

“With Strange Aeons Even Death May Die”

Aging in the World of Cthulhu

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Lovecraft's presence in the horror genre is ever increasing and his influence is discernible in every artistic medium. We find references to his works in books, films, comic books, videogames and even music. He is the central figure of the genre we often call “weird fiction”; with it appears the term “cosmic horror”, that is often used to categorize various works of art that take as a theme or problem the ideas that were put forward by Lovecraft so many years in the past. Even so, of all the themes and images that we find in his short stories, his monsters are still his best-known creations. We all have read or heard about Cthulhu and many other beings that with him make up the mythos of Lovecraftian horror, and these creatures are the focus of this chapter.

These monsters do not share that many characteristics with one another: the lack of a comprehensive description and the agglomeration of adjectives are what make the tales of this author so effective at provoking terror in the reader. The literary techniques that create these creatures of the unknown will be discussed further below, but for now I want to make clear one of the proprieties that is common to most of them: their completely different apprehension of time compared to human beings. With this what I want to emphasize is the fact that Cthulhu, for example, experiences time in a way that is closer to the geological time of earth, which is measured in increments of thousands of years; such a scale is totally foreign to the human mind, that which counts the passing of time

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in weeks, years and, at limit, centuries. This discrepancy between the human time and the time of the “Old Ones” is important, and it is the cause of our own inability to fully comprehend geological changes and climate change. The overlap between geological time and the time of these creatures is a crucial point for the topics that will be discussed in this essay.

Kathleen Woodward, in her article “Ageing in the Anthropocene: The View From and Beyond Margaret Drabble’s *The Dark Flood Rises*” (2020), points out that in Drabble’s novel the “collision of ordinary human time experienced in terms of the orderly expectations of middle-class life regarding longevity (as phobic as the fourth age might be regarded), with the longue durée of geological time, time punctuated by inevitable if unpredictable large-scale catastrophe” (Woodward 2020: 50). Throughout her essay, the author explores the relation between human aging and the geological time that surpasses it, how the second can help us understand the first and vice-versa: the way we understand our own aging, be it positively or negatively, is put into perspective when compared to geological time, in which the average human life has no real consequence. In this perspective, when comparing a human life to the scale of geological time, in which a million of years is not that long, our perception of our own place in the universe is undermined and we suddenly appear meaningless. As we try to understand such changes that happen in the time span of the earth, we eventually ask ourselves what “old” really means, as well as what makes someone old, when we are but a speck in the countless years that have gone by since the planet was formed. I want to take these ideas as a starting point for this chapter, substituting geological time for the “Old Ones” time as a measure for our own time; in other words, to challenge mainstream notions of aging and what that entails, juxtaposing them to the incomprehensible life of these fantastic beings that have existed for millions of years and will surely be around after human have become extinct.

Is worth mentioning at this point the concept of “deep time”, alluded to since the beginning, but not in an explicit fashion. “Deep time” refers to the temporal scale of geological alterations, natural disasters, climate change and the “Old Ones”. At this scale, time is measured in thousands of years, millions of years, in which a century, a decade, a human life are

nothing more but a brief moment in the history of deep time. Such large periods of time are effectively unthinkable for the human mind. Human thought perceives the passing of time in years, centuries or even as generations, the latter concept allowing us to travel further into the past and into the future. Compare this to "deep time", an idea of time in which changes are slow, imperceptible to the human eye and difficult to understand. Cthulhu clearly belongs to "deep time", since not only does he live in a way that is impossible for us to fathom, but also it is this impossibility that gives him his mystique as a character from a horror tale: as we will see, the omnipresent characteristic in every Lovecraftian creation is its total resistance to human thought. A brief excerpt from Helen Gordon (2021) can help us understand this:

Geologists, I was beginning to realise, see the world a little differently from other people. It comes from living half inside what we might call human time and half inside another larger, weirder scale – that of deep time. If human time is measured in seconds and minutes, hours and years, then deep time deals with hundreds of thousands of years, with the millions and the billions. Thinking about it engenders a sort of temporal vertigo. To live in deep time is to take the long view, which means getting your head into a somewhat different place. In deep time it is not just what happened last week or last year or last decade that matters – it's also what happened a million, 50 million, 500 million years ago. It's about the ways in which the succession of events across those millions of years can be said to explain why you're here right now in this particular place, in this particular moment. (Gordon 2021: 1)

And we can also look at an excerpt from the short story "Dagon" that demonstrates how these themes are present in the works of Lovecraft:

Through some unprecedeted volcanic upheaval, a portion of the ocean floor must have been thrown to the surface, exposing regions which for innumerable millions of years had lain hidden under unfathomable watery depths. (Lovecraft 2002: 2)

These themes are a staple of the style and horror of Lovecraft, they come up, for that reason, in other works of literature made in the universe of this author, as we can see in the next excerpt from the book *Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows* (2016) from the series Cthulhu Casebooks by James Lovegrove:

The chieftain laughed balefully. 'They are not the infants. We are. The gods are old, 'older than time. They came here from the stars, from other worlds, while the Earth was still young and unformed.' (Lovegrove 2016: 217)

While most readers will likely know what climate change is and what it entails, even if only by being witness to its effects these last few years, the same cannot be said for the works and monsters of Lovecraft. Because of that, it seems prudent to briefly explore these creatures, their characteristics, and astonishing dimensions, in a way that we can better understand where they stand vis-a-vis the discussion of aging that we are trying to study.

Lovecraft's monsters defy the parameters between what is living and what is dead: these monsters either seem like they do not die, or they are dead and alive at the same time, and in some cases may not even have ever been alive in the first place. Even the word "monster" that is frequently used when talking about these topics can be deceiving. We have a preconceived image of what a monster is. The power of Lovecraft's creation lies in the total undefinition of the beings we are told about. This is best observed in the lacking descriptions the narrators make in all the stories: the monstrous is in the unknowable.

These creatures are terror-inducing because they are unknown; seeing such beings reveals to the watcher the limits of her own thought. The revelation of such a limitation of thought is what drives the characters to madness. Eugene Thacker says the following about this topic:

The threat is not the monster, or that which threatens existing categories of knowledge. Rather, it is the "nameless thing," or that which presents itself as a horizon for thought. If the monster is that which

cannot be controlled (the unlawful life), then the nameless thing is that which cannot be thought (the unthinkable life). Why can it not be thought? Not because it is something unknown or not- yet known (the mystical or the scientific). Rather, it is because it presents the possibility of a logic of life, though an inaccessible logic, one that is absolutely inaccessible to the human, the natural, the earthly – an "entelechy of the weird." (Thacker 2010: 23)

This resonates with what Lovecraf himself says at the beginning of his best-known story, "The Call of Cthulhu":

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 tis 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 deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft 2002: 139)

We find a tension between the attempt to classify these beings, beginning with calling them "old ones" even though we cannot really know how old they are or when they were born, and ending with the multiple descriptions that use abundant adjectives that are never enough or helpful to paint the picture of what the character is seeing.

To really understand how Lovecraft conveys to his reader this unthinkable nature of his creatures, we must first look at his literary style and how his characters narrate what happens around them. One facet of his writing, and really of most horror literature (which he accentuates), is the creation of suspense by means of hiding or giving the least possible amount of information about the monster that is trying to scare us. Throughout the stories we are given glimpses of the nature of the being we should fear; the lack of information builds tension, and the monster ends up being more frightening than it would have been if described right at the beginning or at first sight. Here we must clarify that, even

though this is common in most horror media, Lovecraft takes it one step further, making his descriptions extremely cryptic, since his creations are not meant to be understood, or described for that matter.

Therefore, when the protagonist describes finally what he has seen, we get only a very brief one at that, intentionally. In those descriptions there is a constant tension between the being that the narrator is seeing and that is real, and what the narrator can actually tell us about it. Graham Harman points to two important characteristics in Lovecraft's style that cause this difficulty in understanding completely what is being described:

This is the stylistic world of H.P. Lovecraft, a world in which (1) real objects are locked in impossible tension with the crippled descriptive powers of language, and (2) visible objects display unbearable seismic torsion with their own qualities. (Harman 2012: 36)

So, Harman finds these two facets of the author's style. On one hand, there is the constant limitation of the language itself and the necessary tools to describe the beings that appear in these stories; sometimes the narrator will identify and express this difficulty he has in finding the right words or phrases to tell us what he is seeing. On the other hand, we notice a collision between the empirical and real object observed by a subject and the attempt to enumerate his various qualities, this, contrary to what we would expect, makes everything even more confusing. The focus of the description continues illogically unrecognizable and the various qualities that are given to it appear to not connect between themselves. We are left with a paradoxical image in our minds as we read these texts.²

2 We have here an example of this from "The Call of Cthulhu": "Above the apparent hieroglyphics was a figure of evidently pictorial intent, though its impressionistic execution forbade a very clear idea of its nature. It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the grotesque and scaly body with rudi-

It is the author's own style that exacerbates the impossibility of these and let us experience indirectly the panic and existential crisis lived by the characters in his tales. Again, it's in this that we find the true terror of his works, the horror of revelation, when human reasoning finds something that goes beyond reason and logic as is known to it; the human race is then moved from the top of the animal world to lower in the scale: his own intellectual capability that secured the top spot above all other known animals is confronted with its limits.

We should note that in some cases even a description is too much. We can find instances where Lovecraft gives us a name, foreign to our known names of course, and we are given not a single description of what that name might be attached to. The most we get is some sound, color or object that hints at the being, but other than that is total unknown.

Despite belonging to the domain of "strange fiction", his style and narratives are different from what was standardized for the genre at the time. The stories that were commonly published in the various "pulp magazines" had the typical monsters we are used to seeing and protagonists who were not surprised by their existence.³ But here the protagonists exacerbate the effect of the terror caused by the various monsters through their reaction as they first lay eyes on them. They react in the same way as any reader would when faced with such a creature:

mentary wings; but it was the *general outline* of the whole witch made it most shockingly frightful. Behind the figure was a vague suggestion of Cyclopean architectural background." (Lovecraft 2002: 141).

3 Some examples of this: "Instinctively, by a sort of sub-conscious preparation, he kept himself and his forces well in hand the whole evening, compelling an accumulative reserve of control by that nameless inward process of gradually putting all the emotions away and turning the key upon them – a process difficult to describe, but wonderfully effective" (Blackwood 2014: 2929); "But her face he never properly saw. A muffler of white fur buried her neck to the ears, and her cap came over the eyes. He only saw that she was young. Nor could he gather her hotel or chalet, for she pointed vaguely, when he asked her, up the slopes. 'Just over there-' she said, quickly taking his hand again. He did not press her; no doubt she wished to hide her escapade" (Blackwood 2014: 2865).

terrified, paralyzed and, most of the time, maddened. This reaction also plays an important role in the desired effect of the horror tale.

Going back to the idea of “deep time” that we discussed earlier, the temporal scale of the monsters also plays an important role in how terrifying they are. These are beings that live in a chronology totally different from that of the human being, so different that it becomes inconceivable for the human mind to think or imagine ages so much earlier than its own. It is again the terror of the unknown and the unthinkable, this time in temporal terms: there is the realization that humanity is a very small chapter in the history of the universe, that these beings have a totally different experience from ours and we will never understand it, hence the terror when discovering ancient ruins or artifacts from civilizations that surpass us, as they become, like the monsters, beyond our logical and intellectual capacity, and this difficulty in placing them in a timeline is what creates terror.

Let's look at some examples and start with the fish-men from *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. The terror of this story is linked, in addition to the monsters we find in it, to the revelation of the origins of the small town, its relationship with strange aquatic beings and the protagonist's discovery, at the end of the narrative, that he himself is a descendant of that “species”. These fish-men show strange characteristics, in their skin, in their eyes, in the sounds they produce, which become more and more marked with age,⁴ until these fish-men reach a stage of development in which they become completely aquatic and practically immortal, joining the other aquatic beings, which only the protagonist has heard of, living from then on in the ocean. This latest information comes from the city drunk, which we can see below, although it is not very clear:

4 “Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shriveled or creased up. Get bald, too, very young. The older fellows look the worst – fact is, I don't believe I've ever seen a very old chap of that kind. Guess they must die of looking into the glass! Animals hate'em – they used to have lots of horse trouble before autos came in.”; “His age as perhaps thirty-five, but the odd, deep creases in the side of his neck made him seem older when one did not study his dull, expressionless face.”, (Lovecraft 2002: 273);

When it come to matin' with them toad-lookin' fishes, the Kanakys kind of balked, but finally they learnt something as put a new face on the matter. Seems that human folks has got a kind o' relation to sech water-beasts – that everything alive come out on the water once, an' only needs a little change to go back again. Them things told the Kanakys that ef they mixed bloods there's be children as ud look human at fust, but later turn more 'n more like the things, till finally they'd take to the water an' jine the main lot o' things down thar. An' this is the important part, young feller – them as turned into fish things an' went into the water couldn't die. Them things never died excep' they was kilt violent. (Lovecraft 2002: 297)

This type of evolution we see in the Innsmouth fish-men certainly raises questions about how we view aging. These beings are discriminated against for their appearance and their apparent degradation over the years, not very different from what we might associate with human beings. However, this loss of capabilities that is taking place is not a complete loss for the subject, rather a stage that prepares you for a new life underwater. To a certain extent we cannot speak here of premature aging, after all these fish-men will have a long life; their journey on land could even be seen as the equivalent of childhood in another species. This is interesting also when drawing a parallel between these beings that evolve in a strange way to adapt to an aquatic environment and the living beings that first started adapting to live on land and began the evolution that made us humans today. Again, this questions what it is actually ageing and how different ways of aging are not bad by default.

Cynthia Port, in her essay "No Future: Aging, Temporality, History, and Chronologies" (2012), explores how culture, politics and society view older people and, by contrast, younger people. Throughout her text, she highlights the tendency for neo-liberal societies to devalue the elderly by overvaluing the youngest. The discourse is already known, the youngest are the future, they will be useful and productive, while the elderly are seen as useless and, in a way, without a future. It's clearly a negative view of aging; as we age, we move towards uselessness. In this view, Innsmouth poses a major problem for Port, as aging is clearly a loss of ca-

pacities that impede participation in human society. However, it would be argued that it is not exactly a loss, it would rather be a transformation, these beings are now able to carry out new tasks, and perhaps even more effectively, only in a non-human society. The challenge posed by the tale to our conception of aging is evident: growing old will not be a path of loss and uselessness, it is a transformation, it is an exchange of physical capacities, in the case of human beings, for others that will not be less valuable.

And, remembering “deep time” again, the precocious aging that the beings of Innsmouth show is only precocious from a human point of view. In reality, they also pose a challenge to the way we experience time: people from Innsmouth will live much longer than any human being,⁵ hence the characterization as precocious demonstrates the anthropocentric view we have of aging.

The “Old Ones” are also quite interesting when it comes to the discussion of aging. It should be clarified that this classification is not exactly rigid, so to simplify things, when we speak of “Old Ones” we’re referring to all those beings that existed long before humanity, who surpass their capacity for thought, not being possible to place them among living or non-living beings in the formerly spoken conception, as, for instance, Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep.

They are beings that live in a chronology totally different from the human one, that of “deep time”, and they are clearly a type of life totally different from what we conceive: they do not die, they do not age, as far as we can know, and they defy the natural laws we are accustomed to. The fear they cause us is the same that Woodward attributes to climate change; both the “Old Ones” and climate change belong to “deep time”, their actions are slow and comprise periods of time that are totally unthinkable to us, and it is this fact that makes these creatures so terrifying, because, as we already mentioned above, they place themselves beyond the human intellect and thought.

⁵ “Folks as had took to the water gen’rally come back a good deal to visit, so’s a man ud often be a-talkin’ to his own five-times-great-grandfather, who’d left the dry land a couple o’hundred years or so afore.” (Lovecraft 2002: 298).

Helen Small studies how the way we see age, how we experience it, is dependent on the culture in which we find ourselves. Stereotypes change, like any cultural phenomenon, but Small also claims that age is a subjective and relative experience. Each one will necessarily have a way of seeing aging, a way of experiencing it and acting it, or acting out their age; but beyond that, our age is flexible, we feel younger when we interact with someone who is older, and the opposite is also true, when in the presence of someone younger, we feel the opposite. Evidently aging is experienced mainly according to prejudices. Furthermore, our assumptions about old age are actually paradoxical:

For every conventional negative association of 'old age' there is an equally recognizable counter-association: rage/serenity; nostalgia/detachment; folly/wisdom; fear/courage; loss of sexual powers and/or opportunities/liberation from sex; loss of the capacity or right to labour/release from a long life of labour. (Small 2007: 27)

This reinforces the idea that aging is not simply a loss of capabilities. Even if we do lose some physical attributes, which is normal as the body ages, we also gain new tools and attributes, mainly psychological, that help us participate in different tasks, ones that are still important for society. In a way, Small shows us that aging is very much guided by socio-cultural and cultural forces, not entirely biology.⁶

6 It is interesting to point out here that old people in the tales of Lovecraft present more positive qualities attributed to old age, than negatives. We have various examples: the old man in *The Shadow over Innsmouth* may have seen better days when it comes to being sober and healthier, but he is above all else a wise man, who is presented as the only connection the protagonist can have with the past and the history of the town. In *The Dreams in the Witch House*, we can find something similar. The old woman is represented as powerful and cunning, in contrast with the oblivious protagonist. These examples can briefly show how Lovecraft tends to portray older people, and older beings in general, as more knowledgeable, and capable in certain scenarios. In his works, the loss of physical capabilities is often counterbalanced by mainly positive stereotypes about old age.

These stereotypes aren't only a way to see and judge others, it also guides our behavior. Complementing the work of Small, Mary Russo, in her article "Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism" (1999), tries to show how these assumptions play a big part in the way we act and expect others to act. She argues that we maintain an idea of chronological aging, where each moment of our life comprises some activities that we can or cannot perform, certain characteristics that we must incorporate; aging is gradual and entails changes in our behavior, culturally defined, which imply an evolution, which, on the contrary, obliges us to avoid behaviors that are prior to our age, or after it. Russo then talks about a phenomenon she calls anachronism, which in this context refers to the moment when a certain subject acts "incorrectly" for his age. The effect of anachronism is mostly social, just as the social dictates what is right, an act of anachronism will be met with criticism and ridicule.

The "Old Ones", following these two theorists, lead to two interesting ideas. The first is the difficulty they offer to understanding their own aging: a human subject will never understand how old one of these beings will be, the name "Old Ones" that is used to group them is clearly fallacious, it is a nomenclature with anthropocentric point of reference, however, the use of the word "old" is generally pejorative when we talk about living beings, but here it seems to reinforce the idea that their temporal experience is totally different from ours. "Old" seems to group much more of the positive prejudices that we associate with old age, as Helen Small suggests. The second and more interesting idea is how we can relate our age to such beings. We discussed above how we often view our age subjectively and in comparison, to those around us. Following this reasoning, the presence and revelation of the "Old Ones" creates a certain compression effect on the longevity of human life, which suddenly seems shorter. A young person and an elderly person, when compared to these "deep time" beings, are very close; for such beings they are clearly indistinguishable, which in the various tales is one of the horror aspects for the characters, which does not fail to raise questions about the distinctions we make based on age.

This essay only presents some ideas in this link between aging studies and Lovecraft's work. There is still a lot to explore in theoretical terms,

and we only touched on a few short stories in passing, which is an injustice to them, as each one deserved a text on the subject. I think it was possible, even so, to see that these creatures that appear in the narratives create interesting problems in the way we think and conceptualize aging itself, historically thought from a human perspective, and simultaneously create tensions that allow us to better understand ourselves as humans.

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