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Molnár, András
University of Szeged
Faculty of Law and Political Sciences
associate prof

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What Has Cosmic Horror to Offer Law (or Deprive It from)? The Collapse of Natural Order in H. P. Lovecraft's Fiction*

ABSTRACT

One of the most ancient and enduring issues in the history of legal philosophy is the relationship between law and morality. This can be explained with the fact that the birth of legal philosophy can be traced back to the emergence of philosophy in general. For this reason, for a large period in Western intellectual history, the philosophical analysis of law traditionally implied the assumption that fundamental moral principles and human-made legal rules are related, the former, with a validity beyond human volition, serving as a source of legitimacy for the latter, which are susceptible to change by temporary human will. Thus, one of the main pursuits of classic legal philosophy was to identify the eternal values supplying the foundations of positive law. My paper is an attempt at viewing the "law and morality" question through the lens of the "law and literature" approach. Interdisciplinary movements in legal scholarship like "law and literature" or "law and (popular) culture" offered insight into the various ways literature and other cultural products touch upon problems that are pertinent to how law works or how it is perceived in the popular imagination. From the principles of just distribution to retributive justice and the desire for vengeance to social inequalities, from the greatest literary classics to contemporary popular fiction, a plethora of interactions between fictitious stories and the world of law have been and are being explored to date. My paper focuses on weird fiction and cosmic horror, partly overlapping subgenres of horror fiction pioneered by H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). The central motif in cosmic horror is the insignificance of all kinds of human endeavour, and the meaningless world's indifference towards humanity; an affront to our perception of ourselves as being inherently worthy or possessing some kind of inherent value. My claim is that cosmic horror, by annihilating the teleology attributed to the world by many, implicitly touches on the problem of the destabilization of universal values, a problem that led to the critique and marginalisation of natural law theory by the 19th century. While Lovecraft does not describe situations in which his protagonists face moral dilemmas, he repeatedly hints at an implicit belief in rules and limits inherent in the natural order of things—an assumption not unlike those found in classic natural law theories—and the realization that there is no "cosmic order" is an important writerly tool in his specific brand of horror. This way, cosmic horror offers an opportunity to reflect by the means of fiction upon the fragility of a universal (or any kind of) moral order.

KEYWORDS: law and literature, law and morality, natural law, representation of law,

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Introduction

Fiction and law are intertwined in a great variety of ways. Since the emergence of the law and literature movement in the 1970s as an initiative to reintroduce the human to the law, pioneered by James Boyd White, the interrelatedness of the two fields has been explored from an infinitesimal of perspectives. Literary fiction can be an apt tool to reflect on hypothetical dilemmas on law and morality,[1] to highlight issues of contractual interpretation,[2] to enhance the empathy of law students by introducing artistic representations of social issues to them,[3] to express common sentiments (mostly anxieties) regarding the complexities of modern law,[4] the representation of law in popular culture as an expression of public sentiments and as a source of peril in affirming a simplified perception of law and the legal profession,[5] and a row of other problems. While not without substantial criticism, law and literature has by now gained a firm foothold in the scholarly discourse about law.

The aim of this paper is to explore certain connections between genre fiction and the fundamental issues of legal philosophy. I offer and analysis of the writings of American horror author H. P. Lovecraft, and – using the increasing scholarship on his work – I aim to highlight their moral philosophical connotations and the way these connotations target the reader's belief in a world where there are natural and objective moral truths. To achieve this, I rely on two insights that comprise the main line of my reasoning. First, I consider it settled that popular fiction and genre fiction are legitimately eligible for scholarly analysis. The distinction of high-brow and popular fiction is an old one that persists even in our present. Yet a significant and growing amount of research attests the fact that popular fiction can be a way of expression that reflects some of the most important questions of human society. Second, I consider horror as a genre that, due to its specific tropes, is capable of expressing some abstract philosophical issues, including moral philosophical ones.

In Chapter II of this article, I offer a short overview of Lovecraft's place in horror fiction, first focusing on horror as a genre that questions modernist rationalism, and then highlighting how Lovecraft fits into this pattern. In Chapter III I briefly recall classic legal philosophy's reflections on natural order. Then in Chapter IV I turn to how the collapse of natural order is present in the selected short stories of Lovecraft.

I H. P. Lovecraft and Cosmic Horror

In this chapter, I aim to place Lovecraft's work in the context of the development of horror fiction. For this, I first attempt to briefly outline the significance of the appearance of Gothic fiction, as a branch of fiction directly aimed at evoking fear, in the century of Enlightenment. My claim is that Gothic, and later horror fiction gain meaning as ways of expression that can explicitly be contrasted with the rationalist paradigm inaugurated by the Enlightenment. Then I continue with placing the work of Lovecraft himself in the history of horror fiction.

I.1. Gothic, Horror and the Recourse to Irrationalism

[1] Probably the most well-known example for this approach is the use of Sophocles' *Antigone* as an illustration of the natural law versus legal positivism debate.

[2] Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the plot of which is centered around the interpretation of the contractual provision about the "pound of flesh," is the archetypical example for this kind of usage.

[3] A significant amount of scholarship has been devoted to the thematization of social issues and its relevance to the legal profession. Perhaps the most influential of such attempts is Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*, which devotes a chapter to Dickens' *Hard Times*, and the ways a perceptive reader can take the viewpoint of the characters and gain a deeper understanding of their legal position.

[4] The textbook example for this approach is viewing Kafka's *The Trial* in the light of the increasing complexity of modern law in the eyes of ordinary people, their experience of alienation.

[5] Sherwin offers a broad range of arguments that popular culture's representation of law and legal issues influences the way law operates, and legal procedures, in certain ways, become similar to scenes visible in products of popular culture.

While fear, including fear of the supernatural, has been a part of fiction since the earliest forms of literature,[6] writing fiction for the sake of evoking fear in the reader can be traced back roughly to the emergence of Gothic fiction in the 18th century, commonly connected to the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Gothic fiction emerged as a counterreaction to the Enlightenment's agenda of rationalism. Gothic plots usually feature elements that defy rational explanation (supernatural beings, monsters, mystery, etc.) and often place emphasis on the psychological turmoil of the characters. The lingering effect of the shadowy past is also a recurring element; Gothic stories often feature atavistic secrets that originate from the distant past and haunt the present. Furthermore, works in this branch of literature were often centered around the deconstruction or criticism of the rationalistic perception of the world.

It is a peculiar coincidence that Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* were published in the same year. The former symbolizes the birth of a genre that is grounded in irrationalism and mystery; the latter is considered to be one of the most important and enduring classics of the Enlightenment's legal thinking. In the field of legal philosophy, Beccaria argued that torture and death penalty generally have no practical use, and because of this, they should be abolished from criminal law. His book is a hallmark of the voice of reason produced against archaic elements of law. On the other hand, Gothic fiction gained inspiration from the very archaic practices and customs modernist legal thought attempted to reform; it in fact often borrows from the excessive atrocities that were attributed – sometimes justly, sometimes unjustly – to Christianity and medieval times by Enlightenment thinkers and authors.

This paradox deserves mention, because it underlines the strong – and controversial – relationship between Gothic (and generally horror) fiction and the modernist narrative of rationalism. Enlightenment is the chapter in Western thought that led to the abandonment of transcendental authority as the fundament of argumentation. The world lost its appearance as something that contains a decipherable higher meaning that can be attributed to a transcendental creator or order. Rather, it came to be seen as a methodically observable and rationally understandable set of phenomena in causal relationships with each other that does not carry any higher message.

In literature and the arts, this tendency resulted in the appearance of an attraction towards irrationalism and sentimentalism. Romanticism embraced an aesthetics of mood, feelings, passions, instead of Classicism's attachment to regularity and symmetry. Burke devoted a book-length treatise on the "sublime" as a prime motif in arts. In his words, "[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous [*sic*] to terror, is a source of the *sublime*,"[7] an aesthetical experience that is "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." The sublime in the Burkean sense is strongly related to emotions like fear, and Burke explicitly categorizes terror as one of the passions caused by the sublime,[8] which strongly connects Gothic fiction to Romanticism's sentiment oriented aesthetic values.

It is plausible to argue that the emergence of Gothic fiction and the ongoing development of horror can be understood, or at least gets a new layer, in the context of a modernist, rationalist *Zeitgeist*, a way of thinking that presumes, first, that the world can be measured and comprehended, second, that moral argumentation can be founded on rational insights instead of unyielding, absolute authority, and third, that with the proper knowledge, progress is possible and humankind can obtain the means to change its environment to its advantage. In the medieval ages there was "no concept of 'horror' as a

[6] Edith Birkhead, the author of one of the earliest attempts at a comprehensive history of horror fiction (originally published in 1921), argues that the genre is rooted in ancient mythical tales of the supernatural. Birkhead, Edith: *The Tale of Terror. A Study of the Gothic Romance*. Russell & Russell Inc., New York, 1963. Lovecraft, in his long essay on the history of horror, relies heavily on Birkhead's insights with respect to the early origins, and they may have partly inspired the essay's famous opening sentence: "[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. In Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *Collected Essays Volume 2: Literary Criticism*. Hippocampus Press, New York, 2004. p. 82.

[7] Burke, Edmund: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. R. and J. Dodsley, London, 1757. p. 13.

[8] Ibid. p. 42.

genre," the distinction between fiction and nonfiction was born in a later age.[9] With the advent of what Weber called as "the disenchantment of the world,"[10] the dividing line between reality and fantasy became more marked, the supernatural moved to the realm of pure fiction and imagination. This separation catalyzed the emergence of supernatural stories – horror stories among them – as a distinct branch of fiction instead of tales about real perils beyond our imminent perception (e. g. cautionary tales that serve the purpose of warning people about the punishment for committing sins or breaching taboos).

I.2. The Significance of Lovecraft in Horror

Throughout his lifetime, Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) experienced meagre, if any, literary success – unless we consider the praises from his peers, some of whom also grew to become acknowledged authors in the development of speculative fiction.[11] He came from a wealthy bourgeoisie family, but with the death of his father, and then his grandfather, he experienced a slow and steady loss of caste; and he was never able to secure a stable job. The short stories that were published in his lifetime were published in pulp magazines, most notably *Weird Tales*. Pulp magazines were the main forums for fantastic fiction in those times, and *Weird Tales*, founded in 1922, was one of the leading magazines in the field, with Lovecraft as one of its most popular authors.[12]

Lovecraft, though writing for a profit-oriented type of media, did not care much for the tropes that make a piece of fiction more marketable,[13] and this is where we turn to his unique *ars poetica* that contained the framework of cosmic horror. Cosmic horror is a subgenre of horror that, instead of the explicit depiction of gore and monsters, focuses on the creation of a specific atmosphere. Its central issue is the insignificance of humankind, our vulnerability and ephemerality in the shadow of an indifferent universe that does not care about humanity in any way. Cosmic horror aims at evoking the sentiment of this vulnerability. The plots of the classics of cosmic horror are virtually nonexistent, the emphasis is on the feeling of being decentered and lost, not only as an individual, but also as a species. Cosmic horror was not invented by Lovecraft,[14] but he was the one who elaborated it as a literary program and an aesthetical endeavor.

The core of cosmic horror is the destabilization of the notion that humankind in any way stands in the center of the world. The thought that humans are the measure of all things is intuitively evident for anybody. People shape and interpret the world in a way that is suitable for them. This is nothing less than any species would do. In most historical eras, humans considered it natural that they are on top of the hierarchy between living (or even non-living) beings on earth. Religious worldviews held it that in the divine order of things, the world is, to a varying extent, at the disposal of humans to reap its fruits.

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[9] Cardin, Matt (ed.): *Horror Literature through History. An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to Our Deepest Fears. Volume 1*. Greenwood, Santa Barbara, 2017.

[10] Weber, Max: *Science as a Vocation*. In Weber, Max: *The Vocation Lectures*. Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 2004. p. 13.

[11] Perhaps the most well-known of them all, Robert Bloch, author of the novel *Psycho*, exchanged letters with Lovecraft in his teenage years, and as a beginner writer, he wrote some short stories in the Lovecraftian vein. Another of Lovecraft's friends was Fritz Leiber, known among fantasy fans for his works about Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser. Lovecraft was also close friends with Robert E. Howard, the creator of the figure of Conan the barbarian. All of this, of course, is just miscellaneous information, but it may offer a glimpse of how Lovecraft, despite all his obscurity, was present at the formation of some of literature's present day popular genres.

[12] Nevins, Jess: *Horror Fiction in the 20th Century. Exploring Literature's Most Chilling Genre*. Praeger, Santa Barbara, 2020. pp. 30-39.

[13] This is clearly perceptible in Lovecraft's letter, dated July 5, 1927, to Farnsworth Wright, then editor of *Weird Tales*. In this letter, Lovecraft confidently denounces the schematic clichés often applied in the pulp magazines, as a reaction to the refusal of the first manuscript of his short story "The Call of Cthulhu." Cf. Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *Selected Letters II*. Arkham House, Sauk City, 1968. pp. 149-151.

[14] It is a matter of interpretation how far one predates cosmic horror. The trope of human insignificance can be traced back to as far as antique Greek dramas. But if one would like to identify the direct predecessors of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, one may turn to some of British writer Algernon Blackwood's fiction, most notably "The Willows," in which a pair of travelers encounters unidentifiable entities, possibly from another dimension. The story is about nothing more than the realization that the world holds a much greater amount if information than we could ever comprehend.

Later, Western modernity began to see humans as rational – and for this reason, supreme – beings, and the world as a range of phenomena governed by laws of nature, as well as a set of resources that can be used and exploited to our advantage. In the meantime, science began to reveal more of the world, and, especially with the advances in astronomy, it became more and more obvious and well-known that the human world, our planet, even our solar system and our galaxy are just small parts of the universe, and the more we know of the world, the more questions and doubts arise.

Lovecraft, who was personally very fond of natural sciences, seems to have sensed something from this tendency. While in his lifetime in the first third of the 20th century, the Western world was under the spell of the optimism caused by technological progression, he infused his fiction with an atmosphere that mitigates this optimism, and depicts humans as susceptible to forces that go well beyond their comprehension. This sentiment is aptly expressed in the famous opening paragraph of Lovecraft's most well-known and perhaps most important short 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 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 deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.[15]

This paragraph, as an opening text, serves as a tool to lay the foundations of the brooding atmosphere Lovecraft wishes to achieve. And more importantly, it tersely encapsulates the most characteristic attributes of cosmic horror. The reader is warned about a knowledge that, once achieved, has a detrimental effect on people, because it is not meant to be obtained by human beings. It hints at a peril that cannot be overcome by humankind, rendering them susceptible to marginalization, disaster, perhaps even extinction. Instead of tangible horrors, the text evokes and existential dread; and of course, the short story will introduce a visible monster later (the eponymous Cthulhu), but this monster is not only fearsome because it can cause physical harm (although it definitely can), but also, and more importantly, because it cannot be wholly grasped by our senses, and the possibility of the awakening of its kind makes "even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer … poison" to anyone who became cognizant of it.[16] The most significant motif is not simply a monster, but a realization and a paradigm shift.[17]

At this point, we should take a recourse to the above mentioned antagonistic relationship between Gothic or horror fiction and the rationalism of the Enlightenment and modernist thought. Lovecraft's fiction perfectly fits into this pattern. In David A. Oakes's words, Gothic fiction held up "a mirror that captured the dark side of a society and country founded, in part, on a bedrock of optimism and progress,"[18] and "it raises questions as to the goals of scientists in their quest for knowledge, explores the frightening revelations that may arise from scientific inquiry, and illustrates the difficult search for individuality in a world that grows more technologically complex with each passing year."[19] It deserves mention that Oakes had American Gothic fiction in mind when he wrote down these lines, but it can be extended to Gothic fiction in general. Anyway, his thesis is crucial for the central tenet of this article. In Lovecraft's fiction, knowledge turns from blessing to threat, a transformation that flies in the face of everything we believe in the modern era. Normally, we believe that the more information we gather about the world, the better it will be for humanity. In Lovecraft, gaining knowledge results in the destabilization not only of what we think about science – as Oakes discusses in his book – but also of

[15] Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *The Call of Cthulhu*. In Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*. Penguin Books, London, 2002. p. 139.
[16] Ibid. p. 169.
[17] Kálmán Matolcsy offers a thorough and insightful analysis about the ways the logic of Kuhnian paradigm shift can be perceived in Lovecraft's fiction. Cf. Matolcsy Kálmán: *Knowledge in the Void. Anomaly, Observation, and the Incomplete Paradigm Shift in H. P. Lovecraft's Fiction*. In Lovecraft Annual, 2008, pp. 165-191.
[18] Oakes, David A.: *Science and Destabilization in the Modern American Gothic. Lovecraft, Matheson, and King*. Greenwood Press, Westport, 2000. p. 1.
[19] Ibid. p. 2.

our perception of our place in the world. The theme of forbidden knowledge, itself a characteristic feature of Gothic fiction,[20] is reinterpreted by Lovecraft in a thoroughly modernist context.

II. Natural Law, Modernism, and the Paradigm of an Objective Moral Order

The sudden turn from Gothic and cosmic horror to the millennia old doctrine of natural law might seem to be on the verge of the absurd. Yet it is necessary to recall some key elements of this more or less bygone doctrine of classical legal thinking.

Natural law, in Finnis's words, is a "set of propositions picking out (1) basic human goods, (2) general requirements of right choosing, and (3) the specific moral norms deducible from those requirements as they bear on particular basic goods." And natural law theory is "a theory which argues that propositions of those three sorts can be true, and offers to identify at least some of these true propositions and their implications for theory and practice."[21] This definition reveals nothing of the manifold character of natural law theory and the various intellectual attempts throughout history at finding the source for the moral truths underlying moral, political, and legal principles. However, the afore cited definition contains one important element: the propositions of natural law are *true*, in the sense that they are valid, they offer reasonable arguments and justification, regardless of one's personal convictions, social conditions, or any other contingent circumstances. Natural law, in this sense, constitutes an objective order, a set of insights that ought to be accepted by reasonable people.

If natural law is considered as such, a further question to answer is what justifies its objective status. Throughout the ages, from antiquity on, various answers were given to this question. The purpose of this article is not to offer a textbook-style enumeration of the well-known stages of natural law's development. Yet, as a brief overview, I would like to sketch the framework offered by Stephen Feldman. Feldman placed legal thinking in a context of the history of ideas, connecting schools of legal theory to premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism.

In Feldman's characterization, premodernism is a way of thinking that presupposes the existence of a universal framework that originates from the supernatural. This attachment to the supernatural can be distinguished into two varieties: the "cyclical" and the "eschatological;"[22] the former basically referring to antique philosophy, the latter indicating Christian thought and its belief that human history is a linear progress towards the destination of the second coming of Christ and the Final Judgment. In premodern thought, the world is imbued with an immanent purpose, a *telos*, and this belief pervades political thought, be it Aristotle's ideal of the human being as a political being living virtuously in a regulated community, or the great theologists' belief of good governance's principles originating from the divine law.

Modernism, in Feldman's interpretation, has three marked features that distinctly diverge from premodernism: the concept of secularism (instead of a view on the sacred), the possibility of endless progress (instead of either the repetition of cycles or heading towards a final goal), and the high valuation of human skills and efforts (instead of relying on divine will or providence).[23] Modernism went through three stages from rationalism (the ultimate source of knowledge lies in methodical human thinking) to empiricism (the ultimate source of knowledge lies in experience and observation) to transcendentalism (the ultimate source of knowledge lies in abstract categories independent from us), until it arrived at a stage of crisis, because neither of the enumerated paradigms could offer a lasting solution to the problem

[20] The problem of forbidden knowledge is especially prevalent in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. For an analysis in this regard, see Ellis, Markman: *The History of Gothic Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000. pp. 141-156.

[21] Finnis, John: *Introduction*. In Finnis, John (ed.): *Natural Law. Volume I*. Dartmouth, Aldershot, 1991. p. xi. (emphasis in original)

[22] Feldman, Stephen F.: *American Legal Thought from Premodernism to Postmodernism. An Intellectual Voyage*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. p. 11. It should be remarked that the bulk of Feldman's book – as indicated by its title – deals with American legal thought. However, his focus on premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism, as stages of thought influencing legal doctrine and theory, offers a valuable perspective outside American legal thought, too.

[23] Ibid. p. 18.

of truth that has been separated from the divine.[24] Legal thinking of the modernist era tried to discover the source of law, justice, and morality with the help of these approaches. Perhaps the most symbolic manifestation of this kind of thinking in law is Grotius's famous – one might even say, platitudinized – utterance that the truths of natural law would be valid even supposing that God did not exist. Anyway, the main pattern that should be seen here is an attempt to justify fundamental legal principles and values by reliance to some sort of objective, yet earthly considerations that are wholly accessible to the human mind.

The inability to settle with one lasting justification for natural law led to the gradual abandonment of this doctrine. Of course, natural law never really functioned as "living law," as a system of rules and principles directly and consistently applied by courts in everyday debates. Natural law, as seen earlier, is more a set of principles for good policy, than a detailed system of everyday rules. Radbruch's famous vision of retrospectively abolishing outrageously and unbearably unjust statutes[25] never became everyday practice. Nevertheless, the search for the justification of law with recourse to natural law theory did not cease until the 19th century, when natural law received almost fatal blows from criticism.

The criticism launched against natural law theory rests on two interrelated insights: pluralism and relativism. Criticism based on pluralism emphasizes that in a time when fundamentally diverging worldviews can coexist without threatening each other or the public order, the objectivity requirement cannot be fulfilled, as there is not one single, salient value system (like Catholicism in the medieval ages) that might serve as the basis for any natural law doctrine. For this reason, the recourse to natural law cannot be strongly validated. Criticism based on relativism, on the other hand, argues that one cannot pass a conclusive judgment over the validity of any value system above the others, because they all rest on persuasive grounds.

Due to the criticism launched against natural law, legal theory lost interest in issues of the moral foundations of law.

III. The Collapse of Order in Lovecraft's Writings

The above sketch tried to concisely summarize the nature of natural law and the reasons it lost significance in modernity. The crisis in legal theory was the reflection of a crisis in general, and as philosophy failed in the quest for ultimate truths that excluded all others, so did law abandon the effort to attach to philosophical principles. Lovecraft's fiction is about the loss of points of reference in the world, and the point of my article is that this theme is relevant to the discourse about law, too. For this reason, I now turn to Lovecraft's fiction itself and point out some occurrences of this theme.

Lovecraft's writings are almost always about disruption and incapacitation: our convictions fall apart and we find ourselves incapable of overcoming the perils that manifest themselves before us. Science loses its ability to explain the world around us,[26] language becomes unable to describe things,[27] reality shies away from our ontological thinking;[28] the enumeration could go on much longer. The moral implications of Lovecraft's works did not receive as much scholarly attention as the examples indicated here, even though they're there. Lovecraft was personally an atheist, a materialist, and a moral skeptic.[29] This personal stance most certainly inspired him in imagining material monsters instead of magical ones, making him "the Copernicus of the horror story."[30] It is easy to state that his fiction was a direct

[24] Ibid. pp. 22-28.
[25] Radbruch, Gustav: *Statutory Lawlessness and Supra-Statutory Law*. In *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2006. pp. 1-11.
[26] Joshi, Sunand Tryambak: *Time, Space, and Natural Law: Science and Pseudo-Science in Lovecraft*. In *The Lovecraft Annual*, 2010. pp. 171-201.
[27] Houstoun, Alex: *The Language of Lovecraft: Naming and Writing in "The Call of Cthulhu."* In *The Weird Fiction Review*, Fall 2011, Issue 2. pp. 161-183.
[28] Harman, Graham: *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Zero Books, Winchester, 2012.
[29] For an overview, see Joshi, S. T.: *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*. Necronomicon Press, West Warwick, 1996. pp. 202-212.
[30] Leiber, Jr, Fritz: *A Literary Copernicus*. In Joshi, S. T. (ed.): *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*. Ohio University Press, Athens, 1980. p. 50.

expression of this intellectual position, and I may not be amiss to say that the thoughts reflected in his stories are in line with the author's personal beliefs. Yet I do not wish to conjecture a direct connection between biography and fictitious content. What I would like to attempt in this section is an overview of references to moral implications in Lovecraft's texts.

III. 1. A Contradiction to Cosmic Order: Existential Threat in "The Call of Cthulhu"

"The Call of Cthulhu," written in 1926, first published in 1928 in *Weird Tales*, is possibly the most famous short story in the so-called first phase of Lovecraft's major fiction.[31] It encapsulates the style and motifs of Lovecraft's fiction and was crucial in inspiring the fan base that contributed to the fictitious universe with their own writings.

This short story relates the first-person account of the narrator who "pieces together dissociated knowledge."[32] Having inherited from his grand-uncle a box of curious research material concerning a secretive cult unknown to scholars of religion, he decides to uncover the anthropological mystery of this religious group, only to realize that Earth is infested with beings of great power – only referred to as Great Old Ones – who are currently in a state of semi-sleep, but once they awake – when the start are right – they will wreak havoc on our species.

In "The Call of Cthulhu," the threat posed by the Great Old Ones is demonstrated by their sheer size, our inability to fully comprehend their appearance of language, their ability to infiltrate dreams, and, last but not least, the hint that they are powerful enough to eliminate humankind without any significant effort. Yet there is another aspect to the threat. The typical Lovecraftian hero is a middle-class, white, male intellectual, not unrelated to "New England's traditional 'salt of the earth.'"[33] As a member of this social class, this hero possesses a perspective that is embedded in his cultural and moral environment. Lovecraft never really devoted much effort to the psychologically realistic portrayal of flesh and blood human beings.[34] Yet the reader can attach an implicit normality to these stock characters: they are, in a way, average people who live their lives according to the socially accepted framework and values they interiorized.

This is the point where another kind of breach occurs in "The Call of Cthulhu." As the narrative progresses, the reader, together with the narrator comes to the realization that the secret behind the singular cult and its vaguely disquieting relics is not just an ancient religion never known before, but a fundamental shift in power relations, too, the displacement of humans from the center of the world order. Humanity is not only endangered in its existence – quite a grave issue in itself – but the morality followed by humans would go astray, too. In the second chapter of the short story, old Castro, an elder member of the cult incarcerated and interrogated by Inspector Legrasse, relates the outlines of their tenets. Among these is the anticipation of the awakening and coming of the aforementioned Great Old Ones, an event that the cult members await as some sort of salvation. This lore is perhaps analogous to the

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[31] Cf. Joshi, Sunand Tryambak: *A Subtler Magick. The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft*. Wildside Press, Berkeley Heights, 1999. pp. 112-149.

[32] Cf. 15. footnote.

[33] Lovecraft 2002: p. 145. It is needless to dwell on it any longer, but it may be briefly remarked that the word "hero" is to be used cautiously in the context of cosmic horror, as the whole point of the subgenre it that the autonomy and agency of the hero is reduced to zero or rendered absolutely meaningless.

[34] In a letter from 1934, Lovecraft wrote the following famous lines about his attitude to character portrayal:

Individuals and their fortunes within natural law move me very little. They are all momentary trifles bound from a common nothingness toward another common nothingness. Only the cosmic framework itself – or such individuals as symbolise principles (or defiances of principles) of the cosmic framework – can gain a deep grip on my imagination and set it to work creating. In other words, the only 'heroes' I can write about are *phenomena*.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *Selected Letters V*. Arkham House, Sauk City, 1976. p. 19. I let the reader decide whether Lovecraft only tried to conceal his lack of talent with this utterance, or it was a genuine and elaborate *ars poetica*. Anyway, this excerpt, quite well-known among Lovecraft scholarship and fandom, aptly and concisely expresses his writerly purposes.

Apocalypse and the elevation of the chosen ones to the heavens, but in the story, it only results in chaos and upheaval. As the narrator summarizes:

> The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom.[35]

The followers of the cult await the predicted coming of the Great Old Ones, and believe that this would bring liberation to them. Lovecraft, admittedly never caring much for realistic character depiction in fiction, possibly did not even surmise how much he was on the note when attributed a desire to liberation to "men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type."[36] This aspect aside, the prophecy sketched by Castro hints at the transformation, or rather, elimination, of whatever the dominant WASP group considers moral. From this viewpoint, it is not only humankind in general that becomes endangered, but also the dominant morality. This threat shows the idea of objective morality as an ephemeral, what more, inherently human phenomenon.

III.2. Common Humanity Cruelly Judged by the Law: The Destabilization of Human Values in "The Colour out of Space"

"The Colour out of Space" is not only considered as one of the most salient pieces of fiction in Lovecraft's work in terms of composition, atmosphere, and quality in general, but also as one of the most definitive classics within the subgenre of cosmic horror. Its narrator-protagonist, a waterworks employee surveying the landscape for a reservoir west of the fictitious town of Arkham, relates the local gossip about the origins of a desolate field nearby. According to the rumors, a meteorite fell onto the place of the farmer Nahum Gardner sometime in the 1880s. This meteorite behaved unlike any known material on Earth, and seemed to be the source of some sort of extraterrestrial parasite that not only possessed its prey, but transformed it in horrendous ways, and finally literally turned it to dust. The parasite was visually imperceptible, because its color fell outside the range of the spectrum normally visible to the human eye. No defense was known against this being, and the reader is left with the hint that the area it occupies spreads slowly but steadily.

Not only is "The Colour out of Space" the story of a strange an inexplicable disease, not only does it displace humans from their position as supreme beings on this planet, it is also a chronicle of moral invalidation. The formless, imperceptible "color" is the most authentic Lovecraftian monster: it cannot be interpreted in moral terms. Horror fiction often has moral connotations, and the monsters are often representations of morally dubious or forbidden acts. This feature is absolutely missing from Lovecraft's short story. The color, so far as the reader can learn it from the gossip mediated by the narrator, is a mindless entity, or, if it has a consciousness, it is fundamentally different from what we consider as such. The color seems mostly analogous to protozoa or other kinds of rudimentary forms of life. It is not something that can be interpreted in any kind of moral framework. It only tries to sustain itself by the provender it needs, and in this case this provender seems to be organic matter.

Our almost absolute lack of knowledge about the extraterrestrial organism makes us defenseless against it. This defenselessness questions the place of humanity on the "top" of the world's evolutionary "hierarchy."[37] Lovecraft illustrates this experience on a personal level, and offers a sight that borders on the ironic and the miserable. We see Nahum rationalizing all the tragedies that have befallen on him and his family. He seems to try to convince himself that "[i]t must all be a judgment of some sort; though he

[35] Lovecraft 2002: p. 155.
[36] Ibid. p. 153.
[37] The use of quotation marks is highly advisable in this case. Humankind as the occupant of the top of any kind of hierarchical order is an obsolete thought from more aspects. For the antiquity or the middle ages, and even modernistic rationalism, it seemed natural to assume that humankind is inherently superior to other forms of organic life. This somewhat arrogant belief has been overcome, because any kind of hierarchy presupposes the existence of an inherent order, an assumption that is outright denied by modern thinking. Also, it is especially harshly criticized by posthumanist thinkers who aim to abolish all forms of anthropocentrism.

could not fancy what for, since he had always walked uprightly in the Lord's ways so far as he knew."[38] Nahum, a simple farmer who does not ponder on the vastness of the universe and follows the faith of his ancestors, stands helpless against the unknown menace. His faith, the mere fact that he has any faith at all, is fundamentally alien from the indifferent nature of the world as revealed by the "color:" the world lacks all kinds of *telos*, the very thing Nahum places his trust in, and it is this contradiction that bestows this single sentence from Lovecraft with a singularly tragic tone.

The subversion of the notion of inherent order finds expression in another scene in "The Colour out of Space," and it is directly related to the law, too. When Ammi Pierce, a friend of Nahum, visits the Gardner place, only to witness the family's gruesome fate caused by the parasite, he looks around in the attic, where he discovers Nahum's transformed wife, Nabby. The text makes the unmistakable hint that Ammi, in an act of mercy, killed Mrs. Gardner, relieving her from the agony of her state. At this point the narrator remarks that "what is done in common humanity is sometimes cruelly judged by the law," and the reader also learns that "to leave anything capable of motion there would have been a deed so monstrous as to damn any accountable being to eternal torment."[39] On the one hand, the Lovecraft places the character outside criminal law: he exempts Ammi from murder, pointing out that the state of Nabby justified taking her life to end her suffering. But on the other hand, the fact that killing Nabby is justified indicates that the invading extraterrestrial entity poses a challenge that requires humanity to rethink its moral positions.

III.3. Tampering with Nature beyond Limits: Excessive Hubris in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward is Lovecraft's longest piece of fiction, perhaps more a short novel than a short story. Its title character is a young man who is passionately enamored with the past of his hometown Providence and that of his family. He learns about a remote ancestor called Joseph Curwen. Curwen was a strange, reclusive man whose secretive way of life led to gossips of him being involved into witchcraft and black magic. The gossips finally resulted in action, and in the 1770s, a large party of Providence townsmen killed Curwen and eradicated his memory. About one and a half century later Charles Dexter Ward discovers that Curwen devised a recipe to resurrect people by using certain remains extracted from their corpses called their "essential Saltes."[40] Ward learns this technique and resurrects Curwen. It turns out, however, that Curwen has evil intentions with the knowledge he has amassed. He kills Ward and, taking advantage of their likeness, tries to disguise himself as the young man. But the Ward family's physician, Marius Bicknell Willett discovers the scheme and destroys Curwen with counter-magic.

In my view, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is a take on Shelley's *Frankenstein*, at least in its focus on the limits and ethics of knowledge. The moral of *Frankenstein* is that knowledge is not a value in itself, because it can be used erroneously or with evil intent. In Shelley's novel, Victor Frankenstein's transgression lies in creating a living, sentient being, and then abandoning him like a botched experiment, even though the creature has feelings as well as. Due to the constant refusal and hatred he receives from others, the creature's Rousseauian *tabula rasa* gives way to a death wish and an ardent desire for vengeance. In other words, the central motif of *Frankenstein* is the reckless and irresponsible use of science and knowledge.

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward goes a little further than that. In this case, the central discovery is not creating new life, but the resurrection of the old, and the extraction of knowledge from it. Curwen instrumentalizes the resurrected persons ("Specimens"[41]) as stores of knowledge required to aid him in his endeavors to gain unheard-of power. Even though the story features the resurrection of the dead and magical procedures, Curwen's proceedings and mentality is quite modern in its instrumentalism, the

[38] Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *The Colour out of Space*. In Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*. Penguin Books, London, 2002. p. 185.
[39] Ibid. p. 187.
[40] Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. In Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*. Penguin Books, London, 2001. p. 90.
[41] Ibid. p. 118.

notion of the "Saltes" itself bears a mark of materialism, and Curwen has no scruples in utilizing human beings to reach his goals.

Curwen's ruthless intentions are countered by Willett's naïve belief in the natural order of things. He throws this in the face of Curwen before the final confrontation: "[t]here are abominations and blasphemies which must be stamped out, and I believe that the writer of those words will attend to Orne and Hutchinson. … Curwen, a man can't tamper with Nature beyond certain limits, and every horror you have woven will rise up to wipe you out."[42] Earlier, in the frantic letter he wrote to Willett when he realized that Curwen had evil in mind, the real Charles Dexter Ward referred to a menace that threatens "all civilisation, all natural law, perhaps even the fate of the solar system and the universe," and must be defeated "for the sake of all life and Nature."[43] Willett refers to "Nature" as a thing no one should "tamper with," and Ward mentions "natural law" as a thing that should be protected, because it is at peril from an unknown evil. In these utterances nature gets a normative connotation: it is not the laws of physics that should be protected (why should they?), but "normality" as a way of life, as a point of reference, an order our values can be grounded on. Viewed in this light, the conflict in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* lies between the natural order of things as a human construction, represented by Willett, and the abolition of all such concepts, like Curwen did.

Conclusion

In his dissenting opinion in *Southern Pacific Co. v. Jensen*, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote the famous words the common law "is not a brooding omnipresence in the sky."[44] In its original context, Holmes argued that maritime law can be supplemented by statute or common law. But, like any good Holmes phrases, it can be used as a powerful rhetorical tool. While the doctrine of natural law is considered obsolete and outdated for a row of reasons, it may yet not be denied that law is – or is expected to be – based on rational considerations. Viewed in this light, the law is not just "a brooding omnipresence in the sky," it is tied to certain rational considerations, or at least, is justified be reference to such. Therefore, the question where these rational considerations may lie is not irrelevant even today.

This article is an attempt at connecting one of the fundamental issues of legal philosophy – the source of legal justification – with horror fiction as a tool of reflecting on human values. I tried to achieve this aim by introducing the example of H. P. Lovecraft's fiction and highlight a portion of its moral dimensions. For this, I first sketched the significance of the genre of horror and the subgenre of cosmic horror as fields of literature that reflect on the questionable nature of some assumptions that people take for granted, be they ontological, epistemological, or moral in nature. Then I briefly sketched how legal philosophy has for millennia tried to identify the fundamental principles that can be relied on as guidance to the law. Then, in the last chapter, I offered an overview of three Lovecraft stories and analyzed the way they thematize the destabilization of natural order.

[42] Ibid. p. 204.
[43] Ibid. p. 158.
[44] 244 U.S. 205, 222 (1917)

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