Donald Wandrei, Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith. The section, then, progresses towards a post-Lovecraftian analysis of American cosmic horror fiction, emphasising the works of William Sloane, Ira Levin, Fred Chappell, William Peter Blatty, Brian McNaughton, T. E. D. Klein, Robert R. McCammon and Stephen King. Finally, the post-millennial analysis of American cosmic horror canon includes the works of Caitlín R. Kiernan, Laird Barron, Darrell Schweitzer, John Langan, Michael Wehunt, T. E. Grau and Brian Evenson—though some of these writers are associated with the New Weird movement since these strands of horror fiction often intersect and overlap (discussed in detail later), this study primarily focuses on the cosmic horror fiction produced by these writers. The second section of this chapter is dedicated to the British rendition of the canon, ranging from the texts of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson and M. R. James to the later works by Ramsay Campbell, Robert Aickman, Clive Barker and China Miéville. The British discourse enables a deeper understanding of its American counterpart since Lovecraft—the progenitor of cosmic horror fiction in America—was actively inspired by the works of British authors like Machen, Blackwood and Hodgson, among others. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the cosmic horror tradition beyond the anglophone literary landscape. The primary objective of this chapter is to acquaint the reader with a fundamental understanding of cosmic horror fiction—its genesis and evolution—through an exhaustive literature review. The following section discusses the American canon of cosmic horror fiction.

2.2 The American Tradition of Cosmic Horror Fiction

Lovecraft's Precursors

After having discussed the position of H. P. Lovecraft as the progenitor of cosmic horror fiction in the Introduction to this thesis, this section is set to begin with a discussion of his precursors who had sown the seeds for the growth of a distinctive genre that Lovecraft is credited with. Lovecraft was unique in depicting cosmic horror on a large scale in twentieth century American literature. However, his debt extended to several authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Dunsany, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood and William Hope Hodgson. According to Jonathan Newell, Lovecraft ought to be read and understood as a part of a larger “Weird tradition” since he “looks back to Poe, Machen, Blackwood and Hodgson as modelling the sort of literature that he yearned to create” (163). These precursors of Lovecraft partially addressed the perception-defeating, arcane qualities of literary horror, where characters are gradually illumined about the natural unknown and its debilitating effect on the human mind, often resulting in “a simultaneous commingling of horror and awe” (Moreland 19). There is also a discernible tradition of Weird fiction overlapping the works of Lovecraft, Machen and Poe. Newell connects the dots between these authors using their narratives as examples:

‘Cool Air’ (1928) was rejected by *Weird Tales* for the intensity of its disgusting content. Lovecraft credits the inspiration of the story to ‘The Novel of the White Powder’, an embedded tale in *The Three Imposters* (1895) by Arthur Machen, one of Lovecraft’s literary heroes. Machen’s story, in turn, owes much to Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’ (1845). (2)

Lovecraft, therefore, unequivocally sought inspiration from the early champions of Weird fiction. This study refrains from labelling the works of Poe, Machen, Blackwood and Hodgson² as cosmic horror fiction because, despite harbouring a penchant for the otherworldly, these narratives were almost always limited to encounters between the human and the inexplicable Weird—the latter was often manifested through a corruption of Nature (Blackwood’s “The Willows”, for example). Lovecraft expanded upon the scope of these encounters, which were almost always limited to “corruptions of the flesh and oozing, atavistic horrors” (Newell 61). However, to better understand Lovecraft’s otherworldly threats, this study investigates his precursors’ Weird fiction by comparing and contrasting it with the former’s notion of cosmic horror. This section of the chapter discusses the texts of Lovecraft’s precursors and attempts to locate latent traces of cosmic horror philosophy within them. This section also tries to compare these texts with Lovecraft’s iteration of cosmic horror and, in the process, attempts to understand how they inspired and compelled Lovecraft to pursue his ‘cosmic endeavours’. Dictated by chronology, this study begins with an investigation of Edgar Allan Poe’s macabre fiction, which, according to Lovecraft, emanated an “inborn sense of the spectral, the morbid, and the horrible” (*Supernatural Horror* 55). Lovecraft was in constant awe of Poe’s writing and, in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, devoted an entire chapter to Poe’s contributions to the genre, hailing his narratives as “*alive* in a manner that few others can ever hope to be” (55; emphasis original). Lovecraft’s high regard for Poe’s work is reflected in how he introduces the latter to his readers:

In the eighteen-thirties occurred a literary dawn directly affecting not only the history of the weird tale, but that of short fiction as a whole; and indirectly moulding the trends and fortunes of a great European aesthetic school. It is our good fortune as Americans to be

² I will not be discussing the works of Machen, Blackwood and Hodgson in this section as the trio belongs to the British tradition of Weird fiction and will be examined in Section 2.3 of this chapter.

able to claim that dawn as our own, for it came in the person of our illustrious and unfortunate fellow-countryman Edgar Allan Poe (49).

Lovecraft argued that Poe understood “the psychological basis of the horror appeal” when his gothic predecessors were often plagued by “empty literary conventions such as the happy ending, virtue rewarded”, etc. (49-50). Poe’s work, according to Lovecraft, bore “convincing malignity” and “established a new standard of realism in the annals of literary horror” (50). Moreover, Jonathan Newell suggests that Poe “truly inaugurates weird fiction *avant la lettre*, fixating ... on stories of mental metamorphoses, cosmic entropy and putrescence both physical and spiritual” (5-6). To understand the extent of the aforementioned ‘malignity’ in his fiction, we begin with the analysis of one of Poe’s most celebrated short stories. In “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), Poe describes an unnamed narrator visiting his old companion, Roderick Usher, weighed down by physical and mental discomforts. Usher’s twin, Madeline, suffers from a mysterious ailment for which there is no discernible cure. After spending some time with his peculiar friend, the narrator is engrossed and enchanted by the quaint monotony of the Usher mansion. It is later revealed to the narrator that Madeline has mysteriously died. Upon Roderick’s request, the narrator helps him bury his sister in the manor’s family tomb. The latter half of the story describes the mental and physical collapse of Roderick Usher as the narrative reaches its climax when, on a stormy night, Roderick reveals to the narrator that they may have prematurely entombed his twin sister. At this point, a bloody Madeline barges in and locks her brother in a deadly embrace. The twins die in front of the narrator, who abandons the mansion only to witness the decrepit gothic monstrosity’s inevitable destruction. The “sickening of the heart” in “The Fall of the House of Usher” is amplified by the oppressive and threatening presence of nature that ultimately drives the characters insane and breaks the house asunder (Poe 90).

The climax describes nature swiftly enveloping the property in a “deep and dank tarn” (109), revealing to the narrator the transience of aristocracy, sanity and life itself:

While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘HOUSE OF USHER’ (109).

The narrative conceives the immediate (the house) and the surrounding (the weather) landscape as a reflection of Roderick Usher’s physical and mental disintegration—the decay of the “house, trees, landscape, fungi and water” (Newell 49) collectively act as “an affective assemblage exerting power over the narrator” (49), eating away the protagonist’s initial rationality and pushing the narrative into schizoid chaos. Lovecraft explains that Poe’s narrative “hints shudderingly of obscure life in inorganic things and displays an abnormally linked trinity of entities at the end of a long and isolated family history” (*Supernatural Horror* 54). The ‘trinity’ Lovecraft alludes to here comprises “a brother, his twin sister, and their incredibly ancient house all sharing a single soul and meeting one common dissolution at the same moment” (54). Although not ‘cosmic’ at its core, “The Fall of the House of Usher” arguably influenced Lovecraft’s notion of cosmic horror, not only through its prose style but also through its ominous and lingering sense of inexplicability: “I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness” (Poe 103). Lovecraft is clearly influenced by these ‘vagaries of madness’ and borrows from the annals of Poe’s prose to create an atmosphere of dread and otherworldly malevolence in his narratives.

Poe and Lovecraft, according to Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm, do not rely on “a picturesque, cozy, romantic Gothic”, instead they choose to “unsettle the reader’s sense of the

ordinary, the everyday, the real” (66). T. J. Miller further expounds on this idea by arguing that Lovecraft sought inspiration from Poe’s “piercing of the insubstantial veil that protects humanity from the horror of reality” (133). The ‘horror of reality’ in Poe becomes a ‘cosmic awakening’ in Lovecraft. Apart from drawing inspiration from Poe’s “Usher”, Lovecraft also discusses his other stories such as “MS. Found in a Bottle” (1833), *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* (1838) and “Ligeia” (1838) in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Apart from Poe, Lovecraft was also influenced by the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) describes the titular house with a history of witchcraft in New England: “There it rose, a little withdrawn from the line of the street, but in pride, not modesty. Its whole visible exterior was ornamented with quaint figures, conceived in the grotesqueness of a Gothic fancy” (Hawthorne 24). Lovecraft compared Hawthorne’s depiction of the malevolent ancient house with Poe’s house of Usher, describing the former as “almost as alive as” the latter (*Supernatural Horror* 60). His other novels, such as *The Marble Faun* (1860) and “*Dr. Grimshaw’s Secret*” (1882), along with his shorter prose, including “The Ambitious Guest” (1835), “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1836), “Edward Randolph’s Portrait” (1837) and “Ethan Brand” (1850), can be appreciated as “gentle, elusive, and restrained” evocations of the Weird (58).

Ambrose Bierce, an American Civil War veteran, produced a variety of horror stories, some of which “form a leading element in America’s fund of weird literature” (62). Lovecraft notes that although some of Bierce’s work is “marred by a jaunty and commonplacely artificial style”, there is an unmistakable presence of “grim malevolence” across his narratives (63). In Bierce’s “The Death of Halpin Frayser” (1891), the protagonist dreams about an eerie forest plagued with ominous signs:

As he pressed forward he became conscious that his way was haunted by invisible existences whom he could not definitely figure to his mind. From among the trees on either side he caught broken and incoherent whispers in a strange tongue which yet he partly understood. They seemed to him fragmentary utterances of a monstrous conspiracy against his body and soul (Bierce 6).

The narrative, set “in a weird and horribly ensanguined wood”, finds its denouement when the protagonist meets his death “at the claws of that which had been his fervently loved mother” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 63). His other short stories, such as “An Inhabitant of Carcosa” (1886) and “The Damned Thing” (1893), evoke “a piercing sense of the terror which may reside in the written word” (63). Robert W. Chambers played a pivotal role in influencing Lovecraft’s notion of the cosmic ‘other’. The latter found the former’s strain of horror compelling, “though not without the typical mannered extravagance of the eighteen-nineties” (66).

Chambers is best known for his short story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895). “Loosely organized around the conceit of a mysterious and decadent play” (Weinstock, “Lovecraft’s Things” 68), the collection deals with the themes of madness, tragedy and cosmic fear. “The Yellow Sign” (1895) is arguably the most memorable story from the collection, centred, again, on the legend of ‘The King in Yellow’. Upon reading the entirety of the cursed play, the protagonist, at once, realises that there is no salvation for his soul; he is forever doomed by the poisonous words of ‘the yellow sign’:

Oh the sin of writing such words – words which are clear as crystal, limpid and musical as bubbling springs, words which sparkle and glow like the poisoned diamonds of the Medicis! Oh the wickedness, the hopeless damnation of a soul who could fascinate and paralyse human creatures with such words – words understood by the ignorant and wise

alike, words which are more precious than jewels, more soothing than music, more awful than death! (Chambers 70).

It is well established that Chambers “borrows some motifs” from Ambrose Bierce (Stableford 81), specifically his “An Inhabitant of Carcosa” (1886) and “Haïta, the Shepherd” (1892), which used the names ‘Carcosa’, ‘Hali’ and ‘Hastur’ almost a decade before Chambers did. Lovecraft further cements this argument by observing that Chambers “derives most of the names and allusions connected with his eldritch land of primal memory from the tales of Ambrose Bierce” (*Supernatural Horror* 67). However, Lovecraft too borrows these terms in his narratives, such as “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931), to extend the tradition of the ‘Carcosa’ mythology. There is, thus, a lineage of the horrors of ‘Carcosa’, stemming from Bierce, later adapted by Chambers and made otherworldly by Lovecraft.

Other American authors who contributed to the genesis and evolution of cosmic horror fiction include Francis Marion Crawford, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Irvin S. Cobb, Leonard Cline, Herbert S. Gorman, Leland Hall and Edward Lucas White. Although these writers are not exclusively associated with the cosmic horror canon, their experiments with the Weird led to the subsequent evolution of Lovecraftian cosmicism. For example, Crawford’s short narratives describe the “nightmare struggle with the nameless object” with “incomparable dexterity” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 66). In “For the Blood is the Life” (1905), Crawford tackles the themes of vampirism— an undeniable influence of Bram Stoker (Carter 625), the latter is discussed in the next section. He describes a strange evil residing within the ancestral vault of an ancient house in “The Dead Smile” (1911), whereas “The Upper Berth” (1894), hailed by Lovecraft as his “weird masterpiece”, describes a motley of strange elements such as “the spectral salt-water dampness” and “the strangely open porthole” (*Supernatural Horror* 66). Crawford’s strange

horrors are replaced by uncanny tragedies in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Her celebrated short story collection *The Wind in the Rose-Bush* (1903) offers an “authentic force” of Gothic tropes to elicit genuine dread and horror (67). Nicole A. Diederich argues that there exists an “unspoken terror, beyond language or the symbolic” in Freeman’s narratives (21). Her otherworldly stories, such as “The Lost Ghost” (1903), describe complex female relationships in which “ghostly women take possession of ghostly surrogate daughters” within the larger context of the Weird, often resulting in “ghoulish encounters between dead children and dead or ageing women who have been bereft of the maternal experience” (Elbert 211).

Irvin S. Cobb, on the other hand, weaves a menagerie of “weird specimens” in his fiction (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 68). His “Fishhead” (1911) may be perceived as an early inspiration for Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (Goho 30 and Klein 183), whereas Lovecraft’s “The Rats in the Walls” draws inspiration from Cobb’s “The Unbroken Chain” (1923) (Paz 20). While discussing “Fishhead”, Lovecraft commends the narrative, finding it “banefully effective in its portrayal of unnatural affinities between a hybrid idiot and the strange fish of an isolated lake” (*Supernatural Horror* 68). Cobb’s descriptions of the fish-human hybrids is certainly as terrifying as Lovecraft’s (this study discusses Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” in the next chapter):

His skull sloped back so abruptly that he could hardly be said to have a forehead at all; his chin slanted off right into nothing. His eyes were small and round with shallow, glazed, pale-yellow pupils, and they were set wide apart in his head, and they were unwinking and staring, like a fish’s eyes (qtd. in Ashley 462).

Leonard Cline, in his notable *The Dark Chamber* (1927), describes the total collapse of Richard Pride who, upon undergoing memory therapy with the narrator Oscar Fitzalan, finds himself

caught in a frenzy of murder and suicide. Pride employs “odours, music, and exotic drugs” in an attempt to “recapture every moment of his past life” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 68). However, his ambition transcends *himself* in an effort to experience “the black abysses of *hereditary* memory” and “still more unimaginable deeps of primal time” (68), resulting in irreversible “psychosomatic metamorphosis” within him (Stableford 87). The novel ends in a terminal altercation between a ‘howling’ Pride and his dog who mangle each other to death:

Naked, still gripping in one mud-caked fist the thinner end of a knotted cudgel of polished hornbeam, the other fist thrown out and clutching with spread fingers at the grass; prone, thank heaven, the gray hair matted and unshorn dragging to his shoulders, but the head twisted at a wry angle and under one ear the beginning of a rent where a tusk had ripped in. Richard Pride ... his face buried... (Cline 189).

The theme of *damning* knowledge, evident in Cline’s *The Dark Chamber*, is a recurring motif across the cosmic horror canon.

The latter sections of the chapter discuss how this cursed knowledge of the cosmos—entailing madness or death—evolves and impacts its subjects in the modern renditions of cosmic horror fiction. So far, this section of the chapter has examined all the major proponents of the American Weird fiction school who were instrumental in inspiring and influencing Lovecraft to engender his style of cosmic horror. It is to be noted that other American writers such as Oliver Wendell, Ralph Adams Cram, Herbert S. Gorman, Leland Hall, Edward Lucas White, Henry James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman contributed to the Weird genre as well, but they are not discussed in this study since their contributions are either too insignificant or tangential to the discourse of cosmic horror fiction. The primary objective of this part of the chapter has been to acquaint the reader with the gradual development of the cosmic horror tradition the antecedents of

which—as has already been shown—can be traced as far back as the nineteenth century. Although Lovecraft is considered to be the progenitor of cosmic horror fiction, his debt to his predecessors cannot be ignored. Lovecraft actively sought inspiration from the writers discussed above while describing their work in great detail in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. The likes of Poe, Hawthorne, Bierce and Chambers played an instrumental role in developing the themes and style of Lovecraft's prose. In fact, Lovecraft repeatedly alludes to Poe and his narratives in many of his short stories. For example, in "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928), Lovecraft establishes the genealogical ties of his story with Poe's 1838 novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Similarly, Lovecraft employs recurring terminologies from Chambers' narratives, such as 'Carcosa', 'Hali' and 'Hastur' across his oeuvre. Other American Weird authors such as Francis Marion Crawford, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Irvin S. Cobb, Leonard Cline, Herbert S. Gorman, Leland Hall and Edward Lucas White exhibited and indulged in an acute atmosphere of dread and paranoia, the vagaries of deep time, and unholy copulations between the human and the nonhuman—themes which were later implemented and perfect by Lovecraft in his cosmic horror narratives.

Lovecraft's Contemporaries - "The Lovecraft Circle"

This chapter offers an exhaustive outlook of the history and evolution of the cosmic horror canon within the American tradition and beyond. The previous section discussed the early contributors of the American Weird tradition whose work influenced and compelled Lovecraft to develop his own strand of cosmic horror fiction. Guided by chronology, this section discusses Lovecraft's American contemporaries who produced seminal works of cosmic horror fiction during the first half of the twentieth century. August Derleth came "under the influence of Lovecraft in 1926" and

went on to produce Lovecraftian stories (albeit “conventional” and “stereotypical”) for the next twenty years (Nevins 34). Regarded as the conceiver of the phrase “Cthulhu Mythos”³ (Berruti 388), Derleth indulged in “posthumous collaboration” with Lovecraft to extend and multiply the latter’s incomplete stories (392). However, the Lovecraftian scholarship dismisses Derleth’s crude attempts to build “a substantial similarity between the Cthulhu Mythos and Christianity” since it unequivocally contrasts Lovecraft’s view of an indifferent and amoral universe. Joshi, in a rather stoic way, declares that “almost nothing charitable” can be said about Derleth’s Lovecraftian distortions. (*Unutterable Horror* 526). Despite his myopic view of Lovecraft’s cosmos, Derleth, in his capacity as an editor, “is largely responsible for Lovecraft’s eventual popularity and current position of dominance” (Nevins 35). Derleth’s contributions to the Lovecraftian tradition include short story collections such as *Someone in the Dark* (1941), *Something Near* (1945), *Not Long for this World* (1948), *The Mask of Cthulhu* (1958) and *The Trail of Cthulhu* (1962). Although immense in quantity, Derleth’s cosmic horror narratives do not share the same immensity in their quality, as is noted by critics like Joshi, Nevins and Berruti.

Frank Belknap Long, on the other hand, had a better understanding of Lovecraft’s philosophy, but the former never developed his own style of writing because of his constant attempts to “ape” the latter (Nevins 35). Despite making significant contributions to the genres of mystery and science fiction, Long is remembered “as a footnote to Lovecraft and the weird-fiction tradition he established” (Dziemianowicz, “Long” 371). His short stories, such as “The Space Eaters” (1928) and “The Hounds of Tindalos” (1929) brought nothing new to the cosmic horror tradition and were, in fact, “straightforward Lovecraft pastiches” (Stableford 85). Long even alludes to Abdul Alhazred (author of Lovecraft’s fictitious book *Necronomicon*) in his short story

³ Lovecraft instead used terms like “Arkham Cycle” and “Yog-Sothothery” to describe his ‘cosmic’ mythology (Berruti 411).

“The Were-Snake” (1925) (Dziemianowicz, “Long” 372). Akin to Long, Robert Bloch was inspired by Lovecraft at a young age and greatly benefited from keeping frequent correspondence with the latter (Joshi, “The Cthulhu Mythos” 116). Bloch significantly contributed to the development of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror from 1935 to 1938. His early stories, such as “The Feast in the Abbey” (1935), carry forth the Weird tradition of Poe and Lovecraft. Bloch’s later narratives such as “The Faceless God” (1936), “The Brood of Bubastis” (1937) and “Fane of the Black Pharaoh” (1937) extend the Lovecraftian cosmic horror to Egyptian mythology (Dziemianowicz, “Bloch” 68). However, following Lovecraft’s death in 1937, Bloch diversified his oeuvre into themes of crime and psychological horror, and is best known for his 1959 novel *Psycho*.

Fritz Leiber reveals “strong Lovecraftian influence” in his 1950 short story collection *Night’s Black Agents* (Joshi, “The Cthulhu Mythos” 116). His short story, “A Bit of the Dark World” (1962), describes a group of horror aficionados engaging in supernatural discourse at an isolated house. The denouement of the story presents, in typical Lovecraftian fashion, an encounter between the group and a cosmic entity, the magnitude of which is incomprehensible to the former—a successful attempt at replicating the horror of existence induced by the grandiose of the cosmos. Brian Stableford labels this story as “Leiber’s most adventurous attempt at cosmic horror fiction” (86). His “The Sunken Land” (1942) describes a sunken continent Simorgya – having recently risen back to the surface – in a fashion similar to Lovecraft’s 1928 masterpiece “The Call of Cthulhu” (Joshi, “The Cthulhu Mythos” 117). Leiber had a profound understanding of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror and referred to the latter as “Copernicus of the horror story”, arguing that Lovecraft “shifted the focus of supernatural dread from man and his little world and his gods, to the stars and the black and unplumbed gulfs of intergalactic space” (Leiber 50). Other notable

Lovecraft contemporaries include Donald Wandrei and Robert E. Howard— the former crafted futuristic incarnation of cosmic horror in stories such as “The Red Brain” (1927) describing an all-consuming ‘cosmic dust’, while the latter, another frequent correspondent of Lovecraft, attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to fuse his love for the genres of adventure and fantasy with Lovecraft’s cosmic horror philosophy (Nevins 36).

The final, and arguably the most successful, contributor of cosmic horror fiction during this period was Clark Ashton Smith, whose ‘cosmic’ acumen was lauded by Lovecraft very early on:

Of younger Americans, none strikes the note of cosmic terror so well as the California poet, artist, and fictionist Clark Ashton Smith, whose bizarre writings, drawings, paintings, and stories are the delight of a sensitive few. Mr. Smith has for his background a universe of remote and paralysing fright—jungles of poisonous and iridescent blossoms on the moons of Saturn, evil and grotesque temples in Atlantis, Lemuria, and forgotten elder worlds, and dank morasses of spotted death-fungi in spectral countries beyond earth’s rim (*Supernatural Horror* 69).

Brian Stableford argues that Smith’s correspondence with Lovecraft helped the latter “to move on from the relatively crude conception of ‘cosmic fear’ contained in his essay to a more elaborate and fully-fledged notion of cosmic horror” (81). The theme of cosmic horror is evident in his early tales such as “Marooned in Andromeda” (1930) and “The Amazing Planet” (1931), where he envisions “cosmic horror in terms of a plethora of repulsive alien life-forms” (82). His other narratives such as “The Eternal World” (1932) and “The Dimension of Chance” (1932) describe the liminality of the space-time fabric and the notion of parallel universes. Smith is keenly aware of the terrible consequences of a ‘cosmic’ encounter on the human mind. He argues that “if the

infinite worlds of the cosmos were opened to human vision, the visionary would be overwhelmed by horror” (qtd. in Stableford 81), enunciating the horror of existence born out of cosmicism. Smith describes the tenets of a ‘macrocosmic’ horror tale:

This type of story, because of its very character and purpose, should not, it seems to me, be bound strictly by ‘the practical requisites of literature in general.’ In a tale of the highest imaginative horror, the main object is the creation of a supernatural, extra-human atmosphere; the real actors are the terrible arcanic forces, the esoteric cosmic malignities; and the element of human character, if one is to achieve the highest, most objective artistry, is properly somewhat subordinated in a tale of ordinary and natural happenings (Smith 18).

Despite the subversion of the human characters, Smith’s stories are replete with “ornate, lapidary, sensual descriptions, sardonic authorial viewpoint, decadent tone, gruesome violence, and sexual undercurrents” (Nevins 36), offering a radical departure from Lovecraft’s in terms of their style and content. However, the thematic similarities between the two remain undeniable. Apart from Lovecraft, Smith exhibits a strong influence of Poe. For example, his short stories “The Return of the Sorcerer” (1931) and “The Second Interment” (1933) are heavily inspired by Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and “The Premature Burial” (1844), respectively (Dziemianowicz, “Smith” 551). This section, so far, has attempted to trace the evolution of the cosmic tradition from Lovecraft’s precursors (Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce, Montague Rhodes James, Robert W. Chambers, Francis Marion Crawford, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Irvin S. Cobb and Leonard Cline, among others) to his contemporaries such as August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long, Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber, Donald Wandrei, Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith. The latter category, comprising of Lovecraft’s contemporaries (Lovecraft’s stories are discussed at length in Chapter Two), offers a more nuanced account of cosmic horror

by describing it as an inevitable threat to the human cogito, crippling its fundamental notions of meaning and existence: “Only a thin veil in the perception of reality shields mankind from these outer forces, which are the horrors that control the universe” (Mackley 121).

Post-Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror of the Twentieth Century

The period 1880-1940 witnessed the ‘Golden Age’ of the Weird tale in America (Joshi, “Establishing” 338). This rise in popularity may be attributed to a number of cultural factors and ethos of the age. For instance, there was a steep decline in orthodox religious belief during the later nineteenth century, spearheaded by the dissemination of Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859) which offered “an entirely secular conception of the universe” (338). Furthermore, Joshi argues that when “God is removed from the intellectual and aesthetic landscape” (338), entities such as the ghost and the witch—resting directly or indirectly “upon a religious conception of the universe” (338)—lose their rationale entirely. As a result, monsters in Weird fiction (such as Lovecraft’s Cthulhu or Blackwood’s sinister willows) offered “the terror of the cosmic void suddenly emptied of its comforting and benevolent Creator” (338). The proliferation of the Weird tale during this period may also be attributed to a continuous ‘tradition’ of Weird fiction. The influence of Poe during the latter half of the nineteenth century on writers such as Lovecraft, Ambrose Bierce and Clark Ashton Smith was followed by Lovecraft’s unwavering influence over the likes of August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long and Fritz Leiber, among others. However, the ‘Golden Age’ of Weird fiction was soon followed by a sudden collapse, following the death of Lovecraft in 1937. Although the reasons behind this collapse have already been discussed in the *New Weird* section of the Introduction, they are briefly reiterated here for the reader’s convenience.

The period from 1940 to 1970 witnessed a sudden collapse of the Weird tale because of two primary reasons. First, the emergence of the paperback novel displaced pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* irrevocably. Second, genres such as detective fiction and science fiction grew more profitable and a large number of horror writers gradually migrated towards the profits. According to Joshi, only Shirley Jackson and Robert Aickman “could be said to have attained genuine eminence” as horror writers between 1940 and 1970 (338). Jackson’s brand of horror fiction, although formidable, is not a part of the Weird fiction genre. Aickman, on the other hand, is very much a part of it and is discussed extensively in the next section focusing on the British cosmic horror lineage. Many of the writers discussed in the above section (Lovecraft’s contemporaries) continued writing following the death of Lovecraft. However, some of them, like Robert Bloch and Fritz Leiber, shifted to the genres of suspense and science fiction. Following the sterile period from 1940 to 1970, horror fiction witnessed a reawakening during the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Joshi attributes this “boom” in horror fiction more to cultural and marketing phenomena than literary ones (339). The resuscitation of horror fiction was brought about by the likes of Ira Levin, William Peter Blatty, Thomas Tyron and Stephen King during the latter half of the twentieth century (339). The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of horror fiction solely reliant on the malevolence of Nature, with Grady Hendrix christening the year 1974 as the “Year of the Animal” in his 2017 treatise *Paperbacks from Hell* (81). Peter Benchley’s *Jaws* (1974), James Herbert’s *The Rats* (1974) and *The Fog* (1975), along with Robert Calder’s *The Dogs* (1976) and *The Long Dark Night* (1978) were all published in the same decade.

Herbert also produced two *Rats* sequels— *Lair* (1979) and *Domain* (1984). Similarly, Nick Sharman’s *The Cats* (1977), Arthur Herzog’s *Orca* (1977), David Anne’s *The Folly* (1978), Peter Tremayne’s *The Ants* (1979), Stephen King’s *Cujo* (1981), Shaun Hutson’s *Slugs* (1982), Richard

Haigh's *The Farm* (1984), John Halkin's *Slime* (1984) and Edward Jarvis's *Maggots* (1986), may also be perceived as horror fiction's reincarnation in the form of a vengeful and inherently misanthropic Nature during the latter half of the twentieth century. Since none of these narratives falls within the ambit of cosmic horror, they are not discussed here. However, Chapter Three shall highlight the 'cosmic' treatment of Nature across the canon, focusing on how Nature, rather than being a conduit of the 'cosmic', *becomes* the cosmic, assailing and/or defeating the human cogito in the process. Despite the abundance of creature horror narratives featuring rabid dogs, killer whales, slithering vermin and carnivorous plants, the final decades of the twentieth century were not entirely devoid of cosmic horror fiction. William Sloane's *The Rim of Morning* (1964)—a collection of two novellas—features two of the early cosmic horror narratives of the post-洛夫克拉夫特 period. *The Edge of Running Water*, one of the two novellas, describes the family tragedy suffered by the scientist Julian as witnessed by the latter's colleague academician Richard. The story blends elements of science-fiction and horror, where Julian's desire to communicate with his deceased wife leads him into the invention of a dimension-warping machine, which quickly becomes the gateway of otherworldly monstrosities, finally devouring Julian as it malfunctions and implodes. Preceding this, we are also told that Julian left his New York circle and shifted to a remote village of Maine because "He was still living in that tragic dream, borne of despair and grief, that had taken possession of him the day of Helen's funeral" (Sloane 234).

The American countryside is thus pre-established as a vapid, pastoralist *tabula rasa*, pulling the rational man towards his promethean aberration. The countryside is further described as a dull, homogenous dwelling, punctuating its inconsequentiality at the frontiers of redemption and damnation to be suffered by Julian and Richard. "We New Yorkers become used to audiences which have a good deal of more or less ebullient blood in them...[t]hese people were all of the

same stock and startlingly alike...they had a look of being on the defensive towards life in some way that I could not define" (384-5). The flatness and ennui of the countryside that is "little beyond human need and convenience upon which any concern for animals or landscapes might be founded" (Carr 222), solely works as the narrative's lachrymose setting until consumed by cosmic chaos, repelling the rational observer. The battle is lost, Nature is irredeemable, the rationalist recoils in fear and disgust from its lapsed cinders. The author and the reader do not want to *know* anymore: "he was neither there nor in any other part of this substantial earth. Where the black vortex may have taken him I do not even speculate" (Sloane 464). Richard's physical and psychological withdrawal from Julian's hideout is symptomatic of his demurral of engaging with the possibility of any agentiality of the countryside: whatever unnaturalness happens there should stay buried under the layers of rationalist acculturation and amnesia, leaving the cynic in a cognitive lacuna: "I am I, and he is he. We are separate ontological beings" (Levinas 110).

Many of Lovecraft's contemporaries (discussed above) continued his 'cosmic' tradition during the latter half of the twentieth century. Fritz Leiber's "A Bit of the Dark World" (1962) along with August Derleth's *The Mask of Cthulhu* (1958) and *The Trail of Cthulhu* (1962) have all been discussed in the previous section. Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) and its subsequent film adaptation by Roman Polanski in 1968 "began horror literature's change in direction, away from a niche interest and toward something that everyone read" (Nevins 80). *Rosemary's Baby*, although dealing with devil worshipping cults, may not be an ideal candidate for the scope of this study since the narrative does not exhibit the fundamental tenets of cosmic horror philosophy. However, the novel must be credited for revolutionising the entire landscape of American horror fiction, inevitably influencing the further development of cosmic horror fiction: "[*Rosemary's Baby*] triggered the whole modern boom in American horror fiction - making possible the success

of William Peter Blatty's (much inferior) *The Exorcist* (1971), the *Omen/Damien* cycle of films, and the careers of novelists Stephen King and Peter Straub among many others" (Pringle 103; brackets mine). Fred Chappell's 1968 novel *Dagon* blended psychological and cosmic horror in an attempt to extend the post-Lovecraftian Cthulhu Mythos. Stefan Dziemianowicz observes that *Dagon* is "one of the few attempts at visionary horror in the Lovecraftian vein to succeed at novel length" ("Chappell" 133). Peter Leland, the protagonist of the novel, retires to his quaint family home to work on his thesis concerning the "Philistine fertility god" Dagon (133). He is soon sexually infatuated by the daughter of a sharecropper, who is later revealed to be the "flesh-and-blood embodiment" of the contents of his thesis. Under her influence, he murders his wife and eventually submits himself to the woman, who reduces him to "a bestial level" (133). The denouement of the story presents a terrifying conflation between Leland and a cosmic void. Dziemianowicz argues that despite exhibiting more of Faulkner than Lovecraft, the novel presents its protagonist as quintessentially Lovecraftian, "whose world view is shattered by the unpalatable truths he uncovers" (133). The inevitable threat to human existence is evident in instances of post-Lovecraftian cosmic horror fiction: "Like Lovecraft's characters, he [Leland] is discomposed by the revelation that morality, religious faith and other systems of belief are flimsy security blankets people use to shield themselves from the chaos of existence" (133; brackets mine).

Similarly, William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), which can be called 'Lovecraftian' because of its alignment of cosmic threat to a chaotic and uncivilised orient, unambiguously posits the Iraqi rural (Pazuzu, the demon-villain of the story, is the Mesopotamian spirit of violent wind of the mountains) as the evil invader of the Edenic American city-space that can only be halted by the members of the city-church at great personal cost: "It was arguably the work most responsible for making readers aware that horror could be both a genre of effect and a literature of ideas"

(Nevins 140). Other notable horror narratives of the period such as Thomas Tyron's *The Other* (1971), Robert Marasco's *Burnt Offerings* (1973), Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) and *Salem's Lot* (1975), Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) Peter Straub's 1979 novel *Ghost Story*, along with the works of Michael Crichton and Dean Koontz, albeit having nothing to do with cosmic horror, are worth mentioning here because of the fundamental role they played in the genre's evolution. Brian McNaughton's *Satan's Love Child* (1980), on the other hand, describes the trans-dimensional cosmic "Older Gods", who appear to be inspired by the Lovecraftian Elder Gods (Hendrix 40). Although a fervent tale of sex, murder and satanism, the narrative does exhibit intermittent instances of cosmic horror philosophy, as is echoed by Grady Hendrix: "McNaughton is writing about a Lovecraftian universe that shows no mercy for fragile humans and their petty emotions" (41). T. E. D. Klein, on the other hand, is viewed by critics such as Jess Nevins as "an inheritor of the Machen and Lovecraft traditions and ideas" (Nevins 169). The same view is echoed by Joshi who notes that "Klein achieves a seamless blending of the mundane realism so prevalent in weird writing today and the cosmic horror of Machen, Blackwood and Lovecraft" ("Klein" 329). Klein 'modernises' the cosmic horror of Lovecraft in the sense that his characters are often "contemporary, intelligent, and self-aware" when juxtaposed with otherworldly horrors (Nevins 169).

Nevins goes on to stress Klein's exclusivity in the American horror landscape: "Literate, atmospheric, sardonic, worldly, and intricately meshing mundane realism and cosmic terror, Klein is nearly *sui generis* among horror writers" (169; emphasis original). In "Children of the Kingdom" (1980), Klein describes "a race of blind albinos infesting the sewers" (Latham 599), eager to copulate with the 'human' occupants of the town. Latham argues that Klein's narrative manages to echo Lovecraft's "essential *alienness* of big-city life" (599; emphasis original). *The Ceremonies*

(1986), Klein's only novel, is "a conscious adaptation" of Arthur Machen's "The White People" (1899), describing the conflict between a young girl and a witch-cult (Joshi, "Klein" 329). Robert R. McCammon's *Swan Song* (1987), albeit post-apocalyptic, may be interpreted as a work of cosmic horror due to the incomprehensibility of the demonic shapeshifter in the narrative. Stephen King, on the other hand, cannot be contained within a single subgenre of horror as "his books often cross genre boundaries and customarily mix fantasy, science fiction, and the supernatural" (Nevins 141-2). Although King has dabbled in cosmic horror fiction, at the same time, "some of his horror is supernatural, some psychological, and some physical" (142). However, King's short story "Crouch End" (1980), originally published in *New Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (1980), offers his interpretation of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror. "Crouch End" becomes an important case study at this juncture because it is one of the few narratives written in the final decades of the twentieth century that replicates the essence of Lovecraftian cosmic horror. Set in the eponymous London suburb of Crouch End, the plot chronicles the account of Doris Freeman, an American woman reporting the disappearance of her husband Lonnie. Doris describes the events of the strange night which estranged herself from her husband, stressing upon the fact that the night was illuminated not by Earth's stars but an alien sky: "As if she was on a different planet, a place so alien that the human mind could not even begin to comprehend it. The *angles* seemed different, she said. The *colors* seemed different" (King 26; emphasis original). Freeman later reveals that an otherworldly being had consumed Lonnie and describes the strangeness of the surrounding area where the disappearance took place:

And the names on the signboards (she said) became progressively stranger, lunatic, and certainly unpronounceable. The vowels were in the wrong places, and consonants had been strung together in a way that would make it impossible for any human tongue to get around

them, CTHULU KRYON read one, with more of those Arabian pothooks beneath it. YOGSOGGOTH read another, R'YELEH said yet another. There was one that she remembered particularly: NRTESN NYARLAHOTEP (25).

One of the two policemen investigating the case, Vetter, speculates that Crouch End could perhaps be a gateway between different planes of existence: “Crouch End’s one of those thin places” (6)— similar to the case of the willows in Algernon Blackwood’s eponymous short story (to be discussed in the final section of this chapter). The story ends in ambiguity: Vetter dies of a mysterious heart attack; his partner, Farnham is never seen again; and Doris, after a failed suicide attempt, is institutionalised in a mental hospital in America. The story ends with an ominous warning: “And in Cround End, which is really a quiet suburb of London, strange things still happen. From time to time” (32). The narrative, akin to Lovecraft’s stories, entails either madness or death for the subjects of cosmic horror. Doris’ failed suicide attempt and her subsequent madness strengthen my argument that cosmic horror is, in fact, a horror of existence. Chapter Three details the intertwining of cosmic and existential horror using the work of the major proponents of cosmic horror fiction of this period—Stephen King’s short story “Children of the Corn” (1978), T.E.D. Klein’s *The Ceremonies* (1984) and Robert McCammon’s *Swan Song* (1987). The chapter employs these narratives to trace the evolution of the cosmic horror canon from the post-Lovecraftian era to the post-millennial. There is, however, a significant interstitial presence between these two periods which needs to be discussed here. The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic resurgence of the cosmic horror tradition through the works of Thomas Ligotti, which, according to Aldana Reyes and M’Rabty, “belongs firmly in the traditions of Edgar Allan Poe and Lovecraft” (125). His short story collections such as *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (1985), *Grimscribe: His Lives and Works* (1991), *Noctuary* (1994) and *Teatro*

Grotesco (2006) carry forth the aesthetics of twentieth century Lovecraftian cosmic horror and conflate them with the plurality of post-millennial cosmic horror fiction. Chapter Three discusses this evolution in detail using Ligotti's "The Sect of the Idiot" (1986), "The Mystics of Muelenburg" (1986) and "Nethescurial" (1991) as primary case studies.

Post-millennial Cosmic Horror

This section, so far, has traced the genesis and evolution of American cosmic horror canon by broadly categorising the major works into four periods: the Lovecraftian precursors (Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers, among others), the contemporaries of Lovecraft (August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long, Robert Bloch and Fritz Leiber, among others) and the post-Lovecraftian authors (T. E. D. Klein, Robert R. McCammon, Thomas Ligotti and Stephen King, among others). The final period—the post-millennial era—serves as a conclusion to this historiographical analysis of American cosmic horror fiction. The nascent incarnation of Weird fiction—the New Weird—has already been discussed in the introduction of the thesis and, thus, is only briefly reiterated here. It has also been established that not all New Weird narratives are examples of post-millennial cosmic horror fiction; instead the latter may be better understood as one of the many appendages of the former. For this reason, New Weird authors such as China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, K. J. Bishop and Steph Swainston are not discussed in this study in much detail. Their work—a canonical part of the New Weird tradition—does not overlap with the cosmic horror philosophy. Joshi, in his Introduction to *Black Wings of Cthulhu* (2010), observes that although many of Lovecraftian themes have now become "passé" in contemporary horror canon, his core tenets of "cosmicism; the horrors of human and cosmic history; the overtaking of the human psyche by alien incursion" continue to "remain eternally

viable” in the contemporary world marked by “global warming or the continuing probing of deep space” (8). Unlike the post-Lovecraftian cosmic horror fiction of the twentieth century, its post-millennial counterpart strives to be more *original* rather than a mere “pastiche” (8).

For example, Caitlín R. Kiernan’s 2008 short story “Pickman’s Other Model (1929)”, despite serving as a direct sequel to Lovecraft’s “Pickman’s Model” (1927), stresses the themes of drug abuse, debauchery, necrophilia, occultation and nudity, instead of solely reanimating the Cthulhu Mythos. The narrator—a friend of William Thurber (protagonist of Lovecraft’s “Pickman’s Model”)—comes across two nude sketches, drawn by Pickman, in the possession of his deceased friend Thurber. Intrigued by the “feral face” in front of him (Kiernan 23), the narrator decides to pursue the subject of Pickman’s sketches—Vera. Upon investigation, he discovers that Vera’s troubled past is plagued with rumours of witchcraft, incest and cannibalism. The denouement of the story chronicles a meeting between Vera and the narrator. He returns the two sketches to Vera and nonchalantly enquires about Pickman’s addition of a tail in them: “a crooked, malformed thing sprouting from the base of the coccyx and reaching halfway to the bend of the subject’s knees” (43). Vera reveals that it was no imagination of the artist but her hereditary deformity. Kiernan hints towards human-otherworldly miscegenation when Vera ruminates on the words of her father: “He was always so proud, you see, that his daughter’s body was blessed with evidence of her heritage. It made him very happy” (44). A few days later, the narrator learns of Vera’s tragic end—disembowelled and naked, her body is found dangling off a tree.

The final lines of the story describe the narrator ruminating on the folio of Pickman’s sketches, realising that he too has been cursed by Pickman’s vision: “I know the dreams will not desert me, not now nor at some future time, but I pray for such fortune as to have seen the last of the waking horrors that my foolish, prying mind has called forth” (46). The theme of forbidden

and/or cursed otherworldly knowledge entailing madness or suicide is prevalent in Kiernan's story. She even echoes Lovecraft's fascination with the notion of 'deep time' in her 2001 novel *Threshold: A Novel of Deep Time*, where she reflects on the theme of human insignificance juxtaposed with a concept of time that "shifts and bends" (Sederholm, "The New Weird" 171)—a deliberate attempt to challenge and/or deconstruct the human understanding of the universe. Similarly, Laird Barron's 2012 novel *The Croning* slyly suggests the presence of inexplicably weird phenomena operating beyond the facade of reality, the knowledge of which may collapse the natural order of things. His other stories, such as "The Men from Porlock" (2011) and "Hand of Glory" (2012), again, offer suggestions of an impenetrable cosmos—one that is revealed neither to the characters nor the reader. "The Broadsword" (2010), on the other hand, describes a grotesque species of shapeshifters who treat humanity as their primary source of nourishment. At the end of the story, the protagonist is overcome with a terrifying revelation—he too has become one of *them*: "He touched his face, probing a moist delineation just beneath the hairline; a fissure, a fleshy zipper. ... Pershing gripped a flap of skin. He swept his hand down and ripped away all the frailties of humanity" (Barron 169).

In a similar fashion, Darrell Schweitzer, in his "Ghost Dancing" (2010), unravels the mystery of how the Lovecraftian Old Ones found their way to Earth in a post-apocalyptic setting. Schweitzer describes a world in disarray with "mountains of flesh, miles high, roaring up out of the depths, tidal waves and tsunamis wiping out major cities in minutes" (128). Eric—the protagonist of the story—is reluctant to meet his old friend Tillinghast, seemingly because the duo were involved in cultist activities when they were young, resulting in the awakening of the Old Ones. Despite his initial inhibitions, Eric decides to visit him. Schweitzer offers a glimpse of the magnitude and corrosion of the entire planet as his characters are watching the news together:

The Pope raises his hands and calls out to God to rescue the faithful in this time of greatest need, and he calls on the multitudes to renew their faith in Christ and look to the scriptures for some hope in the days to come—only by then the multitudes aren’t paying much attention because St. Peter’s Square has broken out in a bedlam of panic and carnage as something black and oily and huge starts pouring out of the sky, splattering across the floodlit dome like an immense, palpitating stain, pouring onto the crowd below (132).

Schweitzer masterfully employs the crumbling of religion and faith to accentuate the efficacy and nonchalance of the imminent cosmos. The story reaches its climax when Tillinghast escorts Eric to a cultist gathering “just like old times” (135).

It is later revealed that they had only “opened the gate just a crack” the last time and wish to open it completely now by sacrificing a young girl at the cosmic altar: “We have to open the gate all the way, to make ourselves useful to our new masters, so there will be a place for us in the new world” (136). The story ends with Eric killing Tillinghast in an attempt to save the girl. However, as he slowly succumbs to his death, Eric wonders “if he’s accomplished anything” (138)—implying that resistance against the inevitable always ends in futility. The contemporary status of cosmic horror fiction is being shaped by the likes of John Langan, Michael Wehunt, T. E. Grau and Brian Evenson. Langan, for example, brings to life an ancient Leviathan in his 2016 novel *The Fisherman*—a narrative interspersed with loss and grief. His short story collections, such as *The Wide Carnivorous Sky and Other Monstrous Geographies* (2013) and *Sefira and Other Betrayals* (2019), offer a nuanced juxtaposition of cosmic horror and ecology. Instead of describing Nature as a corruptible and, thus, subservient entity, Wehunt chooses to arm it with cosmic machinations in his 2016 collection *Greener Pastures*. Grau’s *The Nameless Dark: A Collection* (2015) and Evenson’s *A Collapse of Horses* (2016) further strengthen Nature’s agency

in the cosmic domain. Wehunt's "Beside Me Singing in the Wilderness" (2014), Grau's "Return of the Prodigy" (2015) and Langan's "The Shallows" (2013) and "Bor Urus" (2019) are discussed in Chapter Three of this study to enunciate the evolution of cosmic horror canon and the horror of existence it entails on its subjects while focusing on the theme of an agential Nature.

It is pertinent to briefly discuss select works of New Weird tradition before concluding this section. Cosmic horror, especially its post-millennial rendition, may be recognised as one of the many parts of the New Weird tradition. Despite the plurality of terminology, works of Weird, New Weird and cosmic horror fiction often transgress "established generic boundaries" (Weinstock, "The New Weird" 182). Thus, there is bound to be an overlap of themes every now and then. (Kiernan, for example, despite her Lovecraftian forays, is well associated with the New Weird movement.) Jeff VanderMeer—a proponent of the New Weird, but inevitably linked to a "larger tradition" of the Lovecraftian Weird (Glover 180)—offers brief descriptions of what may be construed as a form of cosmic horror in his *The Southern Reach* trilogy (2014). The expansive narrative describes a cataclysmic 'Area X' plagued with otherworldly incursions: "Area X has been created by an organism left behind by a civilization so advanced and so ancient and so alien to us and our own intent and our own thought processes that it has long since left us behind, left everything behind" (VanderMeer 209). VanderMeer's description of Area X's origins is reminiscent of Lovecraft's treatment of Antarctica and the "Old Ones" in his 1936 novella "At the Mountains of Madness", which details the advent of all life on Earth via cosmic machinations: "Their original place of advent to the planet was the Antarctic Ocean, and it is likely that they came not long after the matter forming the moon was wrenched from the neighbouring South Pacific" ("At the Mountains" 440). Furthermore, there are instances of the Lovecraftian *unknowability* within VanderMeer's narrative:

As I adjusted to the light, the Crawler kept changing at a lightning pace, as if to mock my ability to comprehend it. It was a figure within a series of refracted panes of glass. It was a series of layers in the shape of an archway. It was a great sluglike monster ringed by satellites of even odder creatures. It was a glistening star. My eyes kept glancing off it as if an optic nerve was not enough. Then it became an overwhelming *hugeness* (176; emphasis original).

Gry Ulstein argues that the “hugeness, the oddness, the overwhelming of the senses” present in the narrative is reminiscent of “Lovecraft’s Cthulhu” (85). Vestiges of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror—the otherworldly threat that assails human cogito—are sparsely scattered across New Weird narratives. Though its presence is undeniable, cosmic horror is relegated to a secondary role in these narratives, often eclipsed by elements of “science fiction, urban fantasy and second-world fantasy” (Newell 7). Xavier Aldana Reyes, while commenting on the works of New Weirdists such as Jeff VanderMeer, China Miéville, K. J. Bishop and Steph Swainston, argues that “they can only be partially called horror” because these texts are “label-resistant” and, hence, prove that “horror can manifest effectively beyond strictly delineated generic boundaries” (Aldana Reyes, “Post-Millennial” 208). The next section, detailing the beyond-American tradition of cosmic horror, briefly discusses the salient works of China Miéville, K. J. Bishop and Steph Swainston. This section, in summary, has detailed the genesis and evolution of the American cosmic horror canon, starting from its early renditions in Poe, Hawthorne, Bierce and Chambers and concluding with the modern ‘cosmic’ mutations in the works of Kiernan, Barron, Schewitzer, Langan, Wehunt, Grau, Evenson and VanderMeer. The final section of this chapter details the evolution of the cosmic horror tradition beyond the American landscape—primarily focusing on

the British strain—to examine the impact of the philosophy on subsequent literary movements (existentialism, for example) in twentieth century Europe, and beyond.

2.3 Cosmic Horror Tradition Beyond America

The British Strain of Cosmic Horror

Although this study is primarily focused on the evolution of the cosmic horror canon in America, it is important to discuss the state of its European counterpart as well. This section of the chapter, therefore, examines, albeit briefly, the works of cosmic horror fiction, and its earlier Weird predecessors, beyond the American literary landscape. Apart from the British strain of cosmic horror fiction, this section also examines the tradition beyond the anglophone world. Lovecraft, although seeped in the American tradition of Weird fiction, admired a plethora of British authors and even emulated their style to develop his cosmicism. He found the literature of the British Isles to be “gratifyingly fertile in the element of the weird” (*Supernatural Horror* 71). The British Weird tradition of the *fin de siècle* (near the end of the nineteenth century) was already fecund and gained gradual mainstream popularity during the end of the nineteenth century (Machin 79). Early traces of Weird fiction can be found in Rudyard Kipling’s 1888 anthology *The Phantom Rickshaw and Other Tales*. The eponymous story, set in Shimla, describes the narrator Jack’s eventual mental collapse upon encountering a series of phantoms. “The Mark of the Beast” (1891), another short story by Kipling, describes the morbid transformation of Fleete into an animal:

Fleete could not speak, he could only snarl, and his snarls were those of a wolf, not a man.

The human spirit must have been giving way all day and have died out with twilight. We were dealing with a beast that had once been Fleete (Kipling 299).

The witnesses of Fleete's inexplicable transformation describe it as "beyond any human and rational experience" (299)—a common trope of Weird fiction.

Fleete's animalistic transformation can also be compared to that of Gregor Samsa's in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), who undergoes a similar transformation—the cause of which is never disclosed—into an insect. *The Metamorphosis*, and other Kafkaesque narratives, are discussed in Chapter Two. Lovecraft finds "indubitable mastery" in Kipling's short horror narratives and argues that even the final defeat of malevolence "does not impair the force of the tale or the validity of its mystery" (*Supernatural Horror* 71). Oscar Wilde—placed amongst the pantheon of early Weird writers by Lovecraft (72)—chronicles the tale of an ageing portrait in his celebrated novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The protagonist, Dorian Gray, who is no longer prone to the deceleration of ageing (his portrait ages in his stead), engages in an "excess of vice and crime" (72). In an attempt to destroy the portrait, and to rid himself of the "moral degeneracy" associated with it (72), Dorian Gray stabs it with a knife, murdering himself in the process: "Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognised who it was" (Wilde 213). In his 1901 novel *The Purple Cloud*, Matthew Phipps Shiel narrates the polar expedition of Adam Jefferson who encounters the eponymous mysterious cloud responsible for humanity's extinction.

The post-apocalyptic setting of the novel meticulously details the "sensations of this lone survivor as he realises his position, and roams through the corpse-littered and treasure-strown cities of the world as their absolute master" (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 72). In a similar fashion, Shiel's "The House of Sounds" (1911) describes a sub-arctic tower plagued with an inexplicable centuries-old evil. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), according to James Machin, is not an archetype

of “‘true’ weird fiction,” but the narrative explicitly expresses a “desire” to align itself with “the notion of the weird” (47). Stoker’s *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911), on the other hand, describes a monstrous creature of primitive origins. One may speculate that Stoker’s early visions of the ‘monstrous’ had significant impact on Lovecraft’s conception of Cthulhu, however, the latter found Stoker’s prose to be “infantile”, marred by “poor technique” which impairs the “net effect” of horror (*Supernatural Horror* 73). Other Weird authors of the period include Walter de la Mare and May Sinclair. The former is lauded by Lovecraft for his description of “unreality” as a “vivid, living presence” (75); while the latter described instances of “traditional occultism” more than “the stark phenomena of a cosmos utterly unreal” (76). Similarly, we observe an invocation of the ‘horrific’ within the prosaic in the texts of Montague Rhodes James: “Creating the illusion of every-day events, he introduces his abnormal phenomena cautiously and gradually; relieved at every turn by touches of homely and prosaic detail, and sometimes spiced with a snatch or two of antiquarian scholarship” (94).

James’ “Count Magnus” (1904) appears to have influenced Lovecraft’s “The Rats in the Walls” (1924), as both narratives deal with a dilapidated edifice belonging to an ancient family, hiding a sinister secret within itself. In the end, following the death of the protagonist, the manor is abandoned with no possible redemption in sight: “It had stood empty since 1863, and there seemed no prospect of letting it” (James 108). He further contributed to the evolution of the genre through narratives such as “The Treasure of Abbot Thomas” (1904) and ““Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad”” (1904). It is pertinent to mention here that the likes of H. G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle, though they are associated with different genres, contributed to the school of Weird fiction along with the likes of Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, Vernon Lee, Thomas Preskett Prest and Wilkie Collins during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The following paragraphs detail

an exhaustive analysis of Lovecraft's major British precursors who influenced his understanding of the Weird and the cosmic tale. Whereas Lovecraft observed a commingling of fear and dread in Poe, he found an unprecedented cosmic scale in Arthur Machen, even suggesting that "few if any can hope to equal the versatile Arthur Machen" in terms of "cosmic fear raised to its most artistic pitch" (*Supernatural Horror* 82). Machen's stories such as *The Three Impostors* (1895), "The Red Hand" (1895), "The White People" (1904) and "The Shining Pyramid" (1923), according to Lovecraft, delineate "the extremes of stark fear" (88).

The Great God Pan (1894), one of the stories discussed at length in Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, is a tale of a macabre experiment exposing the Western protagonist to a "vast and monstrous deity of Nature" (83), who investigates the pagan bestiality and copulation surrounding the half-demon, half-animal deity—namely, Pan. The story begins with the brain surgery of a young woman who, after this procedure, becomes susceptible to the presence of certain 'deities' of nature. Her inevitable death is followed by the sudden appearance of a young, wild girl, Helen, who happens to be the daughter of the deceased woman. Helen, through the years, torments the town, drives its denizens to death and murder, influences artists to paint Witches' Sabbath, and leaves a trail of suicides wherever she goes. She is eventually apprehended and is discovered to be the unholy progeny of the demon deity Pan. The novel ends with Helen undergoing transmutations of form and sex as she is put to death. The characters are left awed and overwhelmed by the inscrutability of the events that they witness: "'My God!' he had exclaimed, 'think, think, what you are saying. It is too incredible, too monstrous; such things can never be in this quiet world...Why, man, if such a case were possible, our earth would be a nightmare'" (Machen 45-6). Machen's uncaring and indifferent interpretation of the universe bears

significant resemblance with Lovecraft's manifestation of the cosmos. Newell emphasises these striking parallels between Machen and Lovecraft:

We find in Machen's stories figures and imagery that epitomise weird fiction, figures that reappear thirty years later in Lovecraft's writing: antediluvian monsters from the depths of abysses of deep time, hybrid creatures produced through the interbreeding of human beings and otherworldly forces, and the inkling of non-human powers lurking behind the façade of everyday existence (58).

Machen's narrative is much closer to the Lovecraftian cosmic horror than Poe's. Here, we see an inexplicable human-transcendent deity that corrupts the natural order and balance of the quotidian rural life, similar to the elder gods in many of Lovecraft's short stories. Newell argues that the universe of Machen's narratives is "doggedly anti-anthropocentric"; he perceives Machen's god to be "anti-anthropomorphic" and utterly indifferent to the plight of humanity: "Machen's God is not some distant, anthropoid sovereign operating from outside the universe, but a mysterious force known and felt subconsciously, coursing through everything and everyone" (Newell 62). We find the same degree of misanthropy in many Lovecraftian cosmic horror narratives such as "The Call of Cthulhu", "The Dunwich Horror", and "The Shadow over Innsmouth", which are discussed in the next chapter. The misanthropy of Machen is replaced by the idea of an "unreal world" in the works of Algernon Blackwood (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 88), who was lauded by Lovecraft as "the one absolute and unquestioned master of weird atmosphere" (89), with his work "closely wedded to the idea of an unreal world constantly pressing upon ours" (88). Rather than focusing on demonic beings, Blackwood surrounds himself with fear lurking within nature, emphasising its alien and 'un-human' character in the process, as is echoed

by Newell: “In Blackwood’s writing, Nature emerges as at once utterly other – alien, unthinkable, indifferent to the human system of value and, simultaneously, all-encompassing” (95).

Replete with wonder, awe, horror and disgust, Blackwood’s perception of nature transcends beyond human logic and understanding and incessantly “threatens to subsume the integrity of human subjectivity” (97). His “The Willows” (1907) describes two voyagers, resting near the Danube River, plagued by inexplicable disturbances perhaps caused by an interdimensional rift: “We happen to have camped in a spot where their region touches ours, where the veil between has worn thin” (Blackwood 52). Blackwood attributes malevolent characteristics to the landscape surrounding the two protagonists, especially the dense outgrowth of the titular willows, which “moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method” (29). The duo is tormented by the inexplicable enchantment of the willows as their attempts to communicate with or rationalise the *intent* of the monstrous vegetation go to waste. In the end, they are spared by the willows, which are somehow satiated by the death of a peasant. The highlight of the story is its ambiguity, as Blackwood deliberately refuses to offer explanations. He hints about the presence of an interdimensional rift within the willows, but that is as far as he attempts to explain the phenomenon. There is no description of a macabre history or a demonic deity that could serve as the *face* of the evil. Instead, Blackwood, akin to Lovecraft’s brand of cosmic horror, leaves the reader with an overpowering sense of ambiguity that is as dense and opaque as the willows themselves:

‘It’s the willows, of course. The willows *mask* the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we’re lost, lost utterly.’ He looked at me with an expression so calm, so determined, so sincere, that I no longer had any doubts as to his sanity. He was as sane as any man ever was. ‘If we can hold out through the night,’ he

added, ‘we may get off in the daylight unnoticed, or rather, *undiscovered*’ (53; emphasis original).

This deliberate ambiguity is a recurrent motif in many of Lovecraft’s short stories. He deliberately moulds his prose to mirror the inexplicability of his cosmic elements, expounded by Graham Harman, who argues that the real and visible objects within the Lovecraftian cosmic horror narratives are “locked in impossible tension with the crippled descriptive powers of language” (36). Elaborations are avoided intentionally, descriptions are left baroque, and the tension is also apparent in Lovecraft’s treatment of the mundane and the supramundane. In both stories, Lovecraft pitches the cosmic supernatural against the bewilderment of “human reason” (Matolcsy 181), generally positing “gentlemanly students, professors, and scholars” (176), against the “supramundane” (167) that exceeds human understanding and is not part of Nature. Thus, it becomes evident that Lovecraft’s rendition of cosmic horror was unequivocally inspired by the latent inexplicability of Blackwood’s narratives such as “The Willows”, “The Wendigo” (1910) and “Smith: An Episode in a Lodging-House” (1906). He borrowed elements of mystifying nature from Blackwood and transformed them into the inscrutability of the cosmos in stories such as “Polaris” (1920), “The Colour Out of Space” (1927) and “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1933). The ambiguity of Blackwood’s plots is complemented by the specificity of William Hope Hodgson’s—the former refuses to reveal the source of horror while the latter describes it in great detail (often in terms of fungal corruption). While discussing the works of Hodgson, Lovecraft regards him as “second only to Algernon Blackwood in his serious treatment of unreality” (*Supernatural Horror* 77).

Hodgson used animate fungi (a recurrent motif in his fiction), overtaking flora and fauna alike, in his “The Voice in the Night” (1907). The story describes the adventures of a shipwrecked

couple who find themselves stranded on an island seemingly devoid of human presence. While foraging for food, they discover a number of ships decaying and decomposing under the slow consumption of a peculiar fungus. Eventually, they realise that they, too, have started becoming hosts for the omnipresent fungus, and the couple fight the urge to satiate their hunger by eating the same fungus. Towards the end of the narrative, the couple is disoriented by the shocking discovery that the “strange masses of fungus they had seen previously are, in fact, former human beings, shipwrecked souls like themselves, totally consumed by the spreading stuff” (Newell 138). The fungi’s eventual takeover of the human mind and body, rendering them a mere cog in the grand scheme of the fungal invasion, is interestingly interpreted by Newell as an instance of a ‘reverse colonisation’ in which “nature colonises human bodies, transforming them to show that the very idea of human separateness from the surrounding environment is a delusion, and replacing this anthropocentrism with a vision of post-human trans-corporeality” (136). Lovecraft clearly filtered out the vestiges of nature’s malevolence and hybridity from Hodgson’s narratives. For example, in his “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936), Lovecraft describes an aberration of the recognisable human physiology as well as its surroundings resulting from an evil pact made with an ancient monstrous race living deep beneath the ocean—another unfamiliar cosmic zone in the Lovecraftian lore.

In the end, the commonplace human habitation of Innsmouth is overtaken by the fish-human hybrids whose “forms vaguely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes that never closed” (Lovecraft, “The Shadow” 353). Lovecraft, therefore, transcends Hodgson by resorting to the possibility of copulation between humans and *corrupted* Nature, whereas the latter limits himself to the fungal degradation of the human body. Both narratives, however, rest on the idea of human/Nature hybridity. Furthermore, Lovecraft (and

cosmic horror literature in general) sought inspiration not only from the fungal infestations of Hodgson's narratives but also from his otherworldly realms of the cosmic. Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908), regarded by Lovecraft as his "greatest" work (*Supernatural Horror* 77), describes a desolate habitation plagued by hybrid monstrosities. The short novel displays acute instantiation of cosmicism using the protagonist's spiritual journey through the "limitless light-years of cosmic space and kalpas of eternity" (77). Hodgson's malevolent fungi, human-Nature hybridity, and the concepts of deep space and time permeate not only Lovecraftian lore but also contemporary cosmic horror literature. Another major writer who greatly influenced Lovecraft's 'cosmic' literature was Lord Dunsany, who, in the former's own words, pinnacled "the creation of a gorgeous and languorous world of iridescently exotic vision" (*Supernatural Horror* 91). According to Joshi, "Lovecraft idolized [Dunsany] for several years after first encountering his work in the fall of 1919" ("Lovecraft and the Titans" 156). Lovecraft's appreciation for Dunsany is evident in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, where he lauds the latter's texts as "truly cosmic" for his milieu (91):

Inventor of a new mythology and weaver of surprising folklore, Lord Dunsany stands dedicated to a strange world of fantastic beauty, and pledged to eternal warfare against the coarseness and ugliness of diurnal reality. His point of view is the most truly cosmic of any held in the literature of any period (91).

It is documented that Lovecraft read a bulk of Dunsany's short stories, including his celebrated collections such as *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905) and *Tales of Three Hemispheres* (1919), which influenced the former's writing for years to come (Joshi, "Lovecraft and the Titans" 156). Joshi speculates that Lovecraft's "Polaris" (1920) could be perceived as a "strikingly 'Dunsanian'" tale "in its use of a dream-setting and prose-poetic language" (156). His other short story

collections, such as *The Book of Wonder* (1912), are filled with descriptions of giant spider idols, thieves jumping over the edge of the world, strange treasure guardians, forest-dwelling Gnoles, the City of Never, and a frightened Sphinx in the forest:

And the Sphinx in her menaced house — I know not how she fared — whether she gazes for ever, disconsolate, at the deed, remembering only in her smitten mind, at which the little boys now leer, that she once knew well those things at which man stands aghast; or whether in the end she crept away, and clambering horribly from abyss to abyss, came at last to higher things, and is wise and eternal still. For who knows of madness whether it is divine or whether it be of the pit? (Dunsany 18-9).

A Dreamer's Tales (1910), yet another anthology, “tells of the mystery that sent forth all men from Bethmoora in the desert”, among others (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 92). More fantastical than horrific, his short story collections pave the way for his short plays, which, in Lovecraft's words, are “replete with spectral fear” (92). These include descriptions of walking statues in *The Gods of the Mountain* (1911), monstrous ‘Hindoo’ gods in *A Night at an Inn* (1916) and doomed cities at the edge of the jungle in *The Laughter of the Gods* (1922).

The impact that Machen, Blackwood, Hodgson and Dunsany (along with Poe, discussed in the previous section) had on Lovecraft's synthesis of cosmic horror fiction is undeniable. The otherworldly ‘gods’ of Lovecraft, including the later iterations of cosmic horror fiction in general, were clearly inspired by the psychological dread and solitude of Poe, the cosmic expanse of Machen, the inexplicability of Blackwood, the bodily corruption of Hodgson and the dream-induced vagaries of Dunsany. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of cosmic horror fiction in Britain through the oeuvre of Ramsey Campbell and Robert Aickman. In “The Franklyn Paragraphs” (1967), Campbell emulates Lovecraft's “documentary style” as the

story is replete with “letters, newspaper articles, telegrams” (Joshi, *Ramsey Campbell* 29). The plot revolves around cultist practices in honour of the Lovecraftian Elder Gods. His 1969 short story “Cold Print” describes the fictional cosmic manuscript *The Revelations of Glaaki* – an echo of Lovecraft’s fictional treatise *Necronomicon* – and the cosmic entity Y’gononac: “... for even the minions of Cthulhu dare not speak of Y’gononac; yet the time will come when Y’gononac strides forth from the loneliness of aeons to walk once more among men ...” (Campbell, “Cold Print” 214). Upon finding the manuscript at a bookstore, Campbell’s protagonist, Sam Strutt, encounters the cosmic entity Y’gononac and the former meets his demise amidst bouts of “paranoid delusions” (Joshi, *Ramsey Campbell* 29). Similarly, Campbell’s 1986 novel *The Hungry Moon* describes the town of Moonwell harbouring an ancient lunar entity, which once released shrouds the town in perennial darkness and returns to the moon:

The moon was already dead, she saw. Water and atmosphere had evaporated, and the globe seemed dry and hollow as a husk in a spider’s web. Meteors still dug into the surface, causing it to erupt in huge volcanic craters. The bursting of the surface made her think of corruption, life growing in decay, hatching. But that wasn’t what terrified her, made her struggle to draw back from the moon while there was still time. She sensed that however dead the globe was, it harbored awareness. The earth was being watched (Campbell, *The Hungry Moon* 214).

Joshi labels the above description of the lunar entity as “the only genuine Lovecraftian moment” in the novel (*Ramsey Campbell* 36). However, Joshi commends Campbell’s rendition of cosmic horror as it does not overly rely on the Cthulhu Mythos: “Campbell has learned to insinuate Lovecraftian elements into tales and novels that outwardly owe little to Lovecraft and go far beyond mere pastiche” (25). Similarly, while commenting on the work of Robert Aickman, Joshi

states that his “‘strange stories’ were virtually the sole instances of short horror fiction in the 1960s” (12). Aickman’s narratives are characterised by their “very powerful weird conceptions” and “indefinableness” (Joshi, “Aickman” 3). For example, in his 1975 short story “Niemandswasser” (No Man’s Water), Aickman chronicles the melancholia of Elmo who succumbs to suicide upon facing rejection of his beloved. Upon confining himself to a dilapidated manor near the shore of Lake Constance in Berlin, Elmo learns of the part of the lake which belongs to nobody—no man’s water. He eventually learns about the legends surrounding that part of the lake, entailing death, vanishing and madness:

“If any man examines his inner truth with both eyes wide open, and his inner eye wide open also, he will be overcome with terror at what he finds. That, I have always supposed, is why we hear these stories about a region of our lake. Out there, on the water, in darkness, out of sight, men encounter the image within them. Or so they suppose. It is not to be expected that many will return unscathed” (Aickman 76).

The denouement of the story describes Elmo submitting himself to the ‘goddess’ of the lake, fulfilling his suicidal ambition. The legend of the lake, specifically the no man’s water, is, once again, an instance of otherworldly knowledge entailing insanity and/or death. The ‘unknowability’ behind Aickman’s lore aggravates the limitation of human knowledge—a fundamental tenet of cosmic horror philosophy.

This section concludes by briefly mentioning the works of two prominent British horror writers operating during and after the turn of the twenty-first century. Clive Barker, in his “The Skins of the Fathers” (1984), takes the Lovecraftian model of antagonistic cosmic beings and turns it on its head by “making his equally marginal demons the heroes, the ‘true’ fathers of the human species” (Badley 98). His 1986 novel *The Hellbound Heart* and its sequel *The Scarlet Gospels*

(2015) describe the demonic Cenobites who are unable to discern human emotions of pain and pleasure. On the other hand, China Miéville—“a central author, and critic, of New Weird fiction” (Weinstock, “The New Weird” 181)—combines the elements of Weird fiction, science fiction, fantasy and steampunk in his narratives such as *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2002) and *Iron Council* (2004). Though his works are a distant departure from the Lovecraftian cosmicism, his affiliation with the New Weird tradition merits his inclusion in this study. This study has traced the evolution of the British strain of cosmic horror fiction in this section of the chapter—focusing upon the primary influences of Lovecraft, while also discussing the works of post-Lovecraftian British authors such as Aickman, Campbell and Barker. The British strain of cosmic horror influenced its American counterpart in the sense that Lovecraft was fascinated by the works of Machen, Blackwood, Hodgson and Dunsany, which, in turn, shaped the entire American cosmic horror tradition, thereby making the two inextricably linked. Furthermore, cosmic horror fiction—both American and British—undeniably affects the existential ‘normalcy’ of its subjects, rendering them vulnerable to threats of insignificance and indifference in an inscrutable cosmos, often entailing a loss of sanity. These themes are explored in detail in Chapter Two of this study by comparing the Lovecraftian texts of cosmic horror with the existential works of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Cosmic Horror Beyond the Anglophone World

So far, this chapter has examined the cosmic horror traditions of America and Britain from their inception in the nineteenth century to their respective contemporary status. This section briefly discusses, in a non-chronological manner, the works of cosmic horror fiction beyond these two literary landscapes. The Czech author Emanuel Lešehrad’s short stories like “The Demon,” “The

Old Mirror's Memories," and "The Love of Aunt Zofia", published between 1911 and 1919, are labelled as "proto-Lovecraftian cosmic horror" by Jess Nevins (69). Polish author, Jerzy Sosnkowski, in his short story collection *Żywe Powietrze* (1926)—Living Air—offers descriptions of "geometric monsters, 'intelligence of the skies,' and cosmic horrors not unlike those Lovecraft was writing about" (74). His work is often characterised by descriptions of uncharted territories, undiscovered domains and unfathomable heights of the sky. In the Japanese horror tradition, manga artist Daijiro Morohoshi blends Japanese folklore with the otherworldly Lovecraftian gods, whereas Hideyuki Kikuchi emulates the Western cosmic horror philosophy with violence and gore: "The horror of Hideyuki's work is sensationalist in nature, violent and gory" (212). Furthermore, Ito Junji's bleak rendition of horror is also inspired by the works of Lovecraft as he attempts to exhibit the whimsical nature of the universe in victimising its subjects: "[Junji's] universe is cruel, random, and capricious, with protagonists being victimised by unnatural or supernatural beings and events either randomly or for some minor violation of social norms" (213; brackets mine). The Belgian author, Eddy C. Bertin, through his science fictional plots, subjects his characters to "psychological cosmic horror" in stories such as "Dunwich Dreams, Dunwich Screams" (2005)—a twist on the iconic Lovecraft narrative which includes Henry VIII's armies looming large across the eerie streets of Dunwich.

Kuwait's Qasim Khadir Qasim draws upon the works of "Poe [and] Lovecraft" in his 1978 short story collection *Madinatt Al-Reyaah* (Nevins 223). Germany's Michael Siefener employs "Lovecraftian imagery" to weave together narratives "dealing with loneliness and social anxieties" (218-9). On the other hand, the Frenchman Robert Clauzel describes "extra-dimensional horrors impinging on our universe and threatening humanity" by blending the genres of science fiction and horror (218). Clauzel's compatriot Michel Bernanos extends "beyond the Lovecraftian

uncaring universe” by imagining reality as inherently misanthropic in *The Other Side of the Mountain* (1967)—a novel inspired by the stories of Poe, Hodgson and Lovecraft (131-2). Luis G. Abbadie’s short stories not only contribute to the Cthulhu Mythos but contemporise it “for the late twentieth century” and make it more accessible and ‘regional’ for his native Mexican audience (207). His 1998 short story “Of the Doom of Irem” acts as a chapter of Lovecraft’s infamous fictitious grimoire *Necronomicon*, detailing the architecture, and the subsequent destruction, of the Lovecraftian city of Irem. Similarly, Daina Chaviano extends the Lovecraftian mythos by extending it to Cuba as he describes “Havana as the point of departure for trips into other dimensions” (205). Mercè Rodoreda, while drawing inspiration from Poe and Lovecraft, uses her short stories to chronicle “the horrors of how men treat women and the horrors of war, especially the horrors suffered by civilians during the Spanish Civil War” (134). Finally, the Australian author, K. J. Bishop extends the New Weird tradition in her 2004 novel *The Etched City*. These are some pertinent examples of cosmic horror fiction beyond the American and British literary landscapes. The plurality of these narratives goes on to prove the canon’s resilience and popularity across the globe.

2.4 Conclusion

In terms of overarching analysis, this study, so far, has discussed the definitions and explanations concerning Lovecraft’s cosmicism provided in the Introduction chapter. Beginning with a discourse on Weird fiction—its origins and evolution from the confines of the Gothic tradition—the chapter employed the works of theorists such as Jonathan Newell, Michael Cisco and Mark Fisher to establish the ‘otherness’ of Weird fiction in the sense that the ‘weird threats’ do not *belong* to our familiar conception of reality. The very existence of these threats assails the schema

that we use to comprehend the world: “Absolute differences of essence are obliterated by the enmonstered reality that the affects of weird fiction convey” (Newell 4). Cosmic horror, thus, becomes that category of the Weird genre in which the incursion becomes otherworldly and is shrouded in its innate unknowability. Otherworldliness and unknowability of the threat become the distinctive features of cosmic horror fiction. Although the term ‘cosmic horror’ was being used by other writers and philosophers, it was Lovecraft who developed and perfected it to the extent that the philosophy has become virtually synonymous with his work. Furthermore, Lovecraft emphasised that cosmic knowledge must not be trifled with, as it is not meant to be comprehended by the *feeble* human cogito: “but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age” (“The Call of Cthulhu” 61).

Cosmic horror—the otherworldly knowledge that drives one mad—thus strips humanity of all its anthropocentric conceits, rendering its actions and ambitions insignificant and futile in an indifferent universe. Thus, cosmic horror—a notion entirely *alien* to human comprehension—takes the form of horror of existence, threatening our very ontology from afar. It is interesting to observe that an otherworldly phenomenon has its most acute impact on something as intimate as the very notion of our existence. This theme is further explored in Chapter Two by scrutinising the texts of Lovecraft and contrasting their inherent horror of existence with that of existentialists such as Kafka, Camus and Sartre. Chapter Three examines the post-millennial rendition of cosmic horror, while comparing it with the post-Lovecraftian texts of the latter half of the twentieth century, focusing on the ‘cosmic’ treatment of Nature and the horror of existence it entails. The primary aim of this chapter was to establish and instantiate the fundamental tenets of cosmic horror

philosophy engendered by Lovecraft through an exhaustive literature review of the canon. The opening section began with an exhaustive analysis of Poe's short stories "penetrating to every festering horror in the gaily painted mockery called existence" (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 51). Other than Poe, the section also detailed the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers—all of whom inspired the Lovecraftian cosmicism. Other notable horror writers of the time such as Francis Marion Crawford, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Irvin S. Cobb and Leonard Cline were also discussed briefly.

The section then progressed from Lovecraft's precursors to his contemporaries and examined the 'inferior' Cthulhu Mythos of August Derleth, the Lovecraftian pastiche developed by Frank Belknap Long, the expansion of the mythos to the Egyptian pantheon by Robert Bloch, the encounter with the 'cosmic' in Fritz Leiber, the futuristic incarnation of cosmic horror in Donald Wandrei, the conflation of horror and fantasy in Robert E. Howard, and, finally, the esoteric malignance of the cosmos in Clark Ashton Smith. The Weird tradition in the latter half of the twentieth century, upon encountering a sudden collapse from the 1940s to the 1970s, witnessed its resuscitation during the 70s, 80s and 90s through the works of William Sloane, Ira Levin, William Peter Blatty, Thomas Tyron and Stephen King. Furthermore, the chapter also discussed the cosmic horror variants of Fred Chappell, Brian McNaughton, T. E. D. Klein, Robert R. McCammon and Thomas Ligotti. The final period of the American cosmic horror tradition is its post-millennial rendition, marked by the works of Caitlín R. Kiernan, Laird Barron, Darrell Schweitzer, John Langan, Michael Wehunt, T. E. Grau and Brian Evenson. The section discussed how these authors extended the Lovecraftian tradition to hitherto unexplored themes of ecocriticism, sexuality and religion in their narratives. Although this study is primarily concerned with the American cosmic horror canon, the chapter also detailed its British counterpart as the two

are inextricably linked through a common lineage of ideas. For example, Lovecraft was clearly inspired by the works of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson and M. R. James—all of which were discussed at length in the final section of this chapter.

Moreover, the works of British authors operating on the fringes of cosmicism, such as Rudyard Kipling, Oscar Wilde, Matthew Phipps Shiel, Bram Stoker, Walter de la Mare and May Sinclair, were also briefly examined. Finally, the section ended with an analysis of later ‘cosmic’ narratives of Ramsay Campbell, Robert Aickman, Clive Barker and China Miéville. From the examination of the American and British strains of cosmic horror fiction, it is evident that the two traditions are intertwined as they continue to inspire and emulate one another—as is evident through the case studies discussed above. Finally, the chapter concluded with a brief examination of the Lovecraftian impact beyond the anglophone literature of America and Britain. This chapter, in conclusion, has served as a compendium of cosmic horror literature across the globe—from its inception to its contemporary variations. Having traced a comprehensive historiographical analysis of the canon, this thesis can now explore more profound inquiries in the subsequent chapters. However, despite the exhaustive literature review, there remains one significant gap not yet addressed—namely, Lovecraft’s primary texts. Chapter Two addresses this gap by focusing on Lovecraft’s short stories while juxtaposing them with existentialist works to ascertain the *true* nature of the existential horror that comes with Lovecraft’s cosmicism. This juxtaposition becomes the basis for raising pertinent questions in the process: How do the Lovecraftian tales emanate a *genuine* horror of existence? How is it any different from the works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre, who were operating roughly during the same time period in Europe? Can Lovecraft’s philosophy of cosmicism be used to examine and understand these existentialist works? Are the two schools,

despite their veritable differences, inextricably linked? These queries are explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Three:

Lovecraft's Cosmicism and the Inevitable Horror of Existence

3.1 Introduction

The introduction to this thesis outlined the ideology and the fundamental principles of cosmic horror fiction along with the tenets of its philosophy engendered by Lovecraft and perfected by his post-millennial successors. Chapter One, on the other hand, described the genesis and evolution of the cosmic horror literature along with its inherent plurality which, according to Robert H. Waugh, “came about in part through his encounter with his predecessors” (Waugh ix). The previous chapter, therefore, focused on the evolution of the canon from its inception through its Weird predecessors to its pinnacle during the Lovecraftian age and, finally, to its contemporary post-millennial mutation. Apart from discussing the American tradition of cosmic horror, the chapter briefly discussed its British counterpart, along with its influence beyond these two literary landscapes. Based on this extensive analysis, the previous chapter brought to light the influence of Lovecraft's precursors (such as Poe, Hawthorne, Bierce and Chambers) on the development of his philosophy and prose. Having acquainted the reader with the overarching canon of cosmic horror fiction, this chapter focuses on the works of Lovecraft. Specifically, this chapter sets out to reinterpret the Lovecraftian cosmic horror by examining its impact on the quotidian existence of his fictional characters. In order to understand the existential import of a frightening, otherworldly and non-anthropocentric experience, it is crucial to examine the very nature of Existentialism first. The chapter argues for the plausibility of an existentialist analysis and interpretation of cosmic horror through a rigorous exploration of seminal existentialist texts by juxtaposing them with Lovecraft's cosmic horror ideology.

The existentialist texts written during the first half of the twentieth century offer a twofold advantage to this study. First, the existentialist texts analysed here offer an unprecedented insight into the vagaries of the human condition. Robert C. Solomon, while analysing the fictions of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, notes that their work was rooted in “extreme experiences, life-and-death situations, impossible choices in war and in interpersonal conflict, life at the bottom, personal trauma, cynicism” (4). Their texts exemplify the constant tension between the abstract, indifferent nature of being and humanity’s inherent need to rationalise it. This conflict, when magnified on a cosmic scale, offers a reflection of Lovecraft’s philosophy in which humanity’s anthropocentric hubris is not only displaced but shattered. Second, it is interesting to observe that the two schools of fiction at hand—the Lovecraftian and the European existentialist—pinnacled during the first half of the twentieth century, thereby triggering a comparative and *contemporaneous* analysis of the two, focusing on their backgrounds and socio-political milieus despite being written in different continents. The chapter, consequently, is divided into two parts. The first part examines how two different literary movements (cosmic horror and existentialist literature), across two different continents and nourished within the same time period, have so much in common. It discusses the philosophical convergence between cosmic horror fiction and twentieth century existentialism—attributing a secondary layer of understanding to the indifference and infinitude of cosmic horror philosophy. It also introduces the concept of the “dark epiphany”—a horrifying awakening which may be characterised as the “most terrible conception of the human brain” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 14)—that acts as a common thread between the two divergent schools of fiction. From the existentialist vantage point, Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925), Camus’ *The Plague* (1947) and Sartre’s “No Exit” (1944) are used as the primary case studies in this section to gauge the extent of an existentially *wrecked* human condition. The second section of the chapter

discusses Lovecraftian short stories while juxtaposing them with existentialist texts to examine the severity of human existential debilitation caused by cosmic horror. Focusing on Lovecraftian texts such as “The Dunwich Horror” (1929), “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931), “The Dreams in the Witch-House” (1933) and “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936), among others, this section compares and contrasts the ‘cosmic awakening’ in Lovecraftian texts with the ‘*human* Sisyphian awakening’ described in the texts of Kafka, Camus and Sartre.

At this juncture, it is important to address the ‘why’ of this convergence: Why equate Lovecraft’s cosmicism with the inexorability of existentialism? Lovecraft and the existentialists were exploring different ways of describing the gravity of human existence in emotionally negative and debilitating terms during the first half of the twentieth century—for Lovecraft it was cosmicism, for Kafka inescapability, for Camus absurdity, and for Sartre freedom. Although catalysed by very different socio-political reasons (mentioned in the next section), they concurrently described the themes of alienation (Lovecraft’s “Polaris” (1920) and Camus’ *The Outsider* (1942)), inescapability (Lovecraft’s “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936) and Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925)), futility (Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936) and Camus’ *The Plague* (1947)) and the horror of existence (Lovecraft’s “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1937) and Sartre’s “No Exit” (1944)) in their fiction. Despite belonging to diverging schools of fiction, the overlapping themes between Lovecraft’s cosmicism and European existentialism offer an unprecedented avenue of exploration for this study. This study does not claim that Lovecraft was an existentialist or that all existentialist texts may be regarded as cosmic horror fiction; instead it aims to examine how these two very different literary styles catering to “a [distinct] public defined in its diversity, dispersion, and heterogeneity” (Cohen 482; brackets mine) characterise their unique perception of an indifferent and meaningless cosmos. Through this comparative analysis,

it may be argued that *some* of the Lovecraftian texts emanate strong existentialist values, whereas some existentialist works may plausibly be seen as akin to the Lovecraftian tenets of cosmic horror. Furthermore, by focusing on the precise moment of the dark epiphany within these narratives, this chapter examines the very nature of the existential horror born out of these two strands of thought. Chapter Two, therefore, takes shape of a comparative analysis of the Lovecraftian and the existentialist notions of futility—thereby contextualising Lovecraft’s cosmic horror in a wider trans-atlantic literary landscape to better understand his “aesthetics of terror” (Newell 163).

3.2 Socio-Political Milieus

Lovecraft was prominently active between 1917 and 1937 and produced a prolific amount of short stories in that period (Joshi, *A Subtler Magick* 112). However, if we take a trans-Atlantic leap to Europe, this particular time frame was ominous—that is, engulfed in the travesty of the First World War and anxious anticipation of the second. The European milieu of the early twentieth century was very different from the one Lovecraft was subjected to in America. Lovecraft’s European contemporaries, such as Kafka, Sartre and Camus, were “[w]riting in the midst of war” (Solomon 4). It may seem that the only conceivable logic of juxtaposing Lovecraft with the aforementioned existentialists is chronology, however, this study argues that there exist certain strands within their distinct philosophies which bring them together in ways hitherto unexplored, and these cannot be rationalised only by the chronological overlap. Before exploring this thematic overlap, a brief investigation into the socio-political milieus of Lovecraft and the twentieth century European existentialists is undertaken here. For Lovecraft, the otherworldly threat of ‘alien’ beings was born out of racism and fear of “miscegenation and immigration” during the immigration influx in America (Frye 244), whereas in Europe the great wars brought with them an air of human futility

and absurdity that ironically nourished writers such as Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Further, this study claims that working under contrasting socio-political milieus (the immigration-wave in the US during the early 1900s (Hirschman and Mogford 898), and the decadent colonialism of Europe (Macqueen xv))⁴, these authors were haunted by the “indescribable universe where contradiction, antinomy, anguish, or impotency reigns” (Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” 511).

As Hirschman and Mogford write about the trend of immigration into the US during the twentieth century, “the number of foreign born increased from almost 7 million to a little under 14 million” in the early years of the twentieth century (898). Lovecraft perceived this rise in the immigrant population as a threat to the ‘American’ way of life, “laying a charge of devil-worshippers on the immigrant populations” in many of his short stories (Steadman 114). Similarly, the early works of Camus and Sartre, according to Robert C. Solomon, were “poisoned” due to the “despairingly pessimistic” atmosphere of Europe riddled with wars and invasions during the first half of the twentieth century (5). Their work accurately reflected the trauma of its time while often resorting to “dark irony and humour” (5). Camus and Sartre produced seminal works of existential literature “just before, during, and after the Second World War, the Nazi occupation of France, the horrors of Stalinism, and the incipient Algerian war” (5). Whereas Lovecraft’s horror emanated from his purist ideology (immigration influx in America and his fear of miscegenation, as has been previously discussed), it is difficult to isolate the precise source of despair in the twentieth century existentialists. The atmosphere in Europe at that time, according to Solomon, was poisonous:

⁴ Norrie Macqueen describes the turn of the twentieth century as “the most intense period of European colonialism” in which “a small number of European powers controlled the greater part of the surface of the planet”, affecting more than a million lives in the process. See Norrie Macqueen, *Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. xv.

“Cities were in ruins, populations were humiliated, and the mood was despairingly pessimistic” (5). The milieu was ripe for the existential ruminations of Camus and Sartre.

Jacques Hardré argues that the onslaught of the Second World War compelled the young French writers of that time to question the existence of virtues and morality in a world that is “basically absurd, governed not by laws of progress or by divine providence, but through pure chance” (534). For Kafka, on the other hand, it was the First World War that destabilised his “socio-political world”, intensifying his “sense of unbelonging, both culturally and linguistically” (Weller 787). The same could be said for Lovecraft who was concerned with the “sanctity” of the “American culture-stream” which, he believed, was being ‘polluted’ by the contribution of immigrants (Frye 250). Miscegenation, be it racial, cultural or intellectual, was Lovecraft’s biggest nightmare as it posed a threat to his “God-given right to superior status and economic dominance” (Steadman 2). In his “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”, for example, Lovecraft describes miscegenation between humans and ancient fish-like Deep Ones as an unholy copulation entailing chaos and destruction. There was, thus, contradiction and anguish for authors on either end of the spectrum of this study. Lovecraft and the existentialists were weighed down by their cultural milieus which coerced them to acknowledge the bleakness of meaningless existence and futility. The burden of a futile existence, albeit arising out of varying socio-political reasons, compelled these writers to ponder over the possibility of a horrifying reaction to existential absurdity or meaninglessness of life through their fiction—and this is precisely where these two seemingly divergent schools of thought begin to converge.

However, before discussing the point of convergence between the Lovecraftian and the existentialist school, it is pertinent to address their varying climactic sensibilities. The Lovecraftian narrative is apparently distinct from existentialist literature because, in the latter, there are no hints

of malevolent deities scheming against the human world from the remote corners of the universe. The difference lies in the scale of horror: Lovecraft invokes the many-tentacled, colossal, half-seen “abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy” as the primary signifiers of the human ephemerality (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 95), while the existentialists depend less on the somatic proportion of the antagonist and more on the internal crises caused by the system, autocracy and governance resulting in a “weariness tinged with amazement” (Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” 503). Unlike Lovecraft’s ‘corporeal’ Elder Gods whose physical existence poses a threat to humanity’s anthropomorphic conceit, the source of horror in existentialist literature is the non-corporeal, pervasive and palpable angst surrounding the human condition. Furthermore, cosmic horror is marked by a depiction of the loss of human reason and sanity in the face of a hostile cosmic existence entailing a “defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 14). But the existentialist ideology refuses to succumb to the threat posed by the overwhelming and meaningless universe. Instead, existentialism advocates in favor of living an authentic life which may be animated by freedom (Sartre called his ideology “a doctrine of action” (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 10)), or emboldened by rebellion (Camus triumphantly proclaimed “I rebel -- therefore we exist” (*The Rebel* 10)). One can perceive the case studies used in the later sections as parables to the morality of existentialist thought. While they may seem pessimistic, they still disseminate the virtues of an authentic and truthful life, as a “palpable love of life” may be found even in the most “dreary political and moralistic [existential] prose” (Solomon 5; brackets mine).

While cosmic horror freezes over in abject terror after the dawning of realisation, existentialist literature struggles against this epiphany and attempts to embrace it in order to salvage or create some meaning in a meaningless universe (although, as we will see in the case

studies, the triumph remains elusive). As has been amply theorised by numerous critics (the likes of Jacques Hardré, Rudi Visker and Hazel Estella Barnes)⁵ including Camus and Sartre, existentialism is a form of ‘humanism’ that ought to serve as a tool for humanity’s liberation from the meaninglessness exerted by the mechanistic modern civilisation. Existentialism stands against all forms of “quietism and inaction” precipitated by authority (Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 27), and mobilises the human being to accept and resist: “He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” 541). This is surely contrary/progressive to Lovecraft’s denouement of frozen terror and surrendering of agency. And yet, this study argues, both canons depend on an intrinsic existential awakening—the dark epiphany. This dark epiphany may be perceived as an intrinsic connection between these two seemingly divergent branches of fiction; and this convergence is explained by an identical epiphany of inconsequentiality that is common to both. The next section discusses the notion of the dark epiphany in relation to cosmic and existentialist literature.

3.3 The Dark Epiphany

This section isolates the point of convergence between Lovecraft’s cosmic horror fiction and twentieth century existentialist literature. The point of convergence, this study argues, is a moment in the narrative when the characters are *awakened* to recognise their own insignificance and purposelessness while encountering the overwhelming cosmic, often resulting in unconditional surrender and incessant despair. This study terms this ‘horrifying’ awakening the “dark epiphany”.

⁵ See Hardré, Jacques. “Sartre’s Existentialism and Humanism.” *Studies in Philology*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1952, pp. 534–47; Visker, Rudi. “Was existentialism truly a humanism?” *Sartre Studies International* 13.1 (2007): 3-15; and Barnes, Hazel Estella. *Humanistic existentialism: The literature of possibility*. Vol. 145. U of Nebraska Press, 1959.

Thacker calls it “black illumination”, which acquaints the human being with “the indifference of the unhuman world” (Thacker, *Tentacles Vol. 3* 127). In spite of its phonetic and conceptual similarity to Thacker’s terms, the notion of “dark epiphany”, as used in this study, is distinct from Thacker’s. Thacker uses his term as a generalised philosophical reflection to define the “impossibility of experience” and “emptiness of thought” emanating from supernatural horror experiences (128):

Perhaps it is within frozen thought that we see something different, something on the order of deep time and the scale of the unhuman. Perhaps within frozen thought we really find what we might call a *black illumination*. The black illumination is a degree zero of thought, inaccessible to the senses, unintelligible to thought, impossible to experience ... In the black illumination, thought does not exist, but instead subsists, persists, and even resists” (128; emphasis original).

Whereas the dark epiphany is tracing the precise moment of absolute surrender or defeat across cosmic and existential narratives. Thacker uses his “black illumination” to articulate the limit and/or impossibility of thought, and the subsequent breakdown of the “philosophy of horror” into “*the horror of philosophy*” (131; emphasis original). While Thacker’s term operates across the diverse literary landscape of supernatural horror, dark epiphany limits itself to the existential awakening caused by the indifference and meaninglessness of the universe. The term is deployed here as a specific narrative device focusing on the exact moment of absolute submission/defeat emanating from what Camus calls a “definitive awakening” (“The Myth of Sisyphus” 503).

The dark epiphany is brought forth by unintelligible and often indifferent forces operating beyond the edge of human comprehension, which, according to Ben Bradley, recognise “no sentient life at all and no memories or trace of humanity—just a cold, lifeless universe” (409). This

study argues that both cosmic horror and existential literature seem to depend on—to borrow a term from Thacker’s seminal *Horror of Philosophy*—a ‘terrible’ realisation that the human being is surrounded by a perennial, unceasing cosmic void that is “inaccessible to the senses, unintelligible to thought, impossible to experience”, that was and will remain before and after humanity itself (*Tentacles Vol. 3* 128). Traces of Thacker’s ‘inaccessibility’ can be found in Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926); ‘unintelligibility’ in Lovecraft’s “The Rats in the Walls” (1924) and “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936); and ‘impossibility’ in Sartre’s “No Exit” (1944)—with dark epiphany playing an integral role in all these narratives. This moment of realisation (dark epiphany) can be construed as the genesis of true fear in both cosmic horror and existentialist literature. In existentialist literature, for example, this moment comes through the harrowing recognition of the absurd in quotidian existence:

But everyone knows that life isn’t really worth living. In the end, I knew it didn’t matter much whether you died at thirty or at seventy, because in either case other men and women would of course go on living, and it would be like that for thousands of years. Nothing was more obvious, in fact (Camus, *The Outsider* 103).

Whereas in Lovecraft, it comes while encountering the Old Ones (cosmic gods), resulting in a loss of sanity, obliteration of language, or the annihilation of the self: “I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 97).

The epiphany breeds trauma and incredulity that deconstructs the usual: “the fundamental character of existence that people with complete knowledge get destroyed” (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 37). In other words, both the cosmic and existential deliver a truth to be borne by the human subject alone, as it may be too much to bear for the ignorant populace and has to be

“thinned out, veiled over, sweetened up, dumbed down, and lied about” to continue with the daily existence (37). Nietzsche appears to be prescient of Lovecraft in his *The Will to Power* (1901) in claiming that the pursuit of truth is a smokescreen for the human to avoid facing “the terrifying and questionable character of existence” (451). The obsession with truth is an anthropic falsity, as every truth is contextual, and takes us further away from realising the real nature of life (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* xxii). Lovecraft mirrors Nietzsche’s views as the former advocates that we as a species are not meant to unravel certain truths; it is better for humankind to stray far away from them; upon their discovery “we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age” (“The Call of Cthulhu” 61). In *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufman argues that Nietzsche “might well be called an existentialist” in that he “occupies a central place” in the history of existentialism, since many works of Sartre and Camus are “unthinkable without him” (20-1). Kaufman adds: “[T]he conclusion of Camus’ ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ sounds like a distant echo of Nietzsche ... Nietzsche is the first name mentioned in Sartre’s philosophic main work, *L’être et le néant* [Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology (1943)]” (21; brackets mine). This study argues that Nietzsche’s ‘terrible truth’, Lovecraft’s ‘forbidden knowledge’, as well as the existentialists’ ‘awakening to the absurd’, all converge towards a moment of cold comprehension—a dark epiphany—which renders its subjects powerless and submissive. As we will see, the two strands of literature (existential and cosmic horror fiction) represent this epiphanic moment in a similar fashion, building up from the same quotidian drudgery that implodes under the weight of the dawning of the meaninglessness of existence, rendering the observer bewildered and alienated in the ‘normal’ surrounding. Both are focused on the ephemerality of the anthropocentric, self-serving daily life in relation to the eternal, unmoving, inscrutable cosmic

scheme that does not often care about the human being's vanity and struggles. Therefore, the next sections look at the epiphanic moment—the dawning realisation of human insignificance within an uncaring cosmos—in the works of Lovecraft along with those of Kafka, Sartre and Camus.

To understand the 'dark epiphany' in the aforescribed sense, the following sections are divided into two major parts. The first section investigates the seminal works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre to ascertain the unmistakable presence of a progressively increasing dark epiphany in their narratives. The second discusses the short stories of Lovecraft, carefully tracing a gradual progression of the dark epiphany in its intensity and impact. In the process, the following sections draw parallels between the two strands of fiction, discuss their ideological overlaps and raise pertinent questions concerning the *cosmic* and the *existential* encounters in a "universe of indiscriminate butchery and mutual slaughter" (Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* xvii). It is important to reiterate the central hypothesis of this chapter here: it argues that the major authors associated with the twentieth century literary existential school of Europe—Kafka, Sartre and Camus—are tangibly connected to the spirit of the cosmic horror literature engendered by Lovecraft. More precisely, these two literary strains often display a similar epiphany in their narratives, one that makes their subjects conscious of the futility of their human existence under the complete control of an inscrutable cosmic force. Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), Camus' *The Plague* (1947) and Sartre's "No Exit" (1944) will be the primary case studies in the following section. An examination of these existentialist texts will offer a comparative pedestal to analyse the nature of existential debilitation caused by cosmic forces in Lovecraftian narratives. In the process, this study attempts to understand the nature of human condition under extreme duress—unsettled by an indefatigable, extrasensory, dispassionate and cosmic threat that either invades, permeates or ignores humanity's attempts to explain or subdue it, which in Camus' terms generates a feeling of profound loneliness

“under the vast indifference of the sky... sapping them to the point of futility” (*The Plague* 67). Explaining further, one has to delve deeper into specific case studies of existentialist fiction followed by some seminal Lovecraftian cosmic horror narratives.

3.4 Dark Epiphany in Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925), Camus’ *The Plague* (1947) and Sartre’s “No Exit” (1944)

Franz Kafka – The Trial (1925)

Kafka, although situated on the fringes of the existentialist school of thought (Bogaerts 70-71), is an important precursor to many of the subsequent existentialists such as Sartre and Camus, who “were drawn to what they saw in Kafka’s works” hailing him as the “writer of the void” (Gross 265). Furthermore, Walter Kaufmann argues that “the French existentialists are steeped in Kafka” and that he (Kafka) shares “some of the most characteristic features of this movement [existentialism]” (49; brackets mine). Judith Ryan, on the other hand, attributes a “strong existential component” to Kafka’s oeuvre (76), manifesting in the form of a conflict between human agency and established authority. This study conflates Kafka with Camus and Sartre in this section because, despite belonging to differing time periods and cultural milieus, the thoughts of the trio are underpinned by a common philosophical outlook—the futility of human agency in an indifferent universe. Moreover, Camus and Sartre were clearly influenced by Kafka’s fiction, as is confirmed by the abovementioned theorists. In most of Kafka’s narratives, the protagonist finds himself trapped in situations where he has no control and from which there is no apparent escape, thus germinating the term ‘Kafkaesque’ which represents a world without logic, warmth and “pervaded by anxiety and frustration: individual, social, and cosmic” (Steinhauer 391). Camus describes the Kafkaesque world as “an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the

tormenting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come out of it” (“The Myth of Sisyphus” 598). We find ample evidence of futility, followed by the dawning of the dark epiphany, in many of Kafka’s narratives, some of which are discussed below.

Inescapability is a common trope in Kafka, as can be seen in the iconic opening lines of *The Metamorphosis* (1915): “As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin...His many legs, miserably thin in comparison with his size otherwise, flickered helplessly before his eyes” (29). Here, Kafka opens his novella and straightaway hurls his protagonist into an inescapable situation, the cause or reasoning of which is never explained to the reader. However, Samsa’s transformation may be interpreted as a corruption of the natural order (human anatomy, in this case) and, hence, an evocation of cosmic horror by “throwing into crisis the schema by which we make sense of the world” (Newell 72). Samsa’s ‘othering’ has neither social nor cultural underpinnings in the narrative; it is, in fact, rooted in his inexplicable ‘physical’ transformation from a human being to an insect. His metamorphosis is characterised by “abominable hybridity”—one of the many cosmic threats discussed by Jonathan Newell while examining the works of Lovecraft (163). The hybridity at play here is that of Samsa’s ‘human’ consciousness and a ‘nonhuman’ vermin body. We find similar instances of bodily transformation and/or hybridisation in many cosmic horror narratives. For example, Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936) offers a similar depiction of said hybridity. The narrative describes an ancient fish-like humanoid species, the Deep Ones, copulating with a human tribe to engender ‘hybrid’ human progeny, who eventually *transform* into the Deep Ones.

Parallels between the transformation of Samsa and Lovecraft’s fish-human hybrids appear to be converging towards an overlapping ‘abominable hybridity’. Similar instances of body

transformations can easily be found in the works of William Hope Hodgson. His *The House on the Borderland* (1908) renders an “an image of the cosmic outside made hideously physical, inveigling its way from a seemingly alien nature or Great Outdoors into the human body” (Newell 151). Similarly, Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894) is “preoccupied with descriptions” of its protagonist’s body as a “hybrid of human and non-human” (72). Focusing on a more recent work of cosmic horror fiction, T. E. Grau’s “Return of the Prodigy” (2015) paints a similar picture in its denouement in which the protagonist implodes into a swarm of writhing creatures, devouring him from within. Apart from the apparent body hybridity and/or transformations in Kafka’s texts, the essence of *true* cosmic horror lingers in his obscure descriptions of bureaucracy. For example, Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926) depicts the plight of a rational surveyor who cannot find his way out of the literal and metaphorical circularity of bureaucracy, social modes and life in general. This deadening rotundity of existence catapults Kafka’s narratives to the level of the dark epiphanic moment of meaninglessness. For example, for the protagonist of *The Castle*, the dark epiphany is slowly built throughout the narrative culminating in a bleak awakening that he, in fact, will never reach the titular castle and, hence, will never understand why he was summoned.

Similarly, his *The Trial* (1925) is also a tale of dark epiphany with profound destabilisation of the rational mind by presenting a cold immensity of bureaucracy, systems and stratagems. Josef K. undergoes a trial for a crime which is revealed neither to the protagonist nor to the reader. The oppressive and faceless legal structure of the narrative reduces him to a state of powerlessness and impotency, faced with an authorial logic and intent that seems impossible to decipher. Similar to Lovecraftian narratives, the reader often encounters descriptions of colossal structures and long, serpentine corridors that seem limitless and inscrutable throughout Kafka’s novel, resisting K.’s

endless efforts of rationalisation. The human faces are barely recognisable as well, their nonchalance perfectly matched by the machinery surrounding them:

The hierarchy and upper echelons of the court were endless, stretching beyond the purview even of those who belonged to it. Proceedings in court were in general also kept secret from the lower officials, so that they could hardly ever follow the further progress of any case they were dealing with in its entirety... and usually knew less of its further progress, of the results of their own work, than the defence, which as a rule stayed in contact with the accused almost to the end of the trial. (Kafka, *The Trial* 84-85.)

One can equate the endlessness and incomprehensibility of Kafka's bureaucracy with the indifference and inscrutability of the Lovecraftian cosmos—both are infinite and out of reach. Faceless and incomprehensible, the Kafkaesque court keeps on decreeing punishments that are absurd and unavoidable, entirely detached from human sentiment and understanding: "The court does not want anything from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go" (160). This eternal absurdity, a perfect conceptual stranger operating beyond consciousness but continuously affecting it by sheer scale makes frequent appearances in Lovecraft too, especially when the haunted narrator muses about the dreadful possibilities: "Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come—but I must not and can not think!" ("The Call of Cthulhu" 98). The existentialist literature is thus at least partly Lovecraftian not only in its invoking of the immensity of non-anthropocentric entities, but also in its stupefying effect on the human mind that loses its grip on reality. K. is shown to be baffled and intimidated by the unreadable process of judiciary, a sense that does not subside even till the very end of the novel when he is taken to a quarry and executed by the nameless, motiveless stooges of the system.

K. struggles till the end (“It’s going to be hard work for these gentlemen” (Kafka, *The Trial* 162)), but his tenacious resistance (which is the major part of the existential philosophy) against meaninglessness is defeated with his death. Here also occurs the dark epiphany in *The Trial* when K., moments before the knife falls on him, understands that the plethora of the unanswered questions of the nature of the judiciary is in fact its own answer. The latter is an emotionless, deadpan, self-serving paradox where specificity and rationality are lost in a web of bureaucratic deadlocks—taking it far beyond the grasp of a thinking and resisting human being, existing only to threaten and annihilate anthropic consciousness. It does not make sense, because it does not care. K. cannot understand his crime and the legal procedure behind it because the procedures are not meant to be understood by their victims. By extension, K.—in spite of his violent defiance—fails to understand the meaning of existence in a dispassionate and absurd machinery, breeding dark epiphanies in the process moments before he is stabbed:

Who was it? A friend? A kind person? Someone who felt for him? Someone who wanted to help? Was it just one? Or all of them? Was help still possible? Were there still objections he’d forgotten? Of course there were. Logic may be unshakeable, but it cannot hold out against a human being who wants to live. Where was the judge he had never seen? Where was the high court he had never reached? (164-165)

Once again, it is important to signal a slow corrosion of the anthropic agency with every passing narrative in here as well. As has been discussed, there are glimmers of tensile resistance even in the face of overwhelming defeat in *The Trial*, especially since a considerable part of the scholarship surrounding *The Trial* considers it as a satire and trivialisation of bureaucracy in general: “Kafka sees bureaucracy as ‘the social structure most closely corresponding to human nature’... he does not like what he sees and sets out to parody it” (Warner 1028). The protagonist fights till the very

end even after the epiphany dawns on him, possibly hinting that although overpowering, the cosmic inscrutability may not be the only outcome of human existence.

Albert Camus – The Plague (1947)

Elements of ‘small victories’—a protest, a fight or a minuscule win—can again be seen in the next seminal existential text: *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus. Champion of the school of the absurd, Camus refused to be labelled as an existentialist (Davis 139). However, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) defines the absurd as a term “derived from the existentialism of Albert Camus” (1). Furthermore, Neil Cornwell argues that Camus’ absurdism is born “out of existentialism” (5), citing an intrinsic relationship between the two schools of thought. According to Jacob Golomb, Camus was indebted to Nietzsche as the latter’s existential treatises helped shape Camus’ fiction and philosophy. Camus, more revered as a literary genius than a philosopher, was, according to Golomb, “very much a part of philosophy” (119). It is also to be noted that although still decipherable, Camus’ narrative inches closer to a complete defeat of the anthropic resistance in the face of a lingering dark epiphany. The triumphs are momentary, the cosmic takeover is inevitable, and every moment of relief is undercut by another moment of realisation that it won’t last, affirming the Sisyphean futility of the “confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” 515). The narrative of *The Plague* describes a plague-stricken town, Oran, and the existential ennui of its populace, detailing the experiences of an array of characters afflicted by the onslaught of the plague. The concept of a plague “whose scope could not be measured and whose origins escape detection” (Camus, “The Plague” 17), the occurrence of which transcends human understanding, becomes an interesting pedestal for a comparison with cosmic horror philosophy.

One could argue that due to its unpredictability and incomprehensibility, an event such as a plague could be perceived as a ‘*micro*-cosmic horror’. Whereas the Lovecraftian cosmic horror is colossal in scale, Camus’ is microscopic. However, despite the imbalance of scale, both horrors manifest themselves with the attitude of objective indifference to human existence. A plague is not malevolent—it does not intend to wipe out a population. There is no teleological causality behind the plague’s actions. It seeks only to reproduce, not out of malice towards humanity but because of its primal instinct of survival. It is arbitrary and unpredictable, it may happen anywhere without any warning signs, rendering the affected populace defenceless and paralysed as they wonder why “our little town should be chosen out for the scene of such grotesque happenings” (Camus, “The Plague” 23). Lovecraft’s indifferentism—something described as the harbinger of dark epiphany in the earlier sections of this chapter—follows the same philosophy, in which humanity is so insignificant in the grand scale of the cosmos that its existence or annihilation ceases to matter⁶. Pestilence, thus, akin to the Lovecraftian cosmic horror, is an indifferent force that has “a way of recurring in the world” (35), and despite our awareness of it, it “isn’t a thing made to man’s measure” (36). The protagonist of the novel, Dr. Bernard Rieux, while treating the afflicted, reflects on the hope and despair of his fellow citizens as well as his own. Despite his heroic efforts, the nonchalance and the caprices of the plague force him to entertain pessimistic meditations: “all he was conscious of was a bleak indifference steadily gaining on him” (81). Throughout the narrative, Camus portrays the helplessness of humanity in the face of pestilence. As the town is put into quarantine, isolation and dejection take over. The Oran populace is trapped, powerless and

⁶ Indifference finds a human conduit in Camus’ iconic novella *The Outsider* (1942), where the protagonist Meursault murders an Arab man out of sheer caprice, and the epiphany strikes him as he is awaiting execution: “But everyone knows that life isn’t really worth living...other men and women would of course go on living, and it would be like that for thousands of years. Nothing was more obvious, in fact” (103). Although the cosmic theme is rather muted here, Camus is clearly cognizant of life’s inevitable decadence into nothingness, and the futility of *any* action.

unable to fully comprehend the nature of the threat looming around them. This is an instantiation of cosmic horror in which the threatening being operates at a microscopic scale, unlike Lovecraft's colossal scale of cosmic horror.

The most terrifying aspect of the novel, which also happens to be the dark epiphany occurring at the post-climactic moment, is the uncertainty surrounding the plague's resuscitation. Towards the end, as the plague dies down organically, some citizens of Oran live in fear of the plague's return, worrying that "[i]t may start again at any moment" (Camus, "The Plague" 243). The fact that the plague never really vanishes, that it lays dormant for decades and then resurfaces in another part of the world as a different form of mutation, makes it as perplexing and obscure as Lovecraft's elder gods. The concluding lines of Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928), in a deceptively placid tone, deliver a warning to the reader of a slumbering monstrosity that will one day rise from the deep and obliterate civilizations: "Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise" (98). The protagonist of the story (*The Plague*), overwhelmed by this epiphany, perceives his fellow humans with frustration and pity as they are oblivious of this inevitability. Lovecraft's pitch-dark epiphanic moment, stemmed into his cynicism of decadent modernity, finds a potent echo in the final lines of *The Plague* which braces itself for an inevitable takeover by the great microcosmos. Dr Rieux, at this point, bears striking similarities to the Lovecraftian protagonist in his perennial anxiety over the precipitant doom, as he knows that the small triumphs can hardly stop it. This knowledge of one's smallness in front of the cosmic scheme is what ushers in the epiphany:

"And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good;

that it can lie dormant for years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and book-shelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightenment of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city". (Camus, "The Plague" 271-272)

Jean-Paul Sartre – "No Exit" (1944)

This burden of the dark epiphany is carried over even more strongly into the writings of Sartre. The epiphany in his narrative comes from the dawning that no action of the human—in the mundane life or in a heroic context—can be called anything other than absurd, futile and bitterly comic, revealing a "frightening, obscene nakedness" (Sartre, *Nausea* 183). The progressive intensification of the cosmic presence is the most telling here, as in "No Exit" (1944) the very setting is a posthumous one—the human players do not even have a corporeal presence, and are at the complete mercy of faceless figures that are perhaps divine. Garcin, Inez and Estelle find themselves eternally trapped in a seemingly ordinary room with no escape. They await some form of torture before realising that they themselves are supposed to be each other's torturers. Guided by an invisible 'management' which never comes to the fore, the reader soon realises that the room is in fact Sartre's version of hell and "the management can cut off the current if they want to" (Sartre, "No Exit" 6). Never revealing the true nature of the upper hierarchy, Sartre refers to the veiled monstrosities/divinities simply as 'they': "I tell you they've thought it all out. Down to the last detail. Nothing was left to chance. This room was all set for us" (14). It is also broadly hinted that 'they' are merely nonchalantly performing their duties in an endless cycle of cosmic procedure, without malice, reason or closure.

In contrast, however, the three human ‘victims’ start revealing their sins to each other in an attempt to find some form of intimacy in companionship and camaraderie, before starting to find each other unbearable as they fight and argue. Their audacious declaration—“I prefer to choose my hell” (23)—gradually turns into paranoia and defeat. Here again, we see the anthropic resistance replaced by resignation at the very end, precipitated by the devastating dark epiphany which comes as one of Sartre’s most popular lines: “There’s no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is - other people!” (45). The aforementioned agency of ‘choosing’ is taken away by forces that cannot be read or do not care. The characters, now surrendered to the unnamed forces, conclude that they will have to endure each other eternally; there is no escape; they will see no new faces in that room; they will forever be confronted with the hatred and disgust that they bear for one another, reflecting upon the futility of their own existence. At this point, the trio of “No Exit” is merged with Sartre’s other haunted characters in *Nausea* (1938) and “The Wall” (1939) who repeatedly fail at deciphering the meaning of their existence: “it was nothing, simply an empty form” because “his life had no more value than mine; no life had value” (*Nausea* 183; “The Wall” 16). The epiphany of human insignificance is presented to them as a defining narrative moment that sets the course of their journey, now armed with the realisation (as Sartre puts it) that “there is no reason for it [human existence], no outside purpose to give it meaning, no direction. Being is there, and outside of it—Nothing” (*Being and Nothingness* xv).

“No Exit” successfully discovers the source of this recurring epiphany to be the omnipresent cosmic authority. It cannot yet be seen, but everything occurs and ends by its grand design, and a mere glimpse of them can make the soul an outcast from the so-called rational world. The true enlightened is thus the most accursed. “No Exit” ends with the three lost souls laughing

at the absurdity of their incessant damnation, finally accepting their defeat and an eternity of meaningless suffering:

INEZ: Dead! Dead! Knives, poison, ropes – all useless. It has happened already, do you understand? Once and for all. So here we are, forever. [Laughs.]

ESTELLE [with a peal of laughter]: Forever. My God, how funny! Forever.

GARCIN [looks at the two women, and joins them in the laughter]: For ever, and ever, and ever.

[They slump onto their respective sofas. A long silence. Their laughter dies away and they gaze at each other.]

GARCIN: Well, well, let's get on with it... (46).

This detailed examination of the texts of Kafka, Camus and Sartre has yielded an unmistakable presence of the dark epiphany within these narratives. This moment acts as a pivotal point in the story that often results in absolute submission of the characters (Joseph K., Dr. Rieux and the trio of “No Exit”). Dark epiphany in these texts is dictated by the bureaucratic (*The Trial*), the microscopic (*The Plague*), or the posthumous (“No Exit”). However, in Lovecraft, a complete takeover of the supernatural can be discerned, resulting in dark epiphanies caused by natural aberrations, undead witches and ancient alien species. This, as will be discussed in the following section, is where the Lovecraftian can be seen as precipitant to the existential, containing striking parallels of the dark epiphanic theme.

3.5 Dark Epiphany in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" (1929), "The Dreams in the Witch-House" (1933) and "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936), among others

The previous section detailed the presence of a dark epiphany in the works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre, cementing the existence of a horrifying moment of awakening in these texts akin to the one observed in cosmic horror fiction. This section, on the other hand, builds upon the arguments of the previous one by focusing on the 'cosmic' dark epiphanies in Lovecraftian short stories. Although Chapter One detailed the evolution of American cosmic horror fiction from its origin to its contemporary status, it is prudent to once again socio-politically contextualise Lovecraft in the literary landscape of twentieth century America before analysing his texts. The tradition of Weird fiction evolved from the early manifestations of Poe, Machen, Blackwood and Hodgson to the indifferent cosmos of Lovecraft. It must be noted, however, that Lovecraft was very clearly filtering the essence of the subliminal unrest caused by the precipitous threat of "the boundless and hideous unknown" (Lovecraft, *Selected Letters* 150), described in the stories of his precursors. However, his early description of the narrative epiphanies was coloured by his myopic view on racial diversity and immigration and, hence, cannot be called a "pure" epiphany of cosmic inscrutability. Michel Houellebecq, for example, claims that Lovecraft's work is steeped in "[a]bsolute hatred of the world in general, aggravated by an aversion to the modern world in particular" (57; brackets mine).

Joshi—as opposed to Houellebecq—has preferred to consider Lovecraft's racism as a mere phase elsewhere, arguing that Houellebecq has erroneously conflated Lovecraft's "*indifference* and *hatred*" (Joshi, "Why Michel Houellebecq" 44; emphasis original). Mitch Frye similarly attributed his racist 'phase' to the early-twentieth century's turbulent and regressive American life (238). The cosmic in early Lovecraft was racial and conspiratorial—belligerent instead of

indifferent and insidious rather than impenetrable. While spending most of his life in the rapidly growing cities of Northeast and Midwest America during industrialisation, Lovecraft was exposed to the massive early twentieth century immigration influx (Hirschman and Mogford 898). Lovecraft has been variously accused of racial intolerance and miscegenation-phobia, his writings replete with references to the “pre-Aryan and pre-agricultural times when a squat race of Mongoloids roved over Europe with their flocks and herds” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror* 17). However, as S. T. Joshi has pointed out, the obtuse instances of racism majorly occurred during the early stages of Lovecraft’s writing career (Joshi, “Why Michel Houellebecq” 48-9). The congealment of his horror philosophy can be properly represented by his post-New York (1924-26) phase, where we notice “indifference” instead of “hatred”. After his exposure to the intermingling of different races towards a developmental socio-economics in a big city, Joshi argues, Lovecraft softened his views on immigration and turned towards socialism (48).

Lovecraft avers: “I am not a pessimist but an indifferentist—that is, I don’t make the mistake of thinking that the resultant of the natural forces surrounding and governing organic life will have any connexion with the wishes or tastes of any part of that organic life-processes” (qtd. in Joshi, “Why Michel Houellebecq” 44). Lovecraft clearly implied his reluctance to conflate the anthropic heartbreak with cosmic indifferentism. It does not matter whether we find nature to be cold or hateful because nature is beyond either, glacially moving in its own inscrutable direction in spite of the human’s wont: beyond race, beyond eugenics, beyond anthropic biases. Lovecraft’s fiction, thus, transcended from the human to the unhuman, from malevolence to indifference, from a strange familiarity to the inexplicable and otherworldly. This is also what connects Lovecraft to the existentialists: the horror coming from the very invasion of Kantian homocentrism by a unique recognition of the cosmic ‘other’, rendering us humans “objectively insignificant in the eyes of the

universe” (Solomon 45). The idea of the Lovecraftian cosmic as an overpowering, extrasensory experience comes closer to the Kantian “sublime”. Kant’s description of overpowering natural phenomena like a tempest, a hurricane or a volcano induces the sense of triviality of human agency. The sublime, however, occurs when the human spectator is perceiving these events from a secure position, giving it the “courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (Kant 26). This is not the case in Lovecraft, because there is no conceptual safety measure for the spectator of the cosmic. To think about the cosmic is to think within limits, because the cosmic is beyond thought, hence beyond the human ‘pleasure’ of the sublime from the former’s domestic safety. The following Lovecraftian case studies provide cogent substantiation of these arguments.

“The Dunwich Horror” (1929)

Although the core of “The Dunwich Horror” (1929) is formed by an encounter with the cosmic and the anthropic horror it evokes, Lovecraft was clearly struggling to conceive the grand anthropic insignificance in literary terms. He is frequently resorting to human-recognizable emotions like disgust, defiance and ultimately, a cautious jubilation following the apparent defeat of the ‘monster’ in this story. The horrors are either named and taxonomised (“Yog-Sothoth”), or described in vaguely recognisable terms:

Bigger’n a barn . . . all made o’ squirmin’ ropes . . . hull thing sort o’ shaped like a hen’s egg bigger’n anything with dozens o’ legs like hogsheads that haff shut up when they step . . . nothin’ solid abaout it — all like jelly, an’ made o’ sep’rit wrigglin’ ropes pushed clost together . . . great bulgin’ eyes all over it (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 148).

Lovecraft cultured the description of cosmic beings carefully throughout his career, developing what Graham Harman calls a “literary cubism” where “numerous bizarre or troubling features of a palpable thing are piled up in such excessive number that it becomes difficult to combine all these facets neatly into a single object” (270-271). However, the success of this intentional linguistic obfuscation is partial in this story, as the evil is presented through too many anthropically familiar tropes, making it counterintuitive to perfect inscrutability. The creature has an origin story, born out of an unholy copulation between an elder god and a human being; it speaks, it hates, and it is killed by the power of magic wielded by humans. Lovecraft was still developing cosmic horror out of extant figments of the Gothic fiction era that depended on the “subject-dissolving power of disgust” of an alien kind (Newell 5). According to Jonathan Newell, the Gothic tradition frequently resorted to visceral thrill “that turn[ed] the stomach”, depicted mostly through vivid descriptions of gore and dismemberment (5). This horror, while popular and effective, falls short of attaining the self-transcending effect of dark epiphany, as it is dependent on the hostility and violence of the supernatural and never overwhelms the human existential agency.

Lovecraft’s early stories, replete with exploding monsters, deviant sex and bloody climactic battles, are thus the “culmination of a certain strand of the gothic, the aesthetics of terror transforming into a strange, often revolting form” (Newell 163). In “Dunwich”, after the monster is killed, the characters theorise how ‘it’ has gone back to a larger domain of cosmic evil that will never stop haunting the rational world. These tendencies of explaining the inexplicable (and defeating the eldritch) and perceiving the cosmic as essentially hostile are in themselves counterintuitive acts, since any elucidation of beyond-human knowledge is contaminated by human thought, reason and superiority—something Quentin Meillassoux refers to as “an indefensible thesis because thought cannot get outside itself” (3). In other words, human agency,

in spite of the constant threat of supernatural invasion, remains intact after its encounter with the cosmic. There are, however, flashes of the dark epiphanic moments when the rational Lovecraftian hero Henry Armitage witnesses the hideous monster calling out to its otherworldly father, described in a language that retains the unknowability of the subject: “From what black wells of Acherontic fear or feeling, from what unplumbed gulfs of extra-cosmic consciousness or obscure, long-latent heredity, were those half-articulate thunder-croakings drawn?” (“The Dunwich Horror” 150). Armitage, despite keeping evil at bay, is forever branded with the indispensable truth of mankind’s precarious place in an indifferent universe. He remains haunted by the “force that acts and grows and shapes itself by other laws than those of our sort of Nature” (152). His rational thoughts become forever tainted by the inconceivable threat that, one day, will “wipe out the human race and drag the earth off to some nameless place for some nameless purpose” (153). The subsequent stories observe how these tropes of anthropic unease and existential haunting intensify progressively.

“The Dreams in the Witch-House” (1933)

Lovecraft’s dependency on the tropes of recognizing, taxonomizing and banishing evil are gradually replaced by the true, existence-altering cosmic epiphany in the later stories like “The Dreams in the Witch-House” (1933). Walter Gilman, the hapless student opposed to a nefarious conspiracy of cosmic proportions that involves an undead witch, a humanoid rat and the sacrifice of an infant human child, frequently oscillates between an inconceivably de-shaped cosmic dreamworld and his own mundane reality in a rundown attic. Lovecraft’s penchant for a defiant protagonist resisting the cosmic onslaught is unmistakably present in the story as Gilman seeks a feeling of “queer thrill” while investigating the witch’s abode (Lovecraft, “The Dreams in the

Witch-House” 237), resolving to reside there “at any cost” (237). This is probably why the narrative never quite presents the paralysing epiphany that renders the human characters inert in crisis. The emanations of the eldritch are majorly in anthropocentric terms: the antagonist is a “bent old woman” (243), her protege a “white-fanged” (236) anthropomorphic rat with an “evilily human” (240) face and a cosmic ritual demanding the sacrifice of a “two-year-old” human baby (267). The theme of defeat and frustration, however, is stronger here: the protagonist dies a violent death— “[t]here had been virtually a tunnel through his body - something had eaten his heart out” (276); the cosmic insurrection is only momentarily thwarted— “[w]hat he had prevented the knife from doing to the victim’s chest, the yellow fangs of the furry blasphemy had done to a wrist” (273); and the story has a specific moment of epiphany that plunges the audience into an acute existential crisis:

The roaring twilight abysses—the green hillside—the blistering terrace—the pulls from the stars—the ultimate black vortex—the black man—the muddy alley and the stairs—the old witch and the fanged, furry horror—the bubble-congeries and the little polyhedron—the strange sunburn—the wrist wound...what did all this mean? To what extent could the laws of sanity apply to such a case? (269).

Lovecraft is a step closer to the dark epiphany in “Witch-House” because of the graduation from recognisable to abstract horror in the same narrative. Towards the end of the story, the texture of anthropocentric reality is largely bent with figments of both recognizable and otherworldly monstrosities piled on each other, creating a world that Gilman wants to dismiss as a dream; but the dream is more real than reality itself. This nightmarish netherworld, pushing the protagonist to the edge of rationality, is initially presented as essentially misanthropic and cruel. It requires human sacrifices, can be delayed by human interventions, and haunts the mind with the threat of

annihilation. However, unlike “The Dunwich Horror”, here, the cosmic machinations are not thwarted by human intervention – the protagonist dies as he fails to prevent the human sacrifice. Despite the lingering misanthropy, “Witch-House” displays hints of futility and indifference in its narrative, which “The Dunwich Horror” lacked. And yet, while propelling the characters as well as the readers towards the revelation that nothing exists for us, Lovecraft provides enough hints throughout his lore that neither is it against us – as shown in the final story to be analysed in this section. Shadows of the Camusque “definitive awakening” (Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” 503) can be traced in the Lovecraftian narratives as well. Camus, while describing the absurd as the conflict arising out of human desire for purpose in a purposeless world, argues that the absurd is recognized with an “awakening”: “It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery” (503). While seminal existential authors do not overrule the chances of a spiritually positive outcome of awakening to the futility of the quotidian existence, this study’s focus is on the specific moment of epiphany, which is numbing, defeating and horrifying in front of the inevitable scheme of things. Camus’ notion of an existential awakening, thus, corroborates the thesis of the dark epiphany which, as the case studies highlight, is present in both cosmic horror and existentialist literature.

“At the Mountains of Madness” (1936)

The sudden realisation of the rule-bound human subject that his quotidian experiences do not signify anything in the larger scheme dominates the narrative of “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936). Vast in scope and possibly containing the most matured rendition of Lovecraft’s cosmic lores (the novella has elements of “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), “The Whisperer in Darkness”

(1931), “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1937), and many more), the narrative has a systematic deconstruction of the self from the mundane to the cosmic. William Dyer, the atypical Lovecraftian ‘scholar’ hero representing “the materialistic, the logical, the rational, and the empirical” (Matolcsy 176), discovers the secret of creationism in Antarctica that involves a monstrous alien race creating life on earth. The prehistoric creatures, technically the ancestors of human beings but inconceivable in their mass and ferocity, were, in turn, subjugated by a still more dominating entity that even the all-powerful alien races used to be afraid of. Is it biological or ethereal? Terrestrial or cosmic? It is heavily implied in the story that modern rationality cannot fathom the core of the mystery, as the explorer’s human mind encounters a severe existential shock just by catching a mere glimpse of the final, abyssal shape-shifting in the polar ice:

He has on rare occasions whispered disjointed and irresponsible things about ‘the black pit’, ‘the carven rim’, ‘the proto-Shoggoths’, ‘the windowless solids with five dimensions’, ‘the nameless cylinder’, ‘the elder Pharos’, ‘Yog-Sothoth’, ‘the primal white jelly’, ‘the colour out of space’, ‘the wings’...but when he is fully himself he repudiates all this and attributes it to his curious and macabre reading of earlier years (Lovecraft, “At the Mountains of Madness” 490).

It is important to appreciate the progress of the cosmic-anthropic discordance in Lovecraft’s stories taken as case studies. “The Dunwich Horror”, while hinting at larger and potentially inscrutable powers at play behind the macabre visuality of the story, was mostly dependent on the cosmic other’s evil intent as a primary source of horror. To conspire against the anthropic, to threaten it with annihilation is still an acknowledgement of the former, a trope revisited in “The Dreams in the Witch-House” where the pivot of cosmic insurrection is dependent on human sacrifice. As long as there is a ‘fight’ of anthropic and cosmic, the theme is agential

rather than existential as there is a validation of human endeavour, resistance and morality. “At the Mountains of Madness” has a lot of references calling the cosmic as ‘evil’ (hence, misanthropic), yet this study still considers it closest to the dark epiphany because of its ability to make the observer question not only its psychological state but the very essence of its being—invoking a lingering trauma that alienates the subject from itself, forever haunted by an “extimate” presence that is deeply rooted within the subject itself. “Extimacy” is a Lacanian term, occurring in *The Seminar, Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (139). According to Lacan, the extimate occurs when the boundary between a person’s inside/outside collapses due to a troubling, unsettling and anxious thought. If extimate, the subject may lose its established, rational traits, and exist as an alien from the outside world as well as itself.

The connection of the concept of extimate to the dark epiphany is thus apparent in that the latter, in the same way, reveals the cosmic truth to the subject, thereby unsettling and alienating the subject from the quotidian life. The cosmic-cum-existential haunting moves interstitially through “the psychological phenomenon that rejects the inside/outside, self/other binary; it is, thus, both exterior to and intimate with the subject concomitantly” (Hock Soon Ng 159). This cosmic haunting entails an irrevocable change in Lovecraftian characters; the epiphany of insignificance transforms them into petrified observers of the eternal system’s machinations, forcing them to discard their rationality and live as permanent misfits in the otherwise ‘normal’ world. Trauma dictates the post-climactic life of Daniel Upton from “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1937) who, caught in the web of a sinister plot involving cosmic dark magic, is forced to murder his best friend. The events of the narrative irrevocably alter the psyche of Upton, rendering him defenceless against the inscrutable cosmic. He ruminates over the helplessness of those who are forced to encounter such evils: “There are black zones of shadow close to our daily paths, and now and then

some evil soul breaks a passage through. When that happens, the man who knows must strike before reckoning the consequences” (Lovecraft, “The Thing on the Doorstep” 520). Upton is constantly concerned about his own safety even after seemingly killing the cosmic agent: “Those powers survive the life of the physical form” (549). However, it is Upton’s raving madness and capsized psyche that dismantle the boundaries of his inside/outside binary, resulting in the occurrence of the Lacanian extimate: “There are horrors beyond life’s edge that we do not suspect, and once in a while man’s evil prying calls them just within our range” (549).

Francis Thurston from “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) is subjected to a similar dark epiphany upon realising the ephemerality and insignificance of this anthropocentric world after glimpsing the cosmic immensity surrounding it—spending his days in indecision and paranoia because the tactile world would not understand him. The opening lines of the story are an ominous warning, articulating the perils of the dark epiphany:

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. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 61).

Lovecraft vehemently warns against humanity’s exploration of the unknown, describing the latter as “a terrible and omnipotent source of boons and calamities”, confining it to “spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* 12). The dark epiphany, therefore, is a horrifying truth that must be avoided at all costs

since it alienates the subject from their own consciousness. The sense that “there is in you something more than you” (Žižek 169) that renders the protagonist an alien to the outside as well as his own self can be seen in the confusion of dream and reality in “Polaris” (1920), the consumption of conscious thoughts by a sentient grimoire in “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936) and the loss of de la Poer’s verbal cohesion in “The Rats in the Walls” (1924), where the protagonist’s mind is permanently altered by atavistic horrors hiding beneath his manor:

It must have been the rats; the viscous, gelatinous, ravenous army that feast on the dead and the living ... Why shouldn't rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things? ... The war ate my boy, damn them all ... and the Yanks ate Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret ... No, no, I tell you, I am not that daemon swineherd in the twilit grotto! It was not Edward Norrys’ fat face on that flabby fungous thing! Who says I am a de la Poer? He lived, but my boy died! ... Shall a Norrys hold the land of a de la Poer? ... It's voodoo, I tell you ... that spotted snake... Curse you, Thornton, I'll teach you to faint at what my family do!.. 'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust ... wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? ... Magna Mater! Magna Mater! ... Atys ... Dia ad aghaidh's ad aodaun ... agus bas dunarch ort! Dhonas 's dholas ort, agus leat-sa! ... Ungl unl ... rrlh ... chchch ... (Lovecraft, “The Rats in the Walls” 24).

Before discussing the final case studies, it is pertinent to reiterate the overarching objective of this chapter: To establish a convergence between the ‘cosmic’ fiction of Lovecraft and the twentieth century existentialists using an overlapping moment across these narratives, which awakens the human subjects to the horror of their existence, their insignificance and the overall indifference and meaninglessness of the universe. This study terms this awakening the dark epiphany which forces these characters to irreversibly break free from the monotony of their

mundane reality. So far this chapter has discerned the unmistakable presence of the dark epiphany in the existentialist works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre, as well as the cosmic horror fiction of Lovecraft. Although this thesis is a primary investigation of cosmic horror fiction, it is important to understand the nature of the horror of existence born out of cosmic revelations. Whenever a human character is confronted with the cosmic unknown in Lovecraft, it results in a total shattering of the former's existential meaning and identity. Thus, it becomes imperative to compare Lovecraft's 'cosmic' horror of existence with the works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre, inasmuch as the latter trio have the same horror of existence imbued in their texts. Whereas for Lovecraft this horror emanates from the inscrutable cosmic, it arises from the abject meaninglessness of the world for the existentialists. Though Lovecraft's horror is otherworldly, and often beyond human rationale, it indubitably assails the existential underpinnings of his human characters.

"The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931)

A further amplification of the horror of existence can be observed in Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931). The narrator, Albert Wilmarth, is intrigued by the sightings of "bizarre and disturbing" objects or beings floating throughout the rivers of Vermont (Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness" 155). However, despite the intrigue, Wilmarth refuses to believe in the supernatural and dissects the whole matter with abject scepticism, labelling the concerned witnesses as "naive and simple backwoods folk" (156). Soon afterwards, he receives correspondence from Henry Wentworth Akeley who claims to possess sufficient proof of the supernatural events occurring in Vermont: "*monstrous things do indeed live in the woods on the high hills*" (165). Akeley provides the narrator with further information about the existence of an ancient alien race who, in conjunction with certain groups of people, worship cosmic gods such as

Cthulhu: “there are *non-human creatures watching us all the time*, with spies among us gathering information (166; emphasis original). Akeley’s exhaustive series of evidence acquaints the narrator with a larger conspiracy corroborating the existence of a malevolent planet (a recurring presence in the Cthulhu mythos):

There seemed to be an awful, immemorial linkage in several definite stages betwixt man and nameless infinity. The blasphemies which appeared on earth, it was hinted, came from the dark planet Yuggoth, at the rim of the solar system; but this was itself merely the populous outpost of a frightful interstellar race whose ultimate source must lie far outside even the Einsteinian space-time continuum or greatest known cosmos (179).

The aforementioned worshippers of cosmic monstrosities grow suspicious of Akeley’s correspondence with the narrator and, eventually, exchange gunfire with the former, killing his guard dogs.

However, following this encounter, Akeley is no longer afraid of the cosmic beings and goes as far as to suggest, through a “curiously different and calming letter” (192), that they are, in fact, generous and peaceful creatures, having “never knowingly harmed men” (193). Upon Akeley’s request, Wilmarth agrees to visit him only to find the former in a decrepit physical state, believing it to be “something more than asthma” (211). Akeley, mesmerised by the infinite knowledge of the alien beings, tells Wilmarth about a surgical procedure involving the extraction of a human brain and its subsequent storage in a canister, rendering it suitable for cosmic voyages: “*It seemed that complete human bodies did not indeed make the trip*, but that the prodigious surgical, biological, chemical and mechanical skill of the Outer Ones had found a way to convey human brains without their concomitant physical structure” (217). Upon confessing that he has agreed to the procedure, Akeley implores Wilmarth to join him in his extraterrestrial journey,

forcing the latter to engage in dialogue with a brain already stored in the canister: “Do you realise what it means when I say I have been on thirtyseven different celestial objects – planets, dark stars and less definable objects – including eight outside our galaxy and two outside the curved cosmos of space and time” (220). The narrative reaches its denouement when, in the middle of the night, Wilmarth wakes up to find Akeley gone. This is the point in the narrative where dark epiphany overwhelms the narrator when he finds the discarded face and hands of Akeley. The epiphany becomes even more horrifying when he realises that the canister he was speaking to previously, was, in fact, Akeley’s brain:

The three things [Akeley’s face and hands] were damnably clever constructions of their kind, and were furnished with ingenious metallic clamps to attach them to organic developments of which I dare not form any conjecture. I hope – devoutly hope – that they were the waxen products of a master artist, despite what my inmost fears tell me. Great God! That whisperer in darkness with its morbid odour and vibrations! Sorcerer, emissary, changeling, outsider ... that hideous repressed buzzing ... and all the time in that fresh, shiny cylinder on the shelf ... poor devil...For the things in the chair, perfect to the last, subtle detail of microscopic resemblance – or identity – were the face and hands of Henry Wentworth Akeley (234).

Wilmarth is subjected to the horrors of dark epiphany upon discovering the truth about Akeley. The revelation renders his existence insignificant in the grand scheme of the ‘recently uncovered cosmos’. His agency is taken away from him as he realises that there exist cosmic powers exponentially larger than his miniscule existence. Wilmarth’s dark epiphany becomes an irreversible truth for him—an unveiling of hideous proportions—and he realises that he can no longer ignore or escape this ‘new’ truth: “Hideous though the idea was, I knew that I was under

the same roof with nameless things from abysmal space” (227). Lovecraft’s cosmic threats, therefore, set out to assail not only the corporeal human body but the human mind as well: “If my sanity is still unshaken, I am lucky” (234). Lovecraft can thus be described as an author who perceives horror not only as an external threat but also as a transforming agent that may turn the mind into a *tabula rasa*. The ‘cosmic’ and the ‘mind’ form an alliance here, with the latter “becoming, absorbing, changing” (Koppelman 1)—an inevitable consequence of the dark epiphany. The ‘cosmic’ here refers to the plurality of Lovecraft’s incomprehensible and indifferent cosmos but, at the same time, it also signifies the Kafkaesque bureaucracy, Camus’ microcosm and the Sartrean hell—all of which result in an irrevocable alteration of the ‘mind’ through the terrible realisation of the dark epiphany. Thus, it becomes evident that dark epiphany acts as a spiritual bridge between the Lovecraftian cosmic horror and the existential literary canon: both surfacing in the first half of the twentieth century, containing major subtexts of war, strife, autocracy and alienation.

Although there is no recorded evidence of the latter school being consciously influenced by the former, the overpowering sense of anthropic trivialization before inscrutable and uncaring forces in both can hardly be ignored. Lovecraft—a progeny of the early economic upheaval and waves of immigration in the United States—has extensively written about the existential crisis of the white male bourgeoisie due to its exposure to concepts, cultures and languages that were alien to it. The existentialist authors, writing from within the trauma caused by the first world war and the ominous shadow of the second, adopt absolutism, genocide and *ennui* as their thematic mainstay. However, both depict the trivialization of the human beings in front of the powers that they cannot understand, living like cattle, constantly threatened by abrupt and inexplicable slaughter. This commonality is precipitated by the dark epiphany in both canons which propels the

narratives' protagonists to face the burden of their insignificance. This extensive reading of the Lovecraftian and the existentialist reveals how the thematic demarcations between the two are often replaced by striking overlaps, again confirming their tangible ideological similarity. And yet, as observed repeatedly across the Lovecraftian and the existentialist literature, the literary expression of the dark epiphany matures over time, constantly struggling against the basic human tendency to resist a full surrender to the powerlessness of its existence. Although this section contains ample evidence of this relationship between the two genres, it is to be cemented further with a concluding example.

To further reinforce the argument of this chapter, a brief comparison between the representative works of Lovecraft and Camus is drawn here—though this juxtaposition with Lovecraft may easily be applied/extended to any of the existentialist works discussed above. Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1936) describes an ancient pact of copulation between mankind and fish-like cosmic beings, of which he himself is a product. He wants to kill himself after learning this, but further realises that there is no escaping the ancient cosmic god of the fish people, slumbering in the depths. The entire pivot of the climax rests on the epiphany that even suicide cannot save or redeem the one bound to cosmic fate, decadence and annihilation. Similarly, in Camus' *The Outsider* (1942), the protagonist muses over the inefficacy of suicide after he fails to prevent an unnamed woman from killing herself. This inability tortures him, and he contemplates the futility of life, the absurdity of death and the effortlessness of ending life by one's own volition while walking and conversing with a perfect stranger. Both stories, in spite of their apparent generic distinctiveness, are centered on the dark epiphany that suicide too is not a definitive escape from the inscrutable forces operating beyond our understanding. For Lovecraft, suicide loses its efficacy in the face of the cosmic inevitability. For Camus, the very act of suicide

is absurd and futile because no one can understand the *ennui* and loneliness that caused it. Despite the veritable differences of genre and style, both narratives converge upon the dark epiphany that an act as final and definitive as suicide cannot save humanity from its inevitable doom. By putting together two excerpts from both the stories, the reader is presented with unmistakable parallels between the Lovecraftian and the existential school, connected, albeit precariously, by the thread of the dark epiphany:

So far I have not shot myself as my uncle Douglas did. I bought an automatic and almost took the step, but certain dreams deterred me. The tense extremes of horror are lessening, and I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them. I hear and do strange things in sleep, and awake with a kind of exaltation instead of terror. I do not believe I need to wait for the full change as most have waited. If I did, my father would probably shut me up in a sanitarium as my poor little cousin is shut up. Stupendous and unheard-of splendours await me below, and I shall seek them soon. lä-R' Iyeh! Cthulhu fhthag! la! la! No, I shall not shoot myself—I cannot be made to shoot myself! (Lovecraft, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” 361)

They always think that people commit suicide for a reason. But one can very well commit suicide for two reasons, that idea doesn't enter their heads. So what's the use of dying voluntarily and sacrificing oneself to the idea that you want to give of yourself? Once you are dead, they will take the opportunity to assign idiotic or vulgar motives to your action. My dear friend, martyrs should choose to be forgotten, mocked or exploited. As for being understood, never. (Camus, *The Outsider* 47)

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter began with a dialogue between the cosmic horror fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and the existentialist fiction of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. The reason behind this convergence is the overlapping theme of the horror of existence within these narratives. For Lovecraft, this horror comes from the indifference and infinitude of the cosmos, whereas it is born out of humanity's search for meaning in a meaningless world for the existentialists. Despite having differing origins, this horror of existence has the same impact on its subjects—it assails their mundane sense of existence and compels them to reflect upon their insignificance. The chapter also discussed how, despite differing cultural milieus (for Lovecraft, it was the immigration influx in America, while it was the onset of the Great Wars for the existentialists), the two schools of thought resorted to the notion of human frailty and insignificance in their seminal works. Upon comparing the works of the existentialists (Kafka, Camus and Sartre) with the Lovecraftian cosmic horror texts, this study revealed a common strand existing between the two philosophies. This commonality acts as a horrifying awakening within the narrative, and this study terms it a 'dark epiphany'. The dark epiphany presented itself in the total submission of Kafka's K. – the protagonist of *The Trial*. Oblivious to his crime and the nature of bureaucracy, K. finally succumbs to the terrible truth that the endless hierarchies of authority will never come to his defence and he is fated to die, as a criminal, without having known his crime.

In Camus' *The Plague*, Dr Rieux, towards the end of the narrative, realises that, though they may have minimised and delayed the suffering caused by the plague, they will never be able to eradicate entirely, since the plague resurfaces at any given time, in any given place. Rieux, burdened with this dark epiphany, can no longer participate with his townsfolk in the festivities following their inconsequential victory. The central trio of Sartre's "No Exit" are subjected to the

same horror of existence when it dawns upon them that they are forever condemned to suffer each other's judgement and insult. There is neither an escape nor salvation for these Sartrean characters. Although these narratives do not employ any otherworldly themes and mostly rely on anthropocentric ideas and concerns, they, nevertheless, propel their characters into contemplating the value of the complacency of their existence. They are always answered with silence when confronted with higher authority—be it Kafka's bureaucracy, Camus' idea of the plague or Sartre's vision of hell. The second section of the chapter discerned a similar horror of existence across Lovecraftian narratives. In a similar fashion, Lovecraft's human characters submit to an unquestionable silence when confronted with the grandeur of the cosmos.

For example, in his seminal short stories such as "The Dunwich Horror", "The Dreams in the Witch-House", "At the Mountains of Madness", "The Thing on the Doorstep", "The Call of Cthulhu", "Polaris", "The Rats in the Walls", "The Whisperer in Darkness" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth", this study observes highly erudite academicians coming in conflict with cosmic forces, which almost always results in an overturning of their existential understanding. They no longer find meaning or purpose in their existence. Moreover, they are burdened with the truth of their insignificance in the grand cosmos and their existence is forever eclipsed by this dark epiphany. The horror of existence (a consequence of the dark epiphany), therefore, establishes itself as a connecting thread between Lovecraft's cosmic horror fiction and the works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre. This comparative analysis enables a deeper understanding of the existential impact of cosmic experiences on human subjects across Lovecraft's oeuvre. In terms of the overarching narrative of the thesis, the narrative has progressed from the origins of the cosmic horror philosophy in the Weird fiction of Poe, Blackwood, Machen and Hodgson (Chapter One) to a comprehensive analysis of the epitome of cosmic horror fiction, i.e. the Lovecraftian cosmic

horror (Chapter Two). Chapter Three will further build upon the historiographical analysis of this study by focusing on the post-Lovecraftian cosmic horror fiction. While comparing and contrasting them with Lovecraft, the chapter will discuss contemporary cosmic horror authors such as Thomas Ligotti, John Langan, Michael Wehunt and Brian Evenson, among others, by discussing their version of cosmic horror and its entangled treatment of the complacency of human existence with Nature.

Chapter Four:

Nature and Existence Intertwined in Post-Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror

4.1 Introduction

In terms of its overarching argument, this thesis undertakes an evolutionary analysis of the cosmic horror canon by focusing on the turmoil of an irrevocably debilitated human existence that has resigned itself to the indifference and infinitude of the cosmos. Whereas the introduction to the thesis acquainted the reader with the fundamental tenets of the cosmic horror philosophy, Chapter One offered a comprehensive analysis of the American and British strains of cosmic horror fiction, focusing primarily on the Weird fictions of Edgar Allan Poe, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and William Hope Hodgson, among others. It detailed the genesis and the subsequent evolution of the canon across the post-millennial literary landscape. In the process, this study argues in favour of an evident progression from the early, still-struggling embers of cosmic futility in pre-Lovecraftian authors, and early Lovecraft himself, to the sheer indifference and cynicism of Lovecraft's later texts. Chapter Two, on the other hand, reinterpreted the cosmic horror canon using existentialist texts. By drawing parallels between the existentialist fictions of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the cosmic horror narratives of Lovecraft using the notion of the dark epiphany, the previous chapter described the unmistakable presence of the dark epiphany across the two schools. By focusing on the horrified subject's reaction to the indifference and absurdity of cosmos, Chapter Two (aided by existentialist texts) examined the existential import of an otherworldly experience across Lovecraft's oeuvre. Moreover, it also engaged in a 'cosmic' reading of the works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre. It detailed how Lovecraftian cosmic

horror and the twentieth century European existentialist school were linked together by a strand of an epiphanic moment that entails the dawning realisation of meaninglessness, powerlessness and futility. The dark epiphany, therefore, becomes a crucial part of the narrative as it results in the irreversible transformation or psychological alteration of the protagonists.

The previous chapter discussed how the characters or subjects of these narratives are almost always burdened with an inescapable and overwhelming epiphanic moment that upends not only their morality but the entirety of their quotidian existence. Kafka's *The Trial* describes such a moment when its protagonist, K., realises that there is no apparent escape from his absurd punishment; Camus' *The Plague* highlights the epiphanic moment through its protagonist, Dr. Rieux, who realises that the plague in question does not die completely and resurfaces after an indefinite amount of time; Sartre's "No Exit", through its posthumous trio of characters, describes this dark epiphany when they realise that they are each other's manifestation of hell and their punishment is eternal. These texts have been discussed in extensive detail in Chapter Two. This chapter, on the other hand, further extends this study's historiographical analysis by foraying into the post-Lovecraftian mutations of the cosmic horror canon—focusing primarily on their contemporary status and departure from the Lovecraftian mould. It is divided into two parts. The first section is dedicated to the post-Lovecraftian narratives of Thomas Ligotti while the second offers an analysis of post-millennial cosmic horror narratives of several other authors. The first section examines Ligotti's treatment of a cosmically-corrupted Nature and how it *wrecks* the existential complacency of the human subject. There are two reasons for Ligotti's exclusivity in this section. The first is a chronological reason. Ligotti cannot be categorised as a post-millennial cosmic horror writer; he acts as an interstitial presence between the twentieth and the twenty first century. His major works of fiction (short story anthologies), such as *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*

(1985), *Grimscribe: His Lives and Works* (1991) and *Noctuary* (1994), were produced just before the turn of the century. His contribution to the post-millennial cosmic horror canon is scanty (Aldana Reyes and M'Rabty 124), with the exception of *Teatro Grottesco* (2006).

Second, Ligotti is considered to be rooted in the Weird traditions of Poe and Lovecraft by horror theorists such as Xavier Aldana Reyes and Rachid M'Rabty, who argue that "Ligotti's Gothic horror belongs firmly in the traditions of Edgar Allan Poe and Lovecraft in its foregrounding of madness and altered (hallucinogenic) states of mind, and its expression of existential crises provoked by revelations about the nature of life as we understand it" (125). The same view is also echoed by Jonathan Newell who argues that Ligotti's "stories of puppets, manikins, marionettes, monstrous hypnosis and the stultifying horror of the corporate workplace are perhaps especially noteworthy in their evocation of a determinist, pessimistic world view similar to Lovecraft's" (7). Cosmic horror scholar Brian Stableford, while labelling Ligotti as "the most stylish of all the late-twentieth-century Lovecraftian writers", argues that the latter has successfully managed to add a "surreal gloss" to Lovecraft's cosmic tradition (86). Regarded as a torchbearer of the Lovecraftian aesthetic, Ligotti, therefore, deserves to be studied as a post-Lovecraftian cosmic horror writer operating during the late twentieth century. (Other horror writers who worked during the latter half of the twentieth century such as Ira Levin, William Peter Blatty, Thomas Tyron and Stephen King have already been discussed in Chapter One of the thesis—though none of them can be conclusively labelled as cosmic horror writers.) This section discusses Ligotti's "The Sect of the Idiot" (1986), "The Mystics of Muelenburg" (1986) and "Nethescurial" (1991) as primary case studies. The second section of the chapter deals specifically with the evolution of the cosmic horror canon by contrasting its treatment of Nature and its agency in the twentieth century with post-millennial incarnations of cosmic horror fiction. This section examines

if the Lovecraftian strand of cosmic horror and the horror movement of the subsequent decades rely heavily on the corruption of Nature and a lack of its agency. Michael Wehunt's "Beside Me Singing in the Wilderness" (2014), T. E. Grau's "Return of the Prodigy" (2015) and John Langan's "The Shallows" (2013) and "Bor Urus" (2019) are used as the post-millennial case studies. Furthermore, this part of this study also investigates if the post-millennial cosmic horror follows the Lovecraftian tradition, or if the latter's manifestation of the cosmic, rather than suppressing, supplements Natural agency, thereby suggesting an evolution in the cosmic horror canon from Lovecraft's corruption of Nature to the post-millennial rebellion of the Nature against corruptive forces.

4.2 Thomas Ligotti: The Corruption of Reality

This section argues that at the centre of Thomas Ligotti's fiction lies the notion of the 'horror of existence': "to be alive is to inhabit a nightmare without hope of awakening to a natural world" (Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* 3). More precisely, it aims to understand the nightmarish 'awakening' within the fictional characters of a Ligottian narrative leading up to an irreversible exposure to a horrifying existence. The section begins with an exhaustive discussion of Ligotti's philosophies of the nightmare of being and antinatalism, borrowed from his nonfiction treatise *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2018). In this text, Ligotti refers to psychogenesis—the birth of human consciousness—as the beginning of human species' horror of existence. The birth of consciousness, or what Ligotti terms "the parent of all horrors" (9), has only entailed meaningless suffering for humanity, forcing humans to reflect upon "flagrantly joyless possibilities" (9). Upon comparing and contrasting his 'pessimistic' views with the seemingly nihilistic philosophies of Lovecraft and Nietzsche, the section aims to corroborate Ligotti's pessimistic philosophy with his fiction. His "The Sect of the Idiot" (1986), "The Mystics of Muelenburg" (1986) and

“Nethescorial” (1991) serve as the primary case studies of this section. The objective is to understand whether Ligotti’s fiction directly reflects his philosophy. Do his fictional characters inherently nurture his views on the horror of existence, or are they forced into a bleak resignation by the inscrutability of cosmic forces?

In his *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, Ligotti offers a salient commentary on the inevitability of mankind’s ontological horrors. He calls it “The Nightmare of Being”, which is also the title of the book’s first chapter (*The Conspiracy* 1). Ligotti defines it as an unveiling of the cosmic truth which capsizes our indoctrinated ideas of existence: “Among the unpleasantries of human existence is the abashment we suffer when we feel our lives to be destitute of meaning with respect to who we are, what we do, and the general way we believe things to be in the universe” (22). The source of this ontological horror, according to Ligotti, appears to be the evolution of consciousness in humanity (he refers to it as “psychogenesis”), which has resulted in an irreversible divide between humanity and the rest of the Natural world:

As their [humanity’s] species moved forward, they began crossing boundaries whose very existence they never imagined. After nightfall, they looked up at the sky filled with stars and felt themselves small and fragile in the vastness. ... Everything changed once they had lives of their own and *knew* they had lives of their own. It even became impossible for them to believe things had ever been any other way (Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* 1-2; emphasis and brackets mine).

According to Ligotti, the divide between Nature and humanity has been ever-growing since the genesis of consciousness during the course of human evolution: “The whole of their [humanity’s] being was closed to the world, and they had been divided from the rest of creation” (2; brackets mine). Ligotti furthers his argument by stating that consciousness has propelled humans to ponder

over the ‘horror’ of their existence by reflecting on questions such as: “What should we say about being alive?” (2). According to Ligotti, once humans were made aware of their transient existence, they were gradually overwhelmed by the aporias of life, meaning, futility and death. Not only that, Ligotti argues, there may also have crept in a hostility or objection towards the thought of a transient existence inevitably punctuated by death:

They may even fulminate about how objectionable it is to be alive, or spout off that to be alive is to inhabit a nightmare without hope of awakening to a natural world, to have our bodies embedded neck-deep in a quagmire of dread, to live as shut-ins in a house of horrors from which nobody gets out alive and so on (3).

Interestingly, reverberations of Ligotti’s views can be traced as far back as Arthur Schopenhauer, as the latter argues that “[l]ife presents itself by no means as a gift for enjoyment, but as a task, a drudgery to be performed” (qtd. in Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* 36). Furthermore, Schopenhauer reduces human existence and consciousness to a mere “accident of life” (37), and in doing so, he disillusion humanity from the hubris of anthropocentric ideologies. Ligotti, although in awe of Schopenhauer’s pessimism, laments his life-affirming Will-to-live and deems it “too overwrought in the proving to be anything more than another intellectual labyrinth for specialists in perplexity” (13). While describing human existence as a tragedy, Ligotti also invokes Peter Wessel Zapffe’s (Ligotti goes to identify Schopenhauer “a forefather of Zapffe”) notable essay “The Last Messiah” (1933), echoing the latter’s tirade on consciousness, which argues that human survival has only been possible through a “conscious suppression of ... *hazardous* surplus of consciousness” (Zapffe 36; emphasis mine). Zapffe resorts to Biblical references to accentuate the fall of humanity ever since the genesis of consciousness: “He has lost his right of residence in the universe, has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and been expelled from Paradise” (35).

Because of its ‘conscious suppression’ of consciousness, Ligotti refers to humanity as “contradictory beings” (Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* xix). In one of his interviews, Ligotti argues that in order for these *contradictory beings* (humans) to keep on living and “insure the continuation of this funhouse of flesh that we call Life”, it is necessary for them to “fear the pain and grief of death and at all costs struggle to avoid the inevitable”, i.e. it is essential to keep the terrible truths of our existence veiled and out of reach. (Angerhuber and Wagner 71). To hide these terrible truths, consciousness has evolved to be “unself-conscious” of human biology’s transience: “Consciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unself-conscious of what we are—hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones” (Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* 11). Thus, to avoid being consumed by dreadful thoughts of death and suffering, we as a species require “fabulous illusions to take our minds off them” (11). Cosmic horror literature, in the similar vein, warns the subject about the detrimental and baleful nature of cosmic truths. Lovecraft very often resorts to a warning or disclaimer of sorts in his stories to forewarn the reader about the perils of pursuing cosmic knowledge: “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, “The Call of Cthulhu” 61). This ‘masking’ or ‘turning away’ from the horrors of existence is something that is repeatedly observed in Ligotti’s fiction, which will be discussed in the following section. However, a dissection of Ligotti’s fiction demands an invocation of Lovecraft as the two explore the very limit of human thought and rationality through their fiction. Ligotti very clearly sought inspiration from Lovecraft’s fiction, as he argues that Lovecraft, through his fiction, has been able to “sort out the worst of existence from any compensatory dividends, a process which leads him to conclude that life is a malignancy it were better not to know” (Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* 184). According to

Ligotti, Lovecraft's fiction places all human existence in a "frightful position" which could entail "universal madness or extinction at a moment's notice" (184).

When asked about his place in Weird literature in an interview with Darrell Schweitzer, Ligotti responds by saying that his general audience is the select few who, quite like himself, appreciate the works of Poe and Lovecraft (Schweitzer 24). Poe and Lovecraft, according to Ligotti (though he also alludes to the likes of George Trakl, Bruno Schulz and Jorge Luis Borges, among others), were "the ones who perpetuated the tradition of horror in literature, because their works reveal the outrageously strange and terrible as integral to existence, a fascinating turbulence never to be quelled, and not simply a momentary or isolated aberration succeeded by reconciliation with the world, or even its affirmation" (24). In the same interview, Ligotti admits that his stories "could be called Lovecraftian in having a fairly steady view of the bleak and uncertain cosmos" (25-6). Lovecraft and Ligotti have a lot in common: the flavour of the cosmic horror more or less stays the same, the protagonists are almost always erudite academicians, and there is a perennially lingering sense of an inevitable doom⁷. Aldana Reyes and M'Rabty emphasise that Ligotti's style of horror firmly follows the traditions of Poe and Lovecraft as they share a similar "foregrounding of madness and altered (hallucinogenic) states of mind" as well as an "expression of existential crises provoked by revelations about the nature of life as we understand it" (125). Ligotti himself finds echoes of his own pessimistic philosophy in Lovecraft's fiction:

Lovecraft does not want to take you on an emotional roller-coaster ride, at the end of which he tells you to watch your step as your car comes to a stop and you settle back onto steady

⁷ In an interview with Angerhuber and Wagner, Ligotti revealed that Lovecraft's stories helped him combat depression during his late teenage years: "I found that the meaningless and menacing universe described in Lovecraft's stories corresponded very closely to the place I was living at that time, and ever since for that matter. I was grateful that someone else had perceived the world in a way similar to my own view" (Angerhuber and Wagner 53).

ground. He simply wants to say that we no longer have to stand back very far to see that the human race is what it always has been in this or any other world—irrelevant, which is as liberating to some as it is maddening to other, including Lovecraft’s characters (*The Conspiracy* 196).

However, despite the apparent kinship with Lovecraft, Ligotti has carved an unusual niche for himself within the literary landscape of cosmic horror fiction. Ligotti does not heavily rely on the Lovecraftian cosmic beings such as Cthulhu and Azathoth. There are exceptions, of course (for example, “The Last Feast of Harlequin” (1990)), but Ligotti, despite following the tradition of Poe and Lovecraft, does not venture to extend it. There are many contemporary writers who have contributed to the Lovecraftian cosmic lore across literature, television, films, videogames and podcasts. Ligotti’s short stories, however, employ the pedestal of cosmic horror to dissect “the scary reality of suffering” and “the nonsensical nature of existence” (Aldana Reyes and M’Rabty 125). Ligotti’s “dark [and grounded] vision of humanity” (125; brackets mine) isolates him as the ideal mouthpiece for disseminating humanity’s horror of existence in the post-Lovecraftian wake of the cosmic horror tradition. Rather than relying on cosmic entities, Ligotti eschews the reality of his worlds in many ways. The notion surrounding his deconstruction of reality is also echoed by Jason Marc Harris, who argues: “[F]or Ligotti, it is not tentacled-horrors that are usually the heralds of disorder. It’s clowns—and other simulacra of humanity’s horrific disorder and powerlessness: puppets and mannequins” (1251; brackets mine). Harris goes on to argue that “Ligotti’s texts offer an even darker philosophy than the existential indifference of Camus’s Meursault in *The Stranger* or the nihilistic negation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*” (1256).

However, what differentiates Ligotti from the likes of Camus and Sartre is his pessimistic and antinatalistic approach towards life (The European existential school of the twentieth century,

despite its bleakness, arrived at a defiantly optimistic outlook towards life.) Like Lovecraft, Ligotti brings his characters to a state of absolute submission; but, unlike Lovecraft's use of cosmic gods, Ligotti subjects his characters to the aforementioned submission through a manipulation of Nature, physical reality, or their own self. Rather than relying on the tentacles of Cthulhu, Ligotti gravitates towards the corruption of everyday objects, such as spectacles or a music box, to infuse his flavour of existential horror in the narrative:

The encounter with the weird in Lovecraft, an encounter that pits humanity's insignificance against a vast chaotic cosmos (cosmic horror), is replaced with a clash with reality in which the world we know (understood in Ligotti as evil and horrific) is glimpsed via strange artefacts like special lenses or music boxes (Aldana Reyes and M'Rabty 129).

We witness a manipulation of the mundane through the corruption (or transcendence) of cityscapes, biology, books, movie theatres and Nature. The following section details three of Ligotti's existentially nightmarish narratives and builds a progression in the degree of their ontological horror.

"The Sect of the Idiot": Non-corporeal Submission

Ligotti often uses his characters as a conduit for terrifying realisations, resulting in a coming together of existential dread and cosmic horror. Ligotti's cosmic horror, akin to Lovecraft's, assails the very foundation of human existence by subjecting it to abject insignificance and indifference. The nature of reality, for Ligotti, is almost always malevolent and incomprehensible, which seems to be a recurring motif in his short stories. Whereas Kafka, Sartre and Camus described human insignificance and purposelessness through *human* themes of alienation, war, pestilence, etc., Ligotti resorts to themes and settings that challenge the very notion of human existence. Philip J.

Kain describes the horror of existence as an irreversible dark epiphany that dismantles the anthropocentric conceit of humanity by exposing it to the indifference of the universe, resulting in a paralysing encounter: “We live in an empty, meaningless cosmos. We cannot look into reality without being overcome” (41). This knowledge, according to Kain, ‘kills’ the human desire for action and meaning-making and, therefore, “[l]ife requires lies, illusion, art, veiling. Life must shun the truth. Life is not possible with the truth” (47; brackets mine). Kain’s arguments work in tandem with Ligotti’s philosophy as the latter uses his fiction to not only lift but completely annihilate this ‘veil’ in order to expose humanity to the horror and meaninglessness of existence. For example, in his “The Sect of the Idiot” (1986), Ligotti describes a nameless protagonist who slowly isolates himself from the mundane and gravitates towards deciphering the origins of a mysterious cult.

The narrative begins with a seemingly innocuous meeting between the protagonist and an unknown “little man” (Ligotti, “The Sect of the Idiot”, 201). This seemingly inconsequential meeting entails strange dreams of cosmic connotations for the protagonist, who is compelled to ruminate on the absurdity of his existence:

And it was this very remoteness from the designs of my dream universe, this feeling of fantastic homelessness amid an alien order of being, that was the source of anxieties I had never before experienced. I was no more than an irrelevant parcel of living tissue caught in a place I should not be, threatened with being snared in some great dredging net of doom, an incidental shred of flesh pulled out of its element of light and into an icy blackness, which I felt at any moment might be horribly altered or simply ended. In the most far-reaching import of the phrase, my life was of *no matter* (203).

Upon experiencing this profound sense of existential burden, the protagonist is confronted with the presence of cosmic beings within his dream world. He refers to this alien gathering as an “eerie sect” (204). Here, the protagonist makes a startling discovery—these cosmic beings, having terrified and paralysed the former, are in turn being manipulated by the tunes of their “whispering masters” (205). Ligotti offers an ephemeral or even false godhood to these hooded alien beings while hinting towards the presence of an odious supreme power, to whom these “apparent” gods bow down: “For there was a power superseding theirs, a power which they served and from which they merely emanated, something which was beyond the universal hypnosis by virtue of its very mindlessness, its awesome idiocy” (205).

Before waking up from his cosmic slumber, the protagonist observes a growing intimacy between himself and the hooded beings of his dream. The next day, he is able to discern a yet-obscure element within the physical composition of the town, which reveals to him “a cache of unwonted offerings stored out of sight” (206). The entire town seems to be corrupted by the dreamlike lens, which, according to the protagonist, conflated “the lurid and the lovely” (206). Upon further examination, he comes across the same lofty room of his dream world where he had been acquainted with the cosmic beings. Inside the room, he finds the ‘thrones’ of the cosmic entities and is instantly paralysed; he decides to flee but is impeded by the same “little man” as before, who thanks him for visiting and tells him that the beings want to take him along on cosmic voyages as he is one of the “chosen ones” (208). At this juncture, the protagonist is overwhelmed by his own insignificance as the little man holds onto his arm as he tries to escape. This particular event of the narrative may very well be an example of the dark epiphany:

“I tried to free myself from the madman’s grasp, shouting at him to let go of my hand.

‘*Your* hand?’ he shouted back at me Then he began to repeat the phrase over and over,

laughing as if some sardonic joke had reached a conclusion within the depths of his lunacy” (208).

The protagonist’s dark epiphany finds its denouement when, upon returning home, he observes that one of his hands is no longer his and belongs to *them* as it has been corrupted into dark tentacles of inhuman proportions. The narrative ends with the protagonist penning down the entire course of events before succumbing to his otherworldly fate, which awaits him in the same lofty room populated by ancient cosmic beings.

The existential aporia faced by the unnamed protagonist is evident throughout the narrative as we see a frequent intertwining of contrasting elements within the narrative, such as that of dreams and reality, the human and the otherworldly, the lurid and the lovely, etc. Ligotti describes humanity as a species hypnotised by the aforementioned hooded cosmic beings, who, in turn, are subordinate (and, thus, themselves hypnotised) by a cosmic power superseding theirs: “a hypnotized parade of beings sleepwalking to the odious manipulations of their whispering masters” (205). The protagonist, who inadvertently becomes the recipient of this esoteric knowledge, constantly questions his sanity and, furthermore, the absurdity of the universe surrounding him: “Was it ever my intention to confront the madness of the universe, or at least my own” (207). Xavier Aldana Reyes and Rachid M’Rabty argue that “the moment of horror” (which this study terms the dark epiphany here) in Ligotti’s narratives arrives “when we begin to see, through an awareness of our own decay and the impending inevitability of death, the world and humanity for what they are: meaningless, worthless and evil” (130). The protagonist, once overcome with “the moment of horror”, ponders over the nightmare of his existence, which, in turn, is punctuated by a “solitary madness” emulating “that of the world” (Ligotti, “The Sect”, 209). Akin to Lovecraftian cosmic horror narratives, the ‘awakening’ takes the form of forbidden

knowledge which, rather than illuminating, devours its seekers, entailing unbridled madness and absolute submission: “I have been lured away by dreams; all is nonsense now” (209).

“The Mystics of Muelenburg”: Corporeal Submission

The horror of existence in Ligotti’s fiction continues to expand in the next case study. In his “The Mystics of Muelenburg” (1986), Ligotti relates, in an anecdotal manner, the warping of a town’s reality and matter. The medieval town of Muelenburg witnesses a corruption of the very core of its matter, as described by the narrator: “I once knew a man who claimed that, overnight, all the solid shapes of existence had been replaced by cheap substitutes: trees made of poster board, houses built of colored foam, whole landscapes composed of hair-clippings. His own flesh, he said, was now just so much putty” (Ligotti, “The Mystics of Muelenburg” 357). The narrator confesses his scepticism surrounding a natural understanding of the universe (adhering to fixed laws of Nature): “Forms, having nothing to offer except a mere suggestion of firmness, declined in importance; fantasy, that misty domain of pure meaning, gained in power and influence” (358). This disclaimer is followed by the retelling of a discourse the narrator had shared with a mystic named Klaus Klingman, who illuminates the former about the ‘unreality’ of things. Klingsman snaps into a tirade about the terrible transformation of the world affecting its very atoms and molecules: “The worst fear of the race—yes, the world suddenly transformed into a senseless nightmare, horrible dissolution of things. Nothing compares, even oblivion is a sweet dream” (359). Klingsman reveals that this transformation is an extremely obscure affair, and only a select unfortunate few carry the burden of remembering it—Klingsman being one of them. He refers to himself as a “parasite of chaos” and a “maggot of vice,” as he has been subjected to the cosmic metamorphosis of our world (359). This is when Klingsman discusses the events of Muelenburg,

referring to the town with metaphors such as “that medieval gloom, catastrophe of shadows” (360). Klingsman describes the events of an unfortunate evening in Muelenburg when twilight overstayed its welcome and refused to succumb to the dark of the night. The denizens of the medieval town initially paid no heed to the lingering grey swallowing the sky and, instead, chose to carry on with their mundane lives:

Within the high stone walls of Muelenburg itself, no one seemed particularly troubled that the narrow streets—normally so cluttered with the pointed shadows of peaked roofs and jutting gables at this time of day—were still immersed in a lukewarm dimness which turned merchants’ brightly colored signs into faded artifacts of a dead town and which made faces look as if they were fashioned of pale clay (360-1).

Disturbed by this strange phenomenon, the populace exhausted all forms of logic, reason, science, and superstition to explain the former. The town was pervaded by an eerie stillness that made its way to “their homes, and perhaps their souls” (361). Midnight and the early hours of the following morning brought no change to the dusty grey sky. However, the stillness of the sky was contrasted by disorder, decay and “striking revisions in the base realm of matter” (362). Fountains bore unquantifiable depths, cornices came to life and mocked prayers in cathedrals and branches of trees turned into flaccid ropes: “precisely sculpted stone began to loosen and lump, an abandoned cart melded with the sucking mud of the street, and objects in desolate rooms lost themselves in the surfaces they pressed upon” (362-3). The transformation reached its denouement when the townsfolk could no longer recognise each other’s countenance. As the town fell into a somnolent slumber, twilight gave way to night, and the townsfolk woke up to find their town exactly as it used to be. Their memory of the events of the previous twilight had been erased by the higher cosmic entities (except for Klaus Klingsman). Klingsman concludes his monologue by

declaring to the narrator that this tabooed knowledge (which the narrator unequivocally doubts) is his (Klingsman's) gift of enlightenment to the narrator. Following these events, the narrator's scepticism is put to rest when a similar transformation of the world begins to take place in front of his eyes: "But no one else remembers that time when the night would not leave, and no dawn appeared to be forthcoming" (364).

However, the narrator's 'enlightenment' becomes a solitary affair as no one else recalls the events of the transformation and the chaos that ensued:

For no one else recalls the hysteria that prevailed when the stars and the moon dimmed into blackness. Nor can they summon the least memory of when the artificial illumination of this earth turned weak and lurid, and all the shapes we once knew contorted into nightmares and nonsense. And finally how the blackness grew viscous, enveloping what light remained and drawing us into itself (365).

Through this inexplicable transformation of Nature and matter, Ligotti presents to his readers a picture of reality under manipulation, distorted perception, and the burden of remembering. Robert M. Price argues that, as a species, "we proclaim ourselves sane by mere shared convention, shared delusion" (32), and if this illusion were to break (as it happened to Klingsman and later to the narrator), it would awaken the seed of doubt capable of questioning the very nature of reality itself, akin to Ligotti's philosophical views. The narrator is subjected to this harrowing experience as unendurable truths are revealed to him by Klingsman and, consequently, the former must, as is argued by Stefan Dziemianowicz, "remain forever in doubt" about the nature of the real world ("Nothing Is What It Seems To Be" 44). The narrator, no longer untouched by the terrible truths of reality, can never *truly* embrace the mundane like the 'ignorant ones' who surround him. This dark epiphany—the unreality of the world (including his own self)—transgresses into a horror of

existence for the narrator and Klingsman, as they are “[u]nable to consciously comprehend the horror of their own being” (Baumgartner 31).

“Nethescurial”: Total Submission to the Horror of Existence

It is important to articulate a sense of progression across the two stories discussed above. “The Sect of the Idiot” brings about an upheaval in the protagonist’s life when he realises that humanity is enslaved by a higher species who, in turn, are snared to the will of incomprehensible cosmic beings. In the end, he realises that even his own corporeal body no longer belongs to him—his existence is based on the whims of higher beings; thus, his morality, purpose and sense of meaning were never really his. In “The Mystics of Muelenburg”, Ligotti distorts the nature of perception and reality by putting into question the very existence of the world as we know it. The protagonist of this story is acquainted, albeit ephemerally, with the true, terrible appearance of all existence. The world he knew and recognised was simply masquerading as something it was not. Towards the end of the narrative, the protagonist can no longer *trust* the nature of ‘reality’ that surrounds him. The theme of ruination or corruption of human perception is evident in both narratives—although the degree of the horror of existence varies across them. There is a complete loss of agency and teleology in “The Sect of the Idiot” as all of humanity is subservient to cosmic entities. Let us call this *intangible* loss of agency and meaning ‘non-corporeal submission’. “The Mystics of Muelenburg,” on the other hand, puts the entirety of physical reality under scrutiny and, thus, results in a more *tangible* ‘corporeal submission’. A progression from the non-corporeal to the corporeal suggests the ‘degrees of disillusionment’ in humanity’s grasp of the horror of existence. The ‘unknown’ source is becoming more and more known because of its gradual corporeal manifestation. The third case study, in bringing together the corporeal and the non-corporeal,

breaks open the shield of disillusionment, as it were, to engulf and overwhelm humanity, while subjecting it to total submission to existential horror and meaninglessness.

Ligotti's "Nethescurial" (1991) can very easily be compared to Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" in the sense that both narratives feature a manuscript describing an encounter with ancient evil. However, rather than solely relying on the trope of cosmic entities, Ligotti, once again, focuses on manipulating reality and Nature. Divided into three sections, the narrative opens with the protagonist describing a manuscript written by Mr. Gray, who, at the behest of Dr. N—, visits a desolate island called Nethescurial for anthropological investigation. Dr. N— informs Mr. Gray about the history of the island involving a religious cult that worshipped a deity in the form of an idol, believing that "all created things—appearances to the contrary—are of a single, unified, and transcendent *stuff*" (Ligotti, "Nethescurial" 323). However, upon discovering that their deity, instead of being benevolent, is intrinsically evil. The worshippers destroy the idol and scatter its remains all over the world so that the entity may never be summoned again. Dr. N— finds a fragment of the idol and fears that certain Nethescurial fanatics wish to make the idol whole again. Upon arriving there, Mr. Gray discovers that the island's flora and fauna seem to have been 'corrupted' and mutated into bizarre forms by "some shaping force of demonic temperament" (321). Mr. Gray also observes that the entire island bears the weight of an obscure malevolence, which he describes as a "sinister enchantment which derives from a profound evil that is kept at just the right distance from us so that we may experience both our love and fear of it in one sweeping sensation" (320).

This 'omnipresence of evil' is a recurring motif throughout the narrative, as will be made evident in the following discourse. It is later revealed that Mr. Gray is, in fact, a member of the cult in its "modern incarnation" (324) and has brought with him all the other pieces of the idol

with the intent of purloining the final piece from Dr. N—. At the end of the manuscript, Mr. Gray unifies the idol and sacrifices Dr. N— to Nethescurial. He is, however, horrified by the events that follow, describing them as “a horror which is both his own and that of the whole human race” (325) and, consequently, repents by smashing the idol into pieces. The story’s second section acquaints the reader with the narrator, who had found and read the aforementioned manuscript, criticising its literary merit. However, the narrator is soon plagued by horrific nightmares in which he finds himself on the cursed island of Nethescurial and is made witness to a *willing* sacrifice at the altar of the evil deity. Once again, Ligotti alludes to the ‘omnipresence of evil’ which is only magnified through the narrator’s dream: “there was an unseen *presence*, something I could feel was circulating within all things and unifying them in an infinitely extensive body of evil” (329). The narrator, to his horror, is unable to detach himself from this all-pervading evil, which seems to circulate not only through his house but through his own self:

It seemed to be in possession of my house, of every common object inside and the whole of the dark world outside. Yes—lurking among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds. Everything seemed to be a manifestation of this evil and to my eyes was growing stronger behind this living face that I am afraid to confront in the mirror (330).

The third section details the narrator’s “Nethescurialian” exploits (330). He becomes sensitive to the “squirming” and “gushing *stuff*” that circulates through every physical surface, including his own flesh. Furthermore, he describes his visit to a park where, during a puppet show, he is surrounded by a horde of people who start chanting about the *truth* of the omnipresent evil (the same chant as was in the manuscript): “Amid the rooms of our houses—across moonlit skies—throughout all souls and spirits—behind the faces of the living and the dead” (332). He rushes back home to finally burn the manuscript and absolve himself of the Nethescurialian curse. However,

to his horror, upon burning the manuscript, the residue of smoke lingers in his room, taking terrifying shapes and forms. The narrative concludes with the narrator, in a state of denial, refusing to believe the omnipresent evil of Nethescurial:

But no shadow falls across the moon, no churning chaos of smoke that chokes the frail order of the earth. It is not a squirming, creeping, smearing shape I see upon the moon, not the shape of a great deformed crabscuttling out of the black oceans of infinity and invading the island of the moon, crawling with its innumerable bodies upon all the spinning islands of space. That shape is not the cancerous totality of all creatures, not the oozing ichor that flows within all things. *Nethescurial is not the secret name of the creation.* It is not amid the rooms of our houses and beyond their walls—beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies—below earth mound and above mountain peak—in northern leaf and southern flower—inside each star and the voids between them—within blood and bone—throughout all souls and spirits—upon the watchful winds of this and the several worlds— behind the faces of the living and the dead. I am not dying in a nightmare (333).

One can draw parallels between the omnipresent evil of “Nethescurial” and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938). In this novel, Sartre offers a monstrous manifestation of everyday objects that threaten to overwhelm and consume him as “they reach beyond the routine and functional boundaries of everydayness” (Hanscomb 7). The way Sartre describes the superfluity of the material world can easily be compared with Ligotti’s interpretation of malevolent physical reality:

Things have broken free from their names. They are there, grotesque, stubborn, gigantic, and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of the Things, which cannot be given names. Alone, wordless, defenceless, they

surround me, under me, behind me, above me. They demand nothing, they don't impose themselves, they are there" (*Nausea* 180).

In his essay "The Transition from Literary Horror to Existential Nightmare in Thomas Ligotti's 'Nethescurial,'" Matt Cardin argues that Ligotti presents a form of divine transcendental unity between humanity and Nature (the physical world). But there is a caveat: "What if this unity is not blissful, but nightmarish? What if the god who is our very self turns out to be a monster?" (Cardin 77). This chapter focuses on a similar juxtaposition of Nature and the 'cosmic' in the post-millennial cosmic horror canon in the next section. The answer to these philosophical questions (in Ligotti's fiction) is, according to Cardin, in and around the characters who populate it: "We cannot escape from the nightmare when the nightmare turns out to be our own soul" (77). The omnipresent evil alluded to by Ligotti not only pervades the physical world of "Nethescurial" but also permeates through the flesh and soul of each of its characters: "Imagine all of creation as a mere mask for the foulest evil, an absolute evil whose reality is mitigated only by our blindness to it, an evil at the heart of things" (Ligotti, "Nethescurial" 325).

Upon awakening to the impenetrable reality of their world and the unintelligible nature of the universe as a whole, Ligotti's characters can no longer find solace in their mundane existence and are eternally *cursed* to ruminate on the nature of their new disillusioned 'unreality'. "Nethescurial" serves as the perfect conclusion of the argument at hand, because its brand of the horror of existence, rather than limiting itself to the corporeal or non-corporeal realm, results in absolute and unquestionable resignation—i.e., total submission. It becomes the final manifestation of the terrible truth or the dark epiphany that the 'horrific' is at no distance from humanity; it rather is within the very fabric of our existence, our reality, our soul. There is no room for veiling it, or the fabrication of the illusion of respite. It has become a self-intimating truth of horror of existence.

“The Sect of the Idiot” enforced a non-corporeal submission on its characters as all of humanity was hypnotised by the will of higher cosmic entities; “The Mystics of Muelenburg”, on the other hand, corrupted and manipulated matter i.e. the physical world and resulted in a corporeal submission; “Nethescurial”, however, permeates the existential matrix of humanity with an intrinsic evil of corporeal and non-corporeal proportions and, thus, it existentially annihilates those who are made privy to this turbulent discovery. The disillusionment is complete in “Nethescurial”—the quotidian is no longer a solace as the human subject *awakens* to the dark revelation that the universe is an uncaring and inscrutable void bereft of meaning, morality or hope. Before concluding with this section, it is also important to extend this argument to other post-millennial writers. Ligotti can be regarded as an interstitial presence who links the post-Lovecraftian age of horror fiction (characterised by the likes of Stephen King, Robert R. McCammon and T.E.D. Klein) with the post-millennial cosmic horror writers (John Langan, Michael Wehunt and T. E. Grau). As we move deeper into the post-millennial American cosmic horror canon, the cohesion of Weird fiction as a definitive genre becomes progressively obfuscated, interspersed by other allied generic elements of “science fiction, horror and fantasy” (Sederholm, “The New Weird” 162). Thus, before analysing post-millennial cosmic horror (in the next section), it is prudent to address the state of contemporary ‘New Weird’ fiction, which, apart from the authors mentioned in this study, also includes authors such as China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, K. J. Bishop and Steph Swainston, among others.

In these New Weird narratives, cosmic horror and the horror of existence are interwoven with the themes of ecocriticism, feminism and the Anthropocene. For example, Caitlín R. Kiernan’s 2017 novella *Agents of Dreamland*—providing a commentary and a continuation of Lovecraft’s “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931)—focuses on a dystopian future in which the

entire planet has succumbed to an alien threat, and humanity barely survives as mutilated vermin in underground burrows, inducing an existential horror that is less dependent on the eldritch supernatural and more on science fiction. Livia Llewellyn's "Omphalos" (2011), told through the eyes of a young girl, presents the double horror of a distant existential eldritch as well as incestuous abuse. Brian Evenson's "The Dust" (2016) weaves a tale of murder and mystery in which an off-world mining operation is supposedly obliterated by a sentient form of dust. It is, of course, important to mention these authors in a study such as this. However, the scope of this study is limited to cosmic horror fiction (Lovecraftian and post-Lovecraftian). In summary, this section has traced the abundant presence of the horror of existence in Ligotti's cosmic horror fiction. Ligotti not only upholds the Lovecraftian aesthetic but significantly contributes to it through his manipulation of the mundane in terms of corrupted architecture and human anatomy. Moreover, this section has also traced a progressive impact of the horror of existence on Ligotti's human characters in degrees of submission they entail: corporeal, non-corporeal and total submission in "The Sect of the Idiot", "The Mystics of Muelenburg" and "Nethescurial", respectively. The following section is devoted to comparing and contrasting the Lovecraftian and post-millennial strands of cosmic horror fiction (based on their treatment of Nature) to examine the latter's 'evolved' manifestation of the horror of existence. In terms of a historiographical analysis, this study advances chronologically from the precursors of Lovecraft (Chapter One) to Lovecraft himself (Chapter Two). Following a discourse surrounding the post-Lovecraftian decades, this study dissects the work of Thomas Ligotti, marking the turn of the twenty-first century. The next section (Section 4.3) focuses on contemporary cosmic horror authors (the likes of John Langan, Michael Wehunt, Brian Evenson and T. E. Grau) by comparing them with the Lovecraftian cosmicism.

4.3 Horror of Existence contra/sans Nature: Comparison between the Lovecraftian and Post-Millennial Cosmic Horror

First, it is imperative to define the scope and plurality of the post-millennial cosmic horror literature. The cosmic horror canon, ever since its inception by Lovecraft, has seen numerous transformations marred with “tensions and convergences” (Colebrook 209) and, thus, it is difficult to conflate all the post-millennial writers of Weird fiction under the umbrella of cosmic horror. Lovecraft has influenced numerous contemporary writers in “the fields of genre fiction, particularly Gothic, Horror, and the New Weird” (209), resulting in the creation of overlapping themes and subgenres. For example, the New Weird fiction—characterised by the works of China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, K. J. Bishop, Caitlín Kiernan and Steph Swainston, among others—builds upon the genre of Weird fiction by including new and hitherto unused themes of ecocriticism, feminism, identity and the Anthropocene. Despite its evolution, the New Weird is distantly rooted in the “Lovecraftian aesthetic” which “might be thought of as a catalyst as well as a foundation” of the nascent subgenre (210). Carl H. Sederholm describes the New Weird as “a new subgenre within speculative literature” (“The New Weird” 161), drawing from other genres such as “fantasy, science fiction, Gothic and horror, but might also freely draw on Westerns, New Wave science fiction, slipstream or steampunk” (161). Engendered at the turn of the twenty-first century, the New Weird was initially characterised by Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* (2000), Kiernan’s *Threshold* (2001), VanderMeer’s *City of Saints and Madmen* (2002) and Bishop’s *The Etched City* (2003), ushering in the creation of “dense and epic worlds”, while also suggesting “new thematic possibilities” (165).

Sederholm goes on to argue that the New Weird is not *just* an intertwining of different genres but an attempt to create a new identity for the Weird within the contemporary world: “the

New Weird was never simply about combining genres, but was more interested in transforming them in ways that created something new while also preserving certain key questions fundamental to the weird itself” (161). The New Weird subgenre took a departure from imitating or expanding upon the works of Lovecraft and instead chose to emphasise the real and the human in constant conflict with the Weird and the incomprehensible:

One of the clearest signs of this deep change came from the way the New Weird transformed the practice of some weird writers to imitate Lovecraft too closely or to borrow too much from his plots. Instead, the New Weird embraced weird fiction’s general tendency to interrogate the human experience of the world and the cosmos and added to them an interest in exploring how human beings perceive the world. In the New Weird, everything – including the experience of reading and - understanding – is potentially strange and unknowable (161).

The notion of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror—the central focus of this academic undertaking—thus becomes one of the many appendages of the New Weird movement. Therefore, it is pertinent to mention here that this chapter will focus only on post-millennial *cosmic horror* fiction (apart from the work of Thomas Ligotti—who acts as an interstitial presence at the turn of the twentieth century). Following this disclaimer, the next section describes the conflation of cosmic and existential horror in post-millennial cosmic horror.

This section investigates the horror of existence in post-millennial American cosmic horror fiction by juxtaposing it with the canon’s treatment of Nature. Here, the focus shifts to the treatment of Nature because the post-millennial incarnation of cosmic horror, influenced by the plurality of New Weird fiction, catalyses the urgency of global environmental problems (climate change, global warming) to evoke a ‘contemporary’ sense of the horror of existence. Guy Witzel,

while describing the works of John Langan and Victor LaValle, argues that the post-millennial strand of cosmic horror fiction depicts “the relationship between our ecological circumstances and structures of domination, and how the nihilism animating today’s forces of reaction churns with the same vortices that give us superstorms, thousand-year floods, and vanishing shorelines” (561). Witzel’s argument is corroborated by Xavier Aldana Reyes, who argues that “the twenty-first century is perceived as a tipping point for worldwide issues like climate change, population-decimating diseases and overpopulation” (“Contemporary Zombies” 93). Nature, thus, becomes an imperative avenue of investigation in post-millennial cosmic horror fiction. To delineate the evolution of the canon, this section divides the post-Lovecraftian cosmic horror fiction into two phases: the (late) twentieth century phase and the post-millennial phase. The twentieth century phase, prefaced by the texts of Lovecraft himself, posits Nature as a corruptible and subservient entity, subdued by the alien cosmic and redeemed only by a rationalist agent/outsider, focusing on the late-twentieth century texts by Stephen King, T.E.D. Klein and Robert R. McCammon. This study argues that this phase utilises the ‘cosmic corruption’ of the Natural order to evoke the horror of existence in human subjects.

In the post-millennial phase, rather than serving the cosmic, Nature becomes the cosmic, transcending the moulds of existential rationality and comprehension, becoming inscrutable and ‘agential’ in the process. Case studies in this section will include the works of Thomas Ligotti, Michael Wehunt, T.E. Grau and John Langan (Ligotti is used again to ease the argument from the late 90s to early 2000s). This phase manages to present Nature as an *inherently* cosmic entity that requires no corruption. This study argues that the horror of existence emanating from such a revelation (Nature as inherently alien to humanity) is progressively more potent. While discerning Nature’s autonomy, this section also discusses how a ‘rational’ Nature falls within the ambit of

anthropocentrism, whereas a ‘non-rational’⁸ Nature, often mistaken as misanthropic, adopts absolute indifference towards the anthropos. Thus, the horror of existence emanating from Nature’s cosmic incarnation is progressively growing as we move from the first phase’s anthropocentric rendition of Nature to the second phase’s irrational and indifferent Nature. The overarching theme of the horror of existence is, thus, discussed in relation to the human subject’s encounter with Nature’s cosmic ‘corruption’ and/or ‘transcendence’. Tracing the emergence of Nature’s autonomy in the American cosmic horror canon invariably directs us towards the deconstruction of Lovecraftian themes, leading to a division of the canon into two phases—the late twentieth century and the post-millennial. Inspired by the canonical works by H. P. Lovecraft, the first phase, peaking during the 1980s, treats Nature as an unassertive device in the cosmic lore: frequently invaded by an “outside space that continually infiltrates, un-grounds, and subverts” its hospitable familiarity (Camara 44). The recurrence of the themes of ‘haunting’ and invasion of Nature by some ‘other’, supernatural threat opened the former to human interventions that restore it to its normalcy, thus establishing the cosmic theme as a mere invasive anomaly, tameable by human beings.

This ‘invasive-cosmic’ turns into the ‘innate-cosmic’ in the second phase—an inexplicable, empowered and unsympathetic quiddity that resists, even ignores, the human being’s attempt to tame, redeem or restore it. Instead of incursive aliens, ancient corruptors and mutating monsters, the post-millennial phase reimagines Nature as the original threat itself with a limitless ambit and unexplored recesses both on and beyond earth, frigid towards interpretations. Several English authors such as M. R. James, Lord Dunsany and Robert Aickman were breaking through

⁸This study labels the post-millennial representation of Nature as “non-rational” rather than “irrational.” It is because the indifference of Nature is because of its brutality; Nature as a ‘brute fact’ is outside the ambit of rationality. Irrationality, on the other hand, presupposes the possibility of rationality. As philosopher Donald Davidson said, “irrationality is a failure within the house of reason” (138).

the confines of gothic horror fiction in their pursuit of the Weird tale during the first half of the twentieth century. However, this study focuses solely on the American cosmic horror tradition assuming Lovecraft, while also discussing his precursors, as the progenitor of the cosmic theme before exploring works by Stephen King, T.E.D. Klein and Robert R. McCammon, who frequently focus on the invasive cosmic as a Nature-altering force to be nullified by the human protagonists. Contrarily, Thomas Ligotti, Michael Wehunt, T.E. Grau and John Langan—along with a number of emergent authors in the US—do not perceive the cosmic as categorically invasive or ‘other’, instead describing it as Nature’s endemic quality that stalls or ignores human reasoning, perceiving the former “with commingled wonder and horror” (Moreland 35). This section, thus, aims to trace the transformation of the tameable, pastoral⁹ Nature into its post-millennial autonomous awakening, while examining the degree of the horror of existence these two different phases entail. The section also raises pertinent questions concerning the several aspects of the still-embryonic pedagogy of cosmic horror philosophy: Are cosmic horror and the horror of existence inextricably intertwined? Is there a progressive horror of existence as we move from a Nature corrupted by the ‘cosmic’ to one that *is* the ‘cosmic’? What is Nature contra/sans cosmic? The following sections address these queries.

⁹ I am using Leo Marx’s condensation of the wide significance of ‘pastoralism’ in 20th century American literature which is “less an expression of thought than of feeling ... the idyllic and the rustic as antidotes to processes of modernization and alternatives to modern society’s increasing complexity, artificiality, and sophistication”. Pastoralism is a term that represents a hermetic ideal: malleable, unchallenging and jejune. It is also pliant and fawning on the human beings’ impression of it as a nurturing, uncomplicated and pre-civilizational domain. See Catrin Gersdorf, ‘Imaginary Ecologies: Landscape, American Literature, and the Reconstruction of Space in the 21st Century’, *Anglia*, 124.1 (2006), p. 45.

'Tipped with tongues of foul flames': Lovecraft, Nature and Humanity's (mis)anthropic

Existence

To explain the issue of Natural autonomy, and the embedded cosmicity, one has to briefly regard H.P. Lovecraft's perception of 'cosmic horror' and its larger literary context. Lovecraft's own discernment of the genre stressed "a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos" (*Supernatural Horror* 14), implying a postulated predictability of the earthly phenomena familiar to human logic and rationality. In other words, Nature is confined within the scope of human reasoning. This anthropocentric understanding of Nature shields human cognition from cosmic unfamiliarity through its rigid familiarity ('laws'): "subjectivity, therefore, is simply the 'highest power' of the 'identity of subjective and objective we call nature'" (Grant 169). What corrupts this familiarity, according to Lovecraft, is *absque* Nature—the 'cosmic'; which is "a form of blasphemy that is decidedly non-anthropomorphic and misanthropic" (Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet* 98). By altering the Natural laws, the cosmos alienates the human subjects from the aforementioned familiarity, thus haunting not only the subjective narrator but the whole humankind, hence directly calling for a response from the human cognition of it. Mark Fisher, in fact, categorically opines that Lovecraft *demand*s for the cognition of this cosmic threat, as the "boundless and hideous unknown" (i.e., the inexplicable cosmos) requires an anthropocentric counter-position "to provide [it] a sense of scale" (20-1; brackets mine). In simpler terms, through its 'non-rationality' and indifference, the cosmos completely subverts the human understanding of Nature and/or reality.

Lovecraft often describes the anthropocentric attribute of resisting invasion and infiltration of the 'familiar' as a common theme in his oeuvre. He frequently exudes the West's anxiety of "mongrelization and miscegenation" (Hefner 672), manifesting it through baroque descriptions of

the monstrous shapes of ancient gods leering at the ‘world-intelligible’. This is also the reason behind Lovecraft’s frequent reliance on a city-bred, white, educated, Christian mind¹⁰ that recoils from the cosmic eldritch and safeguards its rational habitat. The conventional Lovecraftian protagonist constructs an anthropocentric image of Nature that cannot exist without human intervention/cooperation—invoking the ‘white saviour’ archetype in stories like “The Dunwich Horror” (1929) and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936). As long as Nature can be recognised by the Lovecraftian rationalist (‘I’), it maintains its benign, hospitable and deific image, but once the cognition is defeated and Nature is ushered into the realm of the ‘unfamiliar’, it becomes the hostile, cosmic ‘other’. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” (1927) displays the theme of anthropocentric defence against cosmic threats and the victimisation of Nature. In the story, the strange extra-spectral colour emanating from the crash-landed meteorite in a farm is repeatedly described as yet-inexplicable by science or rationality. Nature mutates around the cosmic site, corrupting the otherwise prosaic rural vista and people, culminating in horrible disfigurement and evil possession, before the alien light goes back to the frigid vastness of the cosmos:

...trees, buildings, and even such grass and herbage as had not been wholly changed to lethal grey brittleness. The boughs were all straining skyward, tipped with tongues of foul flame, and lambent tricklings of the same monstrous fire were creeping about the ridgepoles of the house, barn, and sheds (Lovecraft, “The Colour” 357).

The tension emanating from explaining the inexplicable is in itself a counterintuitive act, since any explanation of what lies outside the realm of human reasoning would be tainted by human reason itself—something Quentin Meillassoux refers to as “an indefensible thesis because

¹⁰ In the tradition of ecocriticism, Christianity has often been described as the source of the modern man’s hubris regarding Nature, as elucidated by Lynn White who accuses the western world enamoured by the orthodox Christian superiority of human beings: “no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes”. See Lynn White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’, *Science*, 155.3767 (1967), p. 1205.

thought cannot get outside itself” (3). Even at the face of defeat, the loss of sanity or unconditional surrender to the eldritch, Lovecraft’s human actors always defend the physical world in their pursuit of what Timothy Morton calls an “anthropocentric dream because it feels safer” (30). They tend to limit themselves to the familiar, while desperately extending the same sense of familiarity to the ‘unrecognisable’ in an attempt to delay and/or turn away from the horror of existence. Lovecraft’s human subjects believe in rationalising and/or abandoning the sites of cosmic incursion, rendering self-preservation synonymous to Nature’s preservation, in order to build a resistance against cosmic corruption. This persistent anthropocentric outlook is the core of Lovecraftian philosophy. It implies, in Cheryll Glotfelty’s words, “that we humans are at the centre, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment” (xx). It is better to distance/blind ourselves to the insufferable horror of existence. This outlook is adopted, and made more telling, by the late-twentieth century American authors.

Nature Bound: Late Twentieth Century Texts and the Rationalised Cosmic

Before moving on to post-millennial cosmic horror fiction, it is important to have a final look at the post-Lovecraftian cosmic horror of the late twentieth century. There are two reasons for this: First, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a “horror boom”, especially from the 70s to the 90s (Joshi, “Establishing the Canon” 339). Joshi regards this sudden resuscitation of the genre as more of a “cultural, even a marketing, phenomenon than a literary one” (339). Writers such as Ira Levin, William Peter Blatty, Thomas Tyron and Stephen King, although none of them strictly Lovecraftian (except for King who is discussed below), catapulted the genre to new heights. Second, a discussion of the late twentieth century texts (the cosmic corruption of Nature, to be more precise) offers a pedestal for comparison with the post-millennial ‘cosmic’ Nature.

Therefore, the following paragraphs analyse the post-Lovecraftian late twentieth century cosmic horror fiction that reduces Nature as the conduit of unnatural cosmic malevolence, feared and resisted by outsiders armed with sophisticated rationality, attempting to restore it to passive familiarity. Even when the defeat of rationality is imminent, the protagonists of such tales often try to preserve their illusory ‘truths’ to keep the horror of existence at bay by resorting to psychosomatic distancing between the sylvan and their own quotidian habitus, falling back to a heterotopic¹¹ fantasy: “it is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth’s dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone, lest sleeping abnormalities wake to resurgent life” (Lovecraft, “At the Mountains” 489).

The hostile image of Nature was a recurrent thematic trope in late twentieth century American horror fiction. The latter half of the twentieth century, especially the 70s and the 80s, was overcome with such narratives of Natural malevolence, concurrent to the emergence of ecocriticism as an academic discipline that pondered “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). The first wave of ecocriticism, although aimed to re-establish a connection between Nature and the anthropos to facilitate the preservation of the former, clearly showed conceptual “wrangling over what it means and what should be done about it” (Buell 3), precipitating the depiction of the anthropic conquest of Nature: taming it, purging it of its malcontents and thus restoring it to a recognisable pristine hood. Grady Hendrix hailed this transitory phase (1974, to be exact) as the “Year of the Animal” which coincidentally featured Peter Benchley’s iconic *Jaws* and James Herbert’s *The Rats* in 1974, followed by Robert Calder’s

¹¹Foucault argues in his influential essay “Of Other Spaces” that heterotopias are ideological manifestations of a society mirroring the culture at large: “kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”. The post-war cosmic horror narrators similarly remove the aberrant rustic from their conscious space. It may or may not haunt them, but the very action of the resolution or removal of the eldritch experience establishes a triumph of rationalism over the inexplicable. See Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2004), p. 7.

The Dogs in 1976 (81). All these stories depicted Nature and existence as ontologically hospitable, but plagued by a misaligned animalistic monstrosity that ails humanity, waiting to be expunged for Natural preservation to take place. *The Fog* (1975)—again by Herbert—is a story where a strange bacterial fog inexplicably drives thousands of people to commit suicide, compelling the protagonist to immunise himself against Nature’s anomalies to restore balance. The entire 70s-80s were thus rife with fiction of “dogs and cats and insects and fish and birds and killer whales who hate humanity” (Hendrix 100), focusing on the malevolent malcontents of Nature, which are parts of the sylvan itself, but have to be amputated to strike the existential balance with the humankind.

We do not observe the otherworldly eldritch across these narratives and, hence, despite evoking the sense of fear, these narratives never truly emanate the horror of existence. In the American cosmic horror fiction of the 1980s, the anomaly becomes cosmic and unnatural instead of an animalistic, discernible corruption of Nature. Contrary to the eco-horror faction described above, its cosmic counterpart does not perceive the eldritch as a misaligned part of Nature itself. Rather, it describes how Nature succumbs to an inexplicable, unrecognisable and overwhelming cosmic corruption that is ontologically ‘other’, entailing an unmistakable invocation of the horror of existence which irreversibly alters the psyche of human subjects. Abandonment and retreat might be the only way for the anthropos in such narratives. The section begins its analysis of a cosmically corrupted Nature with Stephen King’s short story “Children of the Corn” (1978), which depicts rural children paganised by a demon in remote Nebraska, sacrificing the adults to the perverse god’s never-ending appetite for human flesh. En route California in a bid to save their failing marriage, urban couple Burt and Vicky stumble upon the seemingly deserted town of Gatlin, the adult population of which has been slaughtered by the possessed children. The list of the victims, which includes the police chief, the Church minister and the dysfunctional urbanite

couple, further establishes the ceaseless conflict of the ab-/normal precipitated by the alien threat insidiously deconstructing the orthodox image of Nature as normal, simple and orderly.

In the climax the couple is sacrificed to the mysterious demon-god with a never ending appetite for human flesh, and it is also heavily implied that the fecund quality of the corn in the village is granted by the demon as a return favour to the children. King's infantilising of rural humanity thus has a satirical edge—the townsfolk doggedly pursue an asinine primitivism of natural bounty, and to achieve it, they have killed the rationalists and made the devil their master. The result is the most radical subversion of the Natural order for King, which clearly implies that the children will forever remain young because they are devoured by their 'god' as they pass their teens, and new subjects are bred by enchanted copulations between minors. Nature—flora and folk alike—is thoroughly corrupted in the story as the crop grows unnaturally large and bestows eternal youth upon the children. King's Nature is thus repeatedly described as beautiful but vapid, quaint but corruptible: "Alone, all alone, cut off from the outside world by hundreds of square miles of the rustling secret corn. Alone under seventy million acres of blue sky. Alone under the watchful eye of God, now a strange green God, a God of corn, grown old and strange and hungry. He Who Walks Behind the Rows" ("Children" 282). Further examples of the victimisation of Nature can be cited from canonical novels like T.E.D. Klein's *The Ceremonies* (1984) that again shows the abject corruption of Natural purity with the arrival of an ancient evil bent on enslaving the human race. The rural order is restored only after the evil is defeated by university-educated enlightened urbanite Jeremy. The novel is interspersed with existential reflections on the village ennui and passivity (bordering on the horror of existence), desperately awaiting a change:

She had lived all but two of her twenty-two years in a drab little mill town up the Ohio River from Pittsburgh, and she knew what it was to be bored. She remembered...her

grandmother... who'd told her why she always slept past ten: "Because if I get up any earlier it makes the day too long (Klein 69).

Moreover, after the resolution of the crisis and redeeming the rural folk from possession and enslavement, the central couple returns to the city, further cementing the rational outsider's position as the benevolent saviour who may save the country folk, but can never be assimilated within the primitive rusticity. In the celebrated *It* (1986) the sub-urban natural ethos is endemically corrupted, full with bias, emotional predation, familial orthodoxy and economic disparity of the culturally eulogised American small town with shapeshifting evil lurking in its sewers and subterranean caverns, preying on the townsfolk's gullibility (King, *It*). The ultimate defeat of the monster happens at the hands of reformed protagonists and christened urbanites, who escaped the deadening rurality and found a better life in the city, proving, again, that agency is essentially urban-rationalist. The dominant theme of trying to rationalise the cosmic to keep the horror of existence at bay thus continues in Robert R. McCammon's *Swan Song* (1987) that eulogises Sue Wanda, a child from Wichita with the power of healing Nature: "'I was always good at growing plants and flowers,' Swan continued... 'What if I could grow the orchards and crops back again... and there's something in me that could wake things up and start them growing?'" (McCammon 561). The Man with the Scarlet Eye—the cosmic villain of the story who incorporates a Simmelean sense¹² of the hubris of technocracy—wants to hunt down Swan's Natural innocence and plunge a nuclear war-ravaged world into eternal chaos. While seemingly condemning the machinistic urban conceit that leads to dystopia, McCammon still keeps faith in the conscientious urbanite to

¹²Georg Simmel, talking about the difference between the urban and the rural spirit, advocates for a reverse migration of the conscientious citizen to the village, because life blooms better in the village, Nature and away from the urban entropy. See Dibyakusum Ray, *Postcolonial Indian City-Literature: Policy, Politics and Evolution*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 25.

bring back Natural balance. Overall, the onus of Natural redemption invariably falls on the rational anthropos who vanquishes/postpones/abandons the passive rurality, proving that the ‘cosmic’ pastoral exists solely to justify the anthropic individualism of the rationalist subject—any epiphanies entailing their insignificance and the horror of existence are, thus, muted.

The fulcrum of the argument is to position the post-millennial phase as a subversion to this trend—rather than corrupting Nature, this phase presents Nature itself as the unfamiliar, inscrutable cosmos. Anthropocentric, regionalist, invasive and hegemonic—the late twentieth century phase established the rationalist figurehead at the centre of the narrative; a character who can banish the titular ancient evil and restore the sylvan to the former’s own image, without ever submitting to dark epiphanies entailing ontological horrors. This canon’s fulfilment of the conditions of cosmic horror is superficial, because the cosmicity is often shown to be ultimately tameable, and Nature is passively moulded by the otherworldly and the anthropic consciousness in turn. The effect of the inscrutable cosmic is dampened—there are no cosmic revelations forcing the characters to go mad and/or submit altogether. It will be interesting to note that Lovecraft, at the very foundation of the cosmic philosophy, described it as non-anthropocentric: “[against the view of] the world as instrumentally made for the human, the world as a world for human use and benefit” (Thacker, *Tentacles* 124; brackets mine); its psychological effect akin to what Freud called “emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (Gray 8). Human existence is forced to let go of its anthropocentric conceit, rendering the former insignificant and helpless. However, especially in comparison to the post-millennial counterparts, the Lovecraftian malevolence indeed characterises itself as still about humanity: “the world is against us, but at least it cares enough to take notice” (Thacker, *Tentacles* 125). To assault is to recognise, even to care. Besides establishing misanthropy as a precondition of the anthropos, Eugene Thacker attributes a further transcendent,

post-human instantiation of cosmic horror which “move[s] beyond even this misanthropism” (125; brackets mine), which, in Lovecraft’s own terms, is ‘indifferentist’: “a diffuse, enigmatic antagonism, an anti-humanism that sets out the parameters for what we might call the ‘anthropic schema’ ... an indifference registered by the human in the utter apophatic blackness of incomprehensibility” (126).

This study argues that the post-millennial horror canon is even more successful than Lovecraft¹³ in the literary depiction of non-anthropocentric, human-transcendent Nature that operates in its own inscrutable way, irrespective of whether the rationalist finds it threatening or not. It is difficult to socio-historically rationalise this emergent trend post-millennia, although the massive cognitive perplexity to gauge the enormity of destruction and invasion of alienism after 9/11 may certainly be a reason. It may also be the only available literary response to the “momentous build-up of horrors” (Thompson 91), something that “realist fiction generally failed to identify and describe” (Randall 3). 9/11 entailed a further loss of innocence amidst the contemporary American literary landscape in a fashion similar to the First World War, which had “provided a savage introduction to the actual” to the likes of “Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and their contemporaries” (Gray 3). While describing the aftermath of the terror attack, Richard Gray grimly declares: “Innocence is shattered, paradise is lost, thanks to a bewildering moment, a descent into darkness, the impact of crisis” (3). The result is the new strain of cosmic

¹³The informed reader of Lovecraft must know that in spite of the author’s advocacy for ‘indifferentism’, his stories are invariably entrapped in tangibility and culpability of the cosmic intent. According to Lovecraft, the purest cosmic horror does not care, but the evil of “Dagon” (1919), “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) often possesses, controls and lays waste to human establishment with prejudice. While there are stories of a human stumbling on the cosmic entities perchance (and going insane in the process, like in “The Rats in the Walls” (1924)), one cannot deny that partly because of the imaginative aporia of envisioning the ineffable, and partly because of racial phobia, Lovecraft majorly gives his evil a voice, features, motive and as a result, humanity. To be belligerent is to care, and ‘caring’ is anthropic.

horror that depicts the quandary of anthropocentric rationality under the threat of negation, oblivion or cosmic assimilation (the horror of existence, in simpler terms), propitiated by the agential Nature as “an indispensable corrective to human arrogance” (Woodhouse xiii). It is a kind of transcendental horror, assailing the fundamental doctrines of human existence, in which, according to Timothy Morton, “anthropocentric distinctions don’t matter anymore” (32). Now, we have a building canon of revisionist cosmic horror that describes the sylvan and the Natural expanse as resistive and pitiless to humanity’s anthropocentric conception of the world. This is a journey from the corruptible ‘pastoral’ to the inscrutable and untameable Nature.

Nature Unbound: The Inscrutable Cosmic in Post-Millennial Phase

This section begins, once again, with a short story by Thomas Ligotti. Although Ligotti has already been discussed extensively in the first section of this chapter, his presence at this juncture ‘eases’ our transition from the post-Lovecraftian (King, McCammon and Klein) to the post-millennial phase (Wehunt, Grau and Langan). Progressing from the latter half of the twentieth century’s ‘corrupted’ Nature towards the post-millennial canon’s ‘cosmic’ Nature, Ligotti’s narratives (written in the late 90s and early 2000s) act a transitional phase between the two periods, offering a gradual progression of Nature’s transformation within cosmic horror fiction. This study argues that Ligotti reincarnates his Nature as the ‘cosmic inscrutable’ as opposed to a subservient entity. His efforts are far from perfect but they indubitably take the first step in Nature’s transformative odyssey during the post-millennial phase. Ligotti’s “The Red Tower” (1996), published just before the turn of the century, does not have a conventional plot, thus taking its first step away from the post-Lovecraftian canon by eschewing the “epistemological limits of narrative form” (Caracciolo et al. 3). Ligotti deliberately presents his disembodied narrator as an essentially unreliable one who

clearly mentions at the end of the story that “I have only recorded what everyone is saying (though they may not know they are saying it), and sometimes what they have seen (though they may not know they have seen it)” (Ligotti, “The Red Tower” 76). Further, Ligotti purposefully mystifies the location or discernible features of the central area where the events unfold: we only know that these are happening in “a gray and desolate and utterly featureless landscape”, where “a dull edifice had been produced, a pale, possibly translucent tower which, over time, began to develop into a factory” (72).

The titular factory does not produce anything anthropically specific; its products are a melange of figurines, replicas, ornaments, toys, automatons and miniature portals with “a black reverberant abyss inside” (68). Overall, “The Red Tower” vehemently trivialises the anthropocentric obsession of humanly identifiable perspectives, inspirations, systems and narrative modes, constantly pushing the reader to wonder about the existential validity of it all. Ligotti refuses to grant the reader the assurance of an associable Natural vista; we cannot imagine the blasted heath surrounding the tower as a passively lush countryside in need of redemption. His Nature is the unimpeachable ‘Large’: frigid, barren and impervious to the anthropic judgement that reacts to the subversive activities at the tower by annihilating a large part of it. In spite of the sterile immensity Ligotti’s Nature uniquely assumes, there is, still, a hint of anthropic intent in the landscape’s reaction against the violation of its order, and this is partly why this study hesitates to call the story a successful instance of post-millennial cosmicity. Still, the featureless, undetermined Natural depiction brings the story very close to a different interpretation of an indifferent cosmic threat that ruminates on its own inscrutable design. Ligotti consciously desists from explicitly underlining the cosmicity of his narrative, and we also do not know whether the spatial battle between Nature and the tower symbolises the cognitive dissonance between the cosmic and the

human rationale. This assault on rationality, the fear of the negation of the cogito, the looming threat of the horror of existence, the otherworldly Nature juxtaposed by extreme grotesquery and incomprehensibility: all initiate the post-millennial cosmic horror on a path of ‘other’ machinations, systems, belligerence and haunting which serve a common purpose: to undermine and negate human existence. The abstractness of Ligotti ushers in the following case studies which, while adhering to the basic demands of storytelling and plot structure, incorporate the same cognitive challenge and dread through Nature’s autonomy.

The argument in this phase is driven by the core philosophy of a receding rational anthropocentrism and the rise of a progressively uncaring cosmos. And yet, the shift from the twentieth century cosmicity is not radical or abrupt. The following examples—three short stories in a cluster—display a tentative approach of embodying the ontological challenge of thinking about Nature in the latter’s *own* terms, with varying degrees of success. As it is, thinking is an anthropocentric action by itself, and, according to Ray Brassier, never free of its tendency to objectify and rationalise even the most inscrutable cosmic element (141). Irrespective of the enormity, profundity and compellingness of the ‘cosmic’, it is still the human author who imagines it for the readers’ appropriation, conceptually confining the threat within “possible employment of our intuitions of it” (Kant 25). As we will observe, the post-millennial authors of the cosmic horror are going through this same aporia regarding how to ‘otherise’ their narrative thematically and stylistically, in order to incorporate an amoral, insentient and human-transcendent angle to the eldritch that successfully counters the previously described literary solipsism. For example, Michael Wehunt’s “Beside Me Singing in the Wilderness” (2014) tiptoes on the shadow lines of the agential cosmos and a submissive human existence. It is about a strange vampiric ailment ravaging a vast area of the United States in the late-nineteenth century, caused by a mysterious

mountain expelling an unending stream of blood from its orifice. Whoever drinks that blood changes into a mindless machine of violence, and is eventually obliterated through a cannibalistic frenzy spread throughout the community, except Sissa and her twin sister who retain their intelligence and refuse to partake in the bloodbath.

The majority of the events in the narrative remain deliberately unexplained: we do not know whether the blood-seeping mountain is Nature's revenge on the parasitic mankind or whether the twins—by retaining their 'humanity'—symbolise a new hope of humanity's salvation. Sissa finally dies because of her thirst, and her unnamed twin commits suicide by bleeding herself out into the stream of the mountain as the civilization crumbles around them. Before death, the protagonist ruminates on the reason behind the sisters' unassailed minds, attributing it to "the blood having some deeper purpose for us and for this baptism far from the folds of salvation" (Wehunt 14). In spite of this vaguely ordained agency, Wehunt's Nature remains irresolute on misanthropy/indifference—in other words, corrupted/frigid. It is also undecided whether the story really purports a defeat of the human existence or a celebration of the same, as the protagonist—through refusal and suicide—finally wonders if Nature is "wanting me to keep its gift, to grow as old as its bones, but I will not witness what it's planned for me" (14). The abrupt ending keeps the possibilities open in the most germane way. The chapter has already argued that the most striking facet the post-millennial cosmic horror brings to the cosmic horror tradition is indifferentism. It has also specified the challenges of describing this frigidity through 'human' literary devices, because *our* subjective experience of the outside world, in Husserlian terms, is "independent of any of their actual relations to the external world" (McIntyre and Woodruff 5). To the sentient human being, the only world that makes sense is their own experiential world, like in the case of

John Langan's "The Shallows" (2013) that describes a complete obliteration of human civilization by an invading cosmic threat in an unspecified future.

As it is, invasion itself reaffirms the cognitive supremacy of the self, as this study has delineated before. Misanthropy exists as a response to registering humanity's centrality. The unkempt, uncontrolled, threatening and invasive Nature has been historically perceived to incite "imperial and masculine identities" (Sramek 659): a call to conquer the "green hell" (Pouchepadass 2061). Interestingly, Langan's cosmic Nature—at least for the majority of the narrative—is not necessarily against mankind; it is just a slow, sure, inevitable takeover more stolid than belligerent, entailing human extinction as a mere collateral damage, replacing infrastructure and edifices with otherworldly flora and fauna.

The beans had come in big, which Dan had predicted: each was easily six, seven inches long. Of the twenty-five or thirty that were ready to pick, however, four had split at the bottom, burst by jellied, inky coils that hung down as long again as the bean. The ends of the coils raised toward him, unfolding petals lined with tiny teeth...To the right, a single skyscraper was crowned by an enormous shape whose margins hung over and partway down its upper stories. Something about the form, a handful of scattered details, suggested an impossibly large toad (Langan, "The Shallows" 160–2).

The story continues to languidly describe the passing of the erstwhile urban locality, rendering its remaining human inhabitants facile and dispassionate of the apocalypse around them, mostly busy in their existential reverie. A sense of ennui, in the backdrop of grotesque aberration and hybridization of the cityscape, pervades the majority of the narrative, as seen through the lonely father Ransom engaged in a Beckettian waiting for his lost son, Matt. The abstraction and opacity Langan employs grant the story a curiously nonchalant mood, where even "torrents of black

water...[t]he colour of spent motor oil...each black tumult...for a host of eyes, eyes of all sizes, shapes and colors” do not create a sensationalistic effect on the reader (164). However, we also witness a resounding assertion of the cataclysm’s misanthropic intent when, in the climax, Ransom’s composure is shattered with grief as the only ‘normal’ remnant of the world-before—an apple tree in the yard—bears fruit with “red replicas of Matt’s face, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth stretched in a scream of unbearable pain, swung in a sudden breeze” (168).

What we see is a slow and laborious building of the ‘indifferentist’ philosophy—displaying ample signs of an aloof Nature, yet somehow entrapped by horror narrative’s endemic misanthropic trope. Although these narratives evoke the horror of human existence, they also *affirm* and strengthen it through their unequivocal misanthropy. This undeniable gesture of a cruel, scheming and (hence) *caring* ‘cosmic’, bent to break man’s stoicism in a battle of will, is seen through Langan’s last moment inclusion of the torturous image that will haunt Ransom till the end. Why is this hostility at the core of indifferentism? Is this the human author’s innate desire to find humanly recognisable elements within the cosmic? This is repeated at the climax of T. E. Grau’s “Return of the Prodigy” (2015) that re-explores the theme of reclamation in a dark satirical mode. Cynical and racist American bourgeois Gary goes to an exotic holiday in the remote island of Walakea (doubtlessly a reference to Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (1936) and its lore of oriental tribes in a pact with sea-dwelling gods) to be transformed into a horde of underwater critters moments before the island itself is swallowed by a tsunami as part of a cosmic ritual. Described partially through the more equanimous perspective of Gary’s wife Gladys, the eldritch of “Prodigy” has a closer semblance to the disinterested horror than Langan’s. Gary’s bitterness, insecurity, alienation all are rendered facile to the island’s purported prophesied fate involving him as the conceiver of the elder god’s dominion, through the annihilation of his anthropomorphic self:

“The room shuddered, or maybe it was cells shouting out in protest and the walls never moved. A low tone rumbled deep below him...the island swallowed with him, stealing the air and leaving everything deathly still” (Grau 92).

The marine Nature is fully inscrutable here, inaccessible especially to the jaded urbanite Gary who repeatedly trivialises it: “fickle tide and the onslaught of dead fish” (83). And still, frequent incursions of Gary’s haunted past as a war veteran, his bitterness about the frugal life of a retiree, his desperate attempt to escape the urban ennui and commodification of the American Dream, all suggest that Grau is keen on the political subtext of cosmic horror and its role as the leveller of the consumerist modernity. Gary is chosen as the sacrifice because he embodies the failures of anthropocentrism, granting the story a distinctive moral edge over the purity of cosmic abstraction. Ligotti, Wehunt, Langan, Grau thus possibly represent the near-constant literary exertions to conceive the inconceivable—to incite an inevitable horror of existence within their characters without polluting the indifferent cosmos with malevolence and/or misanthropy. The challenge is to address the ‘human’ centrality in the cognitive balance of the narrative—something that marked the Lovecraftian era of American horror literature. Even with the most inevitable, stoic, uncaring cosmic theme, the post-millennial authors faced the frequent challenge of legibly narrating the dissolution of human existence, particularly while eschewing the sense of invasion and threat. It is to be noted that the final case study, chosen for its purported success in largely deconstructing human existence in an indifferentist cosmos, somehow falls more within the previously-described subgenre of New Weird fiction than the definitively cosmic horror ambit. In fact, “Bor Urus” (2019) seems to be aware of the cosmic horror canon’s endemic inability to fully conceive the ‘nebulous’ and decides to accept and address the ‘failure’ by keeping the cosmic mostly obscure, mostly eschewing all the usual beats of a malevolent eldritch, cosmic monsters,

supernatural ‘invasion’ etc. Even the protagonist is nameless and rarely speaks in the story, having very little inkling of the larger events happening around him but experiencing a perplexing attraction towards them.

The narrator’s theory—violent tempests unleash enough power to establish temporary bridges between cosmic dimensions—also has a similarly vague machination behind the events of the narrative. Langan, through first person, tells us of the protagonist’s lifelong struggle to connect with his subjective reality and his extremely rare trysts with supernatural events that had a typically non-invasive tenor: “It was an animal, easily as big as an elephant...with a slowness that was almost casual, as if it were out for a stroll in a light mist, not a raging storm” (Langan, “Bor Urus” 304). Encounters like these, half-glimpsed through cascades of rain or sparks of lightning, keep haunting the protagonist who slowly loses grip over his family, profession and reality:

When the lightning was done plunging into the evergreen, the window it had burned into the air closed, a feeling of loss—of grief—as profound as what I’d felt at the death of my father made me suck in my breath as if I’d been kicked (309).

The narrator’s hermetic bourgeois existential assurance (that used to mark the Lovecraftian era’s rationalisation of the human protagonist and his agency) becomes a caricature of a desperate man’s attempt to hinder himself from his destiny. He struggles to find normalcy in the quotidian, loses the sense of social acceptability, shrugs at the thought of his inconsequential existence and “abandon[s] the nuances of introspection in favour of the simplicity of action” (311). This reversal of agency—where human existence is a facade and the ‘cosmic’ thrives in its inscrutability—climaxes with the protagonist’s final meeting with an otherworldly bull guarding a pagan god’s sanctum in an enchanted forest, that manifested to him after a hurricane. In a sequence that can be termed confrontational, and hence invasive and anthropocentric, the bull charges and chases away

the protagonist (who, in turn, can be construed as the *real* invader in a further subversion of the twentieth century horror tropes). The narrator's obsession, however, does not subside, thus bringing the reader to the final, darkly ironic lines that lets the eldritch/Nature remain mysterious and indifferent, rendering human existence oblivious, self-defeated and emptied of its ego. The protagonist is 'normal' again, but he himself knows it to be a charade:

There I sit at my desk, which faces the window that looks over the backyard. I watch the rain bead the window, the wind toss the trees ... I try not to picture the face I saw on the temple floor, the single eye gazing up impassively. I try not to think about that other place, the grove in which I walked, the ocean whose waves I heard, lying on the other side of a veil as fine as a spider web, as wide as the world ... My hands on either side of them, I gaze out the window and remind myself how much I love my family (323).

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter, through its primary arguments, has exhaustively discussed the evolution and the contemporary status of post-Lovecraftian cosmic horror fiction. More precisely, it has detailed and discussed the varying *yet* omnipresent instances of the horror of existence across these narratives. In the first section, the discourse began with the works of Thomas Ligotti. As someone who has produced cosmic horror fiction at the either end of the turn of the twenty-first century, Ligotti plays an important role in this study to understand the progressive impact of the horror of existence in the cosmic horror canon, starting from the post-Lovecraftian phase to the post-millennial phase in a cohesive way. The first section of the chapter discussed Ligotti's rendition of cosmic horror and its undeniable emphasis on the horror of existence subjected to his characters. Beginning with his philosophy, this section discussed his notion of the nightmare of being, as well as the prevalence

of antinatalism and pessimism in his *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. His philosophy, compared and contrasted with that of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Lovecraft, yielded an overlapping presence of the horror of existence that resulted in radical solutions such as a “self-administered oblivion” of the species (Ligotti, *The Conspiracy* 35).

“The Sect of the Idiot” (1986), “The Mystics of Muelenburg” (1986) and “Nethescurial” (1991), serving as the primary Ligottian case studies of this section, discerned a direct reflection of Ligotti’s philosophy in his fiction—his cosmic horror entails dark epiphanies which propel his fictional characters towards absolute submission in front of the inscrutable cosmos. They are irreversibly altered and can no longer recondition themselves to their quotidian existence. Once subjected to the dark revelations entailing the horror of existence, they are left with no choice but to ruminate on their own insignificance in an uncaring and utterly indifferent cosmic order. This study built upon Ligotti’s progressive impact of the horror of existence by ‘measuring’ its extent through the degree of resignation enforced upon the characters. It did so by taxonomising Ligotti’s narratives into three categories of progressive impact: non-corporeal, corporeal and total submission. We witnessed non-corporeal submission in his “The Sect of the Idiot” where it is suggested that the entire human race is entranced by the will of cosmic beings, who are, in turn, answerable to a *higher* order of cosmic puppeteers. In “The Mystics of Muelenburg”, Ligotti describes an inexplicable reconfiguration of the titular town’s composite elements. The abject *alienation* of the base matter of our ‘familiar’ reality propels us towards corporeal submission.

Finally, the corporeal and the non-corporeal combine in “Nethescurial” where both physical matter and intangible consciousness are infiltrated by the Nethescurial evil. Thus, we progress from the hypnotised populace of “The Sect” to the corrupted reality of “The Mystics” and conclude with total annihilation of “Nethescurial”—a progressive breakdown of the degrees of

disillusionment of the horror of existence. An exhaustive analysis of the Ligottian philosophy and fiction has, thus, resulted in a deeper understanding and a novel classification of the extent of the horror of existence in his ‘cosmic’ short stories, while raising pertinent questions for further research. On the other hand, the second section discerns the post-Lovecraftian late twentieth century phase from its post-millennial incarnation. The late twentieth century phase, characterised by the works of Stephen King, Robert R. McCammon and T.E.D. Klein, acted as a representative of what Joshi calls the “horror boom” of the late twentieth century (“Establishing the Canon” 339). Moreover, this phase offered a comparative pedestal for the post-millennial cosmic horror fiction, enabling a deeper exploration of the treatment of Nature in the two phases. The foundation of divergence between the two phases is the autonomy of Nature—from “benign, beneficent, and distinct” (Tait 381), to “the ecstatic and affective unfolding of a thing into the space of its presence” (Chandler 559).

Nature, as witnessed in King, Klein, McCammon as well as Lovecraft, has been perceived as corruptible, pliant, idealised and a protege of the cardinal anthropic rationality that frequently corroborated itself with an urban, sophisticated and benevolent agency. The Lovecraftian cosmic was always the evil alien, and the demurral of Nature propelled the anthropic redeemer to subdue the former either by sagacity or by distancing himself; at times even distinguished by its tacit class-consciousness. The post-millennial canon, however, attempts to separate itself from the overarching homocentric aspects of Nature and cosmicity by transforming the ‘other’ into endemic and the protege into agential. Yet, is such a non-human perspective ever scribable? Is effability always intrinsically anthropocentric? Can Nature be thought of on its own terms? As seen through the texts of Ligotti, Wehunt, Grau and the diptych of Langan, the attempt—with varying degrees of success—is ongoing in the post 9/11, crisis ridden, ‘otherized’ America. Instead of invasion and

misanthropy, the post-millennial authors attempt to grasp Nature's autonomy and inscrutability, pushing the bewildered anthropos into "a residue that is simply not-human, or better, unhuman" (Thacker, *Tentacles* 125). The intersection between the human subject and the "unhuman" void, that is presented through Nature in these narratives, results in irreversible epiphanies preaching the insignificance of human life and all that it entails. These texts establish that the indifferent cosmos is a subversive force that devastatingly counteracts humanity's anthropocentric outlook towards life in the cosmos, and the cosmos itself.

One may argue that the indifferentism of cosmic horror enables it to describe an unblemished image of Nature—free from anthropocentric interpretations—whilst dictating the canon to revise and restructure our 'human' understanding of the Natural world. As witnessed in the post-millennial case studies, Nature is described as an elusive entity that transcends humanity's anthropocentric hubris. As a result, the post-millennial canon attempts to accomplish a 'de-humanising' of the cosmic horror canon by shedding the Lovecraftian malevolence and misanthropy in favour of an indifferentist ideology. The result is a definitive and uncontaminated cosmic horror experience that constantly debilitates the existential comfort of its subjects and refuses to be contained within the sphere of human cognition. Offering an in-depth analysis of the contemporary state of cosmic horror fiction, this chapter serves as the final node of this thesis' overarching historiographical study, which began with the Weird fiction of Lovecraft's predecessors, while also tracing the inherent impact of the horror of existence imbued within the canon. The subsequent concluding chapter offers a 'reflective' analysis of the entire thesis, while also raising pertinent questions such as: What is the future of this endeavour? What are its limitations? Which avenues does it open for future research? Will it revive its Lovecraftian roots

or diversify within the plurality of the New Weird? What promises does it hold for the ‘human’ world on the verge of ecological crisis? The next chapter attempts to answer these questions.

List of Publications from Thesis

Journal Articles (*Published*)

Gupta, Satvik, and Dibyakusum Ray. “... Miles of the Rustling Secret Corn’: Nature, Cosmic and Autonomy in American Cosmic Horror Literature.” *Textual Practice*, Sept. 2023, pp. 1–18. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2259347>.

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“Dark Epiphany: the Lovecraftian in the Twentieth Century Existential Literature.” *Horror Studies* (with Dr. Dibyakusum Ray). Forthcoming in 2025.

Under Review

“The Lurid and the Lovely: Degrees of Disillusionment and Existential Awakening in Thomas Ligotti’s Short Stories” (with Prof. Bijoy H. Boruah). *Extrapolation*.

Conference Presentations

Gupta, Satvik (14-16 June, 2024). *25th Annual International Conference*. “‘At the Manors of Madness’: Analysing the Unhuman in Lovecraft’s ‘Cosmic’ Architecture”. University of Bucharest, Romania (Presented Online).

Gupta, Satvik (5-7 July, 2023). *Folklore and Gothic. Supernatural Presences in the Americas and Europe*. “Ecophobia and Existential Horror: Re-interpreting Camus and Sartre”. Universidad de León, Spain (Presented online).

Gupta, Satvik (22-24 Sept, 2022). *Fantastic Geographies | 13th Annual Conference of the Association for Research in the Fantastic*. “Geographical Infinitude: Fantastic Worlds in Jorge Luis Borges Short Stories”. TU Dortmund University, Germany (Presented online).

Book Chapter

“Pondering Infinity and Irrationality in the Fantastic Architecture and Geography in Jorge Luis Borges’ Fiction”. To be published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in collaboration with the *13th Annual Conference of the Association for Research in the Fantastic* conference in 2025.

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