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## **Dreadful Reality: Fear and Madness in the Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

DREADFUL REALITY: FEAR AND MADNESS IN THE FICTION OF H. P.

LOVECRAFT

by

Phillip Snyder

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
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## Abstract

The effectiveness of H. P. Lovecraft's horror relies on an atmosphere of dread in his stories. Both the verisimilitude of Lovecraft's stories and the dilemma many of his protagonists face in losing their sanity or being perceived to have lost their sanity play a large role in creating this atmosphere. By viewing Lovecraft's fiction through the lens of recent psychological research on fear, this project shows how his intuitive understanding of fear and his vivid imagery and sensory descriptions conform to our understanding of unconscious automatic threat avoidance behaviors. Because Lovecraft's behavioral descriptions accurately reflect these behaviors, they increase the sense of verisimilitude in his fiction and thus increase the effectiveness of his horror. This project uses these behavioral descriptions to show the presence or absence of immediate physical threats to Lovecraft's characters. The presence of these threats indicates that the character that encounters them is sane. Finally, this project discusses how the presence of a sane protagonist who has encountered the otherworldly threats of Lovecraft's world and appears insane as a result of his newfound beliefs bolsters a story's verisimilitude and more effectively inspires dread.

Key Words: Lovecraft, fear, verisimilitude, imagery, Dunwich, Innsmouth, Cthulhu, weird fiction, sanity, insanity, psychology, smell, eyes, threat avoidance behavior

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## Introduction

Many children fear the monsters that lie under their beds and that hide in their closets, but adults tend to console these frightened children with the assurance that there are no monsters. As adults we tend to embrace rational thought and put such fears to rest. Many of us, however, still jump at unfamiliar sounds when we think ourselves alone. Hairs stand on end at the sight of animal eyes shining in the dark. Those individuals whom society at large labels as delusional, paranoid, or psychotic speak of things that most of us dismiss as wild fantasy. We go on with our lives and live in the rational. Maybe, however, those individuals whom we so readily dismiss might see something real that the rest of us do not and those frightened children see something terrible. Maybe there is a reality that the world at large does not perceive. Maybe there are monsters that hide in dark places just out of sight.

These are the kinds of unsettling thoughts raised by the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft. His blend of rational reality and his accounts of the terrible and impossible invite readers to suspend skepticism, and the vivid imagery and sensory descriptions Lovecraft fills his fiction with create a credible atmosphere of dread. Protagonists who become plagued with madness while struggling with monstrous realities urge the readers to consider the validity of insane men's tales. Much of Lovecraft's fiction wrestles with themes of sanity, often featuring characters that fall into madness as a result of their terrifying experiences. We see a fine example of how Lovecraft inspires fear through the perception of sanity in his story "The Thing On the Doorstep."

Daniel Upton, the first person narrator of "The Thing On the Doorstep," begins his narrative saying, "It is true that I have sent six bullets through the head of my best

friend, and yet I hope to shew by this statement that I am not his murderer. At first I shall be called a madman—madder than the man I shot in his cell at the Arkham Sanitarium” (919). We later learn that the man Upton shot, his friend Edward Derby, is struggling for control of his own body in the events leading to the fatal shooting. A cruel wizard has been switching his consciousness between others’ bodies to achieve a sort of immortality in a suitable host, and Derby’s body is perfect for the ritual the wizard wishes to complete. As a result, Derby’s consciousness is occasionally trapped in the body of the wizard’s current host, Derby’s wife Asenath. Eventually Derby musters the courage to kill his wife in order to kill the wizard and save himself.

Upton, at first ignorant of the dangerous situation, notices how his friend’s personality changes throughout the story as the wizard takes control. Upton perceives Derby’s mental condition to be deteriorating after Asenath mysteriously disappears, and he eventually commits his friend to the Arkham Sanitarium. Upton, however, still remains suspicious that there is something more sinister happening than mere insanity. Not long after the Sanitarium declares Derby cured and fit for release, Upton receives a visitor in the night—the decaying corpse of Asenath carrying a note in Derby’s handwriting. The note says that the wizard has taken control of Derby’s body from beyond the grave and permanently trapped Upton’s friend in this corpse. The note begs Upton to kill the wizard and to burn the corpse so that the wizard cannot continue changing bodies. Now convinced, Upton goes to the asylum and shoots the wizard who is inhabiting Derby’s body.

In this story, we see how the outward perception of characters’ sanity shifts after they have encountered the strange forces lurking in Lovecraft’s world. Upton considers

Derby's mental health to be deteriorating throughout most of the story, but Derby is actually struggling with the otherworldly powers of the wizard. When Upton encounters the effects of the wizard's strange powers by finding Asenath's animated corpse on his doorstep, he too decides to combat the wizard's schemes. In the eyes of society at large, however, Upton has shot and killed his best friend, a man just declared sane by the Arkham Sanitarium. The only defense Upton has for his own sanity is the internal consistency of his own narrative and, for the readers, the intertextuality between "The Thing On the Doorstep" and other stories by Lovecraft that show similar threats: some of the occult terms and descriptions of supernatural forces in "The Thing On the Doorstep" appear in Lovecraft's other stories. Lovecraft names an extra-dimensional entity called Yog-Sothoth and references the *Necronomicon* in both "The Thing On the Doorstep" and "The Dunwich Horror," and characters from "The Thing On the Doorstep," "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," and "At the Mountains of Madness" all make reference to supernatural creatures called shoggoths. I will analyze the stories "The Dunwich Horror," "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," and "The Call of Cthulhu" to discuss the roles that fear and madness play in Lovecraft's fiction and the effectiveness of these stories' horror. My source for all these texts is *H. P. Lovecraft: The Complete Fiction* compiled by Barnes & Noble.

Knowing more about who Lovecraft was and his thoughts about supernatural horror can grant us further insight into how to analyze his fiction. The scholar and critic S. T. Joshi, a leading expert on Lovecraft, provides useful biographical information in his introduction to Lovecraft's *Complete Fiction*. Joshi says, "Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born on August 20, 1890, in Providence, Rhode Island" (ix), and that "Lovecraft, plagued

by ill health in his final years . . . died in poverty on March 15, 1937” (xiii). Although Lovecraft was not famous in his lifetime, the author has met “tremendous posthumous triumph, . . . and some critics have ranked him among the world’s greatest writers” (ix) for his mastery of horror. Some of Lovecraft’s more famous stories are “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Colour out of Space,” “At the Mountains of Madness,” and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth.” In her article “*Cthulhu Fhtagn: Dreams and Nightmares in the Fantasy Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft*,” the scholar Kelly Bulkeley discusses how Lovecraft also drew from his own “unusually vivid and highly memorable dreams” and the topic of dreaming and nightmares in general provided inspiration for many of his stories (56). Bulkeley references Lovecraft’s personal letters and his own discussions about his nightmares to examine these influences.

Lovecraft was far from a paragon of humanity, however, and scholars have not shied away from his failings. Bennett Lovett-Graff (1997) criticizes the xenophobic underpinnings of Lovecraft’s story “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and draws a connection to Lovecraft’s own personal prejudices against immigrants and minorities. In a similar vein of criticism, Sophus A. Reinert (2015) discusses the underlying themes of eugenics in Lovecraft’s works, a topic popular at time, and which he links to the economic crisis of the Great Depression. Indeed, in his biography *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (2013), S. T. Joshi tells us, “Lovecraft’s racism manifested itself in many different forms,” though “in 1905, such views were prevalent even among the intellectual classes” (sec. 4). Lovett-Graff and Reinert’s articles, along with Joshi’s biography, address the influence that commonly held racist beliefs of the time and Lovecraft’s own prejudices have on his fiction.

Other studies are more focused on the lasting cultural impact of Lovecraft's fiction and the intertextuality between his works and those of other writers. Conny Lippert (2012-2013) discusses the cultural impact of Lovecraft's infamous *Necronomicon*, Lovecraft's invented tome of occult lore, and how it has appeared in film, games, and other works of fiction. Another study by Justin Mullis (2015) addresses Lovecraft fan culture and works inspired by him. David McWilliams (2012) further demonstrates the cultural impact of Lovecraft's fiction by discussing the Lovecraftian themes of cosmic horror in the recent film *Prometheus* directed by Ridley Scott. Through these studies we see the legacy of Lovecraft's fiction and the way it has influenced culture.

Lovecraft's stories themselves fall within a subgenre of supernatural horror called *weird fiction*, a blend of fantasy, science fiction, and horror that elicits a particular kind of fear in the readers. In his article "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft explores the history of supernatural horror and how it has evolved into weird fiction. In this article he simultaneously defends supernatural horror's literary value and attacks those critics who would dismiss the genre as mere pulp fiction. Through his analysis, Lovecraft declares that "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (1041), which "became for our primitive forefathers a terrible and omnipotent source of boons and calamities visited upon mankind" (1042). According to Lovecraft, the unknown triggers an ancient and primal sense of dread that fuels our survival instinct, and as soon as a threat becomes understandable it becomes significantly less threatening. For Lovecraft, true fear is not found in a gory crime scene but instead in the thought of who or what might have created

the scene and whether that unknown threat is still near. A supernatural beast leaping from the shadows is not as frightening as the ominous implications that the beast is present. The sense of dread Lovecraft describes is the terrible revelation that what we once thought to be understandable or safe is a threat beyond our comprehension.

Lovecraft distinguishes this fear of the unknown with the kinds of fear commonly found in other types of horror. He explains, “The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present” (1043). He uses the fear of the unknown, the type of fear he calls *dread*, as a measure of what defines weird fiction. According to Lovecraft, “The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers” (1044). These very characteristics of weird fiction and Lovecraft’s skill at including them in his stories are one of the primary causes of his remarkable posthumous fame. His innate understanding of this fear and the way he constructs atmospheres of dread in his stories readily lend themselves to psychological readings of his characters and how they experience this dread.

There are a vast number of literary studies focusing on the issue of fear in Lovecraft’s work: a search of “Lovecraft” and “horror” on the MLA International bibliography produces one hundred fifty-nine results. Several studies more relevant to my particular study include the articles “A Last Defense against the Dark: Folklore, Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H. P. Lovecraft” by Timothy H. Evans, “What Screams are Made of: Representing Cosmic Fear in H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘Pickman’s

Model” by Carl Sederholm, and “The Monster-Text: Analogy and Metaphor in Lovecraft” by Kálmán Matolcsy. Evans discusses the roles that folklore, tradition, and architecture play in creating the ominous atmosphere of cosmic fear in Lovecraft’s works, and Sederholm discusses the specifics of cosmic fear itself and how it appears as dread in Lovecraft’s story “Pickman’s Model.” Matolcsy addresses the importance of poetic language in Lovecraft’s fiction, arguing that the metaphors and analogies Lovecraft uses are central to the atmosphere he creates and the resultant verisimilitude of his stories. My own contribution to this body of literature will continue the conversation of fear and verisimilitude in Lovecraft’s fiction. To accomplish this goal, I will discuss how the atmosphere of dread Lovecraft creates in his fiction is more effective at eliciting horror in light of recent psychological studies of fear.

Most of Lovecraft’s work dates from 1918 to 1937, the same year of his death. With the benefit of psychological research developed more recently, we can analyze the sanity of Lovecraft’s characters with far greater precision than anyone could in his lifetime. Lovecraft’s intuitive understanding of fear and his rich behavioral and sensory descriptions paint a clear picture to view from the perspective of psychological research on fear. By analyzing how the characters react to the horrible situations they find themselves in, we can assess whether or not these characters are reacting to real threats in their environments. By extension, we can see how the accuracy of Lovecraft’s descriptions in light of recent research and his intuitive understanding of fear increase the sense of verisimilitude in his fiction, and thus increase the effectiveness of his horror.

## Chapter 1: “As a foulness shall ye know them”: The Science of “The Dunwich Horror”

Lovecraft displays a deep understanding of the primal fears hardwired in the human brain. He uses the mind’s natural reactions to threat in order to enhance the horror his stories inspire. One of the ways that Lovecraft accomplishes this enhanced horror is through the association of smell with danger. While the scientific research to support such an association did not exist at the time, Lovecraft’s works show that, consciously or not, he understood the relationship between smell and fear quite well. Among his stories, “The Dunwich Horror” shows a particular link between odor and otherworldly danger. The idea that a smell can elicit an instinctual awareness of danger is not a new one; dogs become alert at the scent of other animals, and we turn our noses away from rotting food, knowing that to eat would be to invite sickness. While this information is common knowledge, we now have empirical scientific evidence to support the idea that particular chemicals detected by smell provoke in humans instinctual responses to danger.

Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror” tells of the plight of the small town of Dunwich. The town’s residents distrust a man who lives on Dunwich’s outskirts, known as Old Wizard Whateley, for his interest in the occult and for strange smells that permeate his property. Before he dies, Old Whateley’s daughter gives birth to twins, one of which is a creature called Wilbur Whateley. The father, we learn only later, is a powerful entity from another dimension known as Yog-Sothoth. Wilbur appears to be human but hides monstrous features under his clothing, and his brother—we also learn later—is a huge monstrosity invisible to the mortal eye, a monstrosity that is kept secret. Old Whateley leaves Wilbur with the task of taking care of his twin and opening a portal

to Yog-Sothoth's world with information found in the *Necronomicon*.<sup>1</sup> Wilbur's copy of the book is crude and incomplete, lacking the passage he needs, so he seeks an older Latin translation at the fictional Miskatonic University's library in the neighboring city of Arkham. Dr. Henry Armitage, the university's librarian, realizes what Wilbur intends to do with the book and forbids him from studying the tome any further. Wilbur tries to steal the book, but dies in the attempt. Without Wilbur to care for it, the monster begins to terrorize the countryside by consuming families and livestock, leaving only destruction and an unearthly stench in its wake. These events cause the townsfolk to refer to Wilbur's brother as the Dunwich Horror. Armitage finds a spell in the *Necronomicon* that can destroy the monster and he departs to kill it. The people of Dunwich help Armitage track Wilbur's monstrous brother to Sentinel Hill, where Armitage recites his spell and ends the Horror.

In the text, Lovecraft makes frequent mention of the otherworldly smell that permeates the land in the presence of magic. We can find psychological context for the verisimilitude that this sensory detail creates in the article "The Smell of Death," by psychologists Arnaud Wisman and Ilan Shrira. The researchers study the olfactory (smelled) effects on humans of a chemical called putrescine,<sup>2</sup> "a volatile diamine that results from the breakdown of fatty acids in the putrefying tissue of dead bodies" (1). Wisman and Shrira further explain that "alarm and avoidance behaviors . . . in response

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<sup>1</sup> The *Necronomicon* is a fictional tome of forbidden occult lore created by H. P. Lovecraft. This book appears in several of his stories as a source of information on the otherworldly forces in his settings. According to Lovecraft's "The History of the *Necronomicon*", the tome was written circa seven hundred thirty-eight A. D. (*Classic Tales* 567).

<sup>2</sup> According to the American Chemical Society, putrescine and cadaverine, a similar chemical, "are foul smelling compounds produced . . . in decaying animals." The compounds were both isolated in 1885 by L. Brieger and O. Bocklisch.

to [putrescine] scents are widespread in the animal kingdom,” and that these “necrophobic [death fearing] behaviors,” as they call them, “may have innate underpinnings through the activation of . . . a group of specialized scent receptors in the olfactory epithelium” (2). Wisman and Shrira hypothesize that if the smell of decaying flesh can trigger an instinctual fear response in the brain through the chemical putrescine, then it is not only possible but also likely that chemicals carried in other smells can trigger “similar threat response[s] as putrescine” (8). If we apply Wisman and Shrira’s research to understanding the aversion to mystic smells that Lovecraft describes in his characters, then we can better understand how Lovecraft addresses primal human fear behavior and how this behavior creates verisimilitude in the story.

Furthermore, from Wisman and Shrira’s research we know that a conscious association between smell and danger need not be present to provoke a fear response. In “The Smell of Death” the researchers state, “scents can alter our perception, cognition, behavior, and physiology (e.g., heart rate, skin conductance) even when there is no conscious scent detection” based on a series of experiments involving participants’ unconscious exposure to putrescine (2). Additionally, their research “showed that responses to putrescine were automatic” and “suggested that conscious evaluations are not at the heart of the observed responses to putrescine” (8). This research allows us to view the characters’ reactions to the strange smell as automatic, biologically determined responses. If we suppose that the human sensorium processes Lovecraft’s mystical scent similarly to the way it processes putrescine and other smells, then the character’s aversion makes scientific sense. Even if Lovecraft does not explicitly state that the characters are

reacting to the otherworldly odor, their fearful behavior can still be attributed to the stench.

Lovecraft makes extensive references to magic and the otherworldly in “The Dunwich Horror,” and with each reference he also describes a foul, otherworldly stench. He does not, however, provide any similar smells with which to compare the odor. This contextual absence for the smell places it within the realm of the indescribable, thus contributing to the atmosphere of dread and the unknown. When describing Old Wizard Whateley’s home, a place where many magic rituals have been performed, Lovecraft says that a visitor “was quite discomposed by the singular odour he encountered—such a stench, he averred, as he had never before smelt in all his life . . . and which could not come from anything sane or of this earth” (640). By excluding any other scents as reference points for the readers to imagine this new smell, Lovecraft keeps the readers from associating the odor with anything specific from our own lives. The closest that the readers are able to come to relating the smell to known scents is the knowledge that the smell is negative, thanks to the aversion the characters display and Lovecraft’s use of terms with negative connotations like “stench.” This dissociation from the readers’ world allows Lovecraft to present a novel scent that is only recognizable as an accompaniment to the terrible forces called on by magic.

The link between these extra-dimensional forces and smell is most apparent when one views Lovecraft’s descriptions of the *Necronomicon*. As Wilbur first studies the Latin copy of the *Necronomicon* at the Miskatonic University in Arkham, the librarian Armitage reads over Wilbur’s shoulder the words, “by their smell can men sometimes know Them near . . . As a foulness shall ye know Them” (645). This passage from the

infamous tome shows that occultists of Lovecraft's fictional world have known, at least since the first writing of the *Necronomicon*, that forces from beyond mortal reality carry a particular smell. By establishing this association as a known phenomenon, Lovecraft shows that his characters have had the chance to further associate the smell of the otherworldly with danger. With this information, a character's fearful reactions to the smell make sense. Not every human in Lovecraft's world has access to this knowledge, yet they still all react to the smell of the otherworldly with avoidance behaviors.

One such instance of avoidance behavior is when Armitage puts the *Necronomicon* away after Wilbur's visit. Lovecraft says that Armitage feels a "wave of fright" after glancing at the page Wilbur is reading, even though the librarian has no prior knowledge of the occult (645), and that Armitage "locked away the *Necronomicon* with a shudder of disgust, but the room still reeked with an unholy and unidentifiable stench" (646). This second quote is the first description Lovecraft provides concerning any scent in the room in which Wilbur and Armitage stand over the book, but that the room "still reeked" implies that the smell is present before Armitage consciously detects it. Lovecraft does, however, make Armitage's fearful behavior clear before the smell is mentioned. Even if Armitage is not aware of the scent until he is locking the book away, we can supply an unconscious scent detection of the *Necronomicon*'s smell, similar to the unconscious detection of putrescine by the participants in Wisman and Shrira's experiments, as a contributing factor to the librarian's fear. Wisman and Shrira's research suggests that the characters' fear and avoidance behaviors do not need to be reactions to conscious sensory detections, such as Armitage's reaction to the *Necronomicon*'s smell.

The character's awareness of the scent, however, allows him to further associate the smell with danger.

When Armitage and his colleagues later find Wilbur dying in the library, they also find that "the building was full of a frightful stench which Dr. Armitage knew too well" (648). Lovecraft adds the word "frightful" to describe the smell now that Armitage has previously encountered it. This addition supports the idea that subsequent exposure to the scent also serves to heighten the fear experienced by both the characters and the readers.

Furthermore, this same scene shows an increased sensitivity to the smell when the narrator says, "for a second nobody dared to turn on the light, then Armitage summoned up his courage and snapped the switch" (648). This now conscious association between the smell and danger contributes to a fear conditioning that not only provokes threat avoidance behaviors in Lovecraft's characters, but also provides a fear conditioning which allows the characters to anticipate possible threats. That Armitage is both the only person present who has encountered this odor before and the first to muster the nerve to turn on the lights shows that Armitage's repeated exposure has increased his sensitivity to the smell, thus pushing him into action where his colleagues remain passive. While the other characters are afraid to turn on the lights, they do not display any evidence of entering a fight or flight response to address the situation.

Wisman and Shrirra's research on putrescine can help us understand from a scientific perspective how Lovecraft's use of smell in "The Dunwich Horror" draws on primal human fear responses. The link between Lovecraft's mystic scent and the way the human brain processes certain smells as primal signs of danger grants us an insight into Lovecraft's work that was previously unavailable. We can thus better understand how the

link between smell and fear strengthens the bond between Lovecraft's fiction and reality and deepens the story's sense of verisimilitude. Smell, however, is not the only attribute of Lovecraft's fiction that benefits from analysis through modern psychological research.

## Chapter 2: “The Innsmouth Look”: The Science of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”

Like his emphasis on smell in “The Dunwich Horror” that I have addressed above, Lovecraft also stimulates his readers’ fear through his description of eyes. In his novella “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” he focuses on eyes in particular when describing the strange appearance of the townspeople. Just as recent psychological research explains physiological reactions to the mystic odor of the *Necronomicon* in “The Dunwich Horror,” this research also shows us how the eyes of Innsmouth’s native population are linked to the way the human brain processes external stimuli in regards to threat identification and avoidance behaviors.

There are numerous psychological studies regarding both the behavioral and neuroanatomical responses of humans who are presented with images of eyes. Of particular note among these images are those of fearful and angry eyes. Various studies show that when we see eyes that express fear or anger, our vision is drawn towards these eyes and our minds automatically analyze the situation and search for threats. Joshua M. Carlson has headed several recent studies regarding people’s reactions to fearful expressions in human eyes. He has collaborated with Karen S. Reinke for the article “Attending to the Fear in Your Eyes,” Lilianne R. Mujica-Parodi for the article “Conscious and Nonconscious Fearful Faces,” and both Robert D. Torrence and Michelle R. Vander Hyde for the article “Beware the Eyes Behind the Mask.”

Each of these articles discusses various factors regarding our perception of and reaction to fearful eyes by using some variation of a dot-probe experiment.<sup>3</sup> By

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<sup>3</sup> A Dot-Probe Experiment is “a widely used method of assessing attentional bias to facial expressions and other types of salient environmental stimuli” (Carlson and Mujica-Parodi 70). This experiment involves participants watching a screen and

measuring how quickly the participants locate the dot in relation to which set of eyes the dot appears beside, the researchers are able to determine what kinds of eyes are more effective at attracting attention. By extension, this same process helps to identify which set of eyes alert the participant to a threat in their immediate environment—if there is a pair of eyes expressing fear then there is likely something within sight that is threatening. While each article discusses a different variable regarding human perception of fearful eyes, all three show that the participants detected the fearful eyes faster and observed them longer than the participants did neutral eyes.

In a similar experiment, Elaine Fox and Ljubica Damjanovic studied angry faces. Their article “The Eyes Are Sufficient to Produce a Threat Superiority Effect” shows how participants reacted to various images showing both eyes and mouths expressing anger. The results of the study show that the participants noticed the angry facial expressions faster than neutral facial expressions and were therefore more likely to detect threatening stimuli faster than neutral stimuli. This is a phenomenon known as the “threat superiority effect” (534), the idea that human instincts prioritize the perception of threats over other stimuli to aid in survival. While Fox and Damjanovic clarify that “other parts of the face may be important” to producing this effect, their results “show that the eye region can convey threat to the same extent as the entire face” (538). This emphasis on the eye region in the researchers’ results supports the idea that eyes are central to how the human brain assesses potential threats. Fox and Damjanovic further mention that “converging evidence comes from work with primates showing that the eyes are attended

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measures how quickly they shift their gaze from the center of the screen to a *dot-probe* stimulus, in this case images of fearful and angry eyes. The dot-probe appears to the right or left (sometimes the top or bottom) of the screen.

to more frequently and for longer periods than any other region of the face” (538), implying that spending time analyzing the eye region for threats through fear or anger is a primal evolutionary instinct. Fearful expressions may alert the viewer that there is a potential threat in their environment, but angry expressions present a threat themselves, and are therefore more likely to activate threat avoidance behavior.

The insight that this research provides on the relationships between fear, eyes, and threat assessment offers a useful scientific context for studying Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth.” This novella follows the narrator, a young man on a coming-of-age tour to learn about his heredity. On his way to Arkham, where he can access his genealogical records, he is forced to take a detour through the port city of Innsmouth. Everyone not native to this place views the people of Innsmouth with superstitious disgust, and many advise the narrator not to go there. While in the town, the narrator notes the strange appearance of its residents and gains insight into Innsmouth’s past from an old sailor named Zadok Allen. The sailor tells the narrator that several generations ago the people of Innsmouth made a deal with creatures from the sea called Deep Ones. After a time these creatures demanded that the townspeople interbreed with them, and so human-Deep One hybrids began to make up the majority of Innsmouth’s population, appearing human while young but slowly becoming Deep Ones themselves. After telling this story and urging the narrator to flee now that he knows the town’s secret, the sailor disappears. The townspeople sabotage the night bus that would get the narrator out of the city before the next morning and that night the town mobilizes to capture the narrator, who narrowly escapes and flees Innsmouth. After finally reaching Arkham and accessing his genealogy, he discovers with horror that by a cruel twist of fate he is descended from

one of the first people to interbreed with the Deep Ones in Innsmouth. He himself begins a slow transformation over the course of two years after the events of the narrative and ends the story determined to join the Deep Ones in the sea.

Lovecraft is quick to emphasize the strange appearance of Innsmouth's residents, which the narrator dubs the "Innsmouth look" (820) early on in the story. The first time the narrator sees Joe Sargent, a native of Innsmouth and the driver of the bus that runs through the town, the narrator notes that the driver "had a narrow head, bulging, watery blue eyes that seemed never to wink, a flat nose, a receding forehead and chin, and singularly undeveloped ears" (815). This description of Sargent's fish-like facial features foreshadows the narrator's shocking discovery about the Deep Ones, but among all of Sargent's strange features the narrator gives particular attention to the driver's eyes. In this quote he notes the morphological attributes of Sargent's head and chin, but he also adds color and behavioral attributes to his description of the eyes. These extra details show us that the narrator himself spent more time scrutinizing Sargent's eyes than the rest of the driver's face. This added attention highlights the importance of eyes in the narrator's process of threat detection.

The narrator is also not the only character to have seen the driver and make particular note of his discomfiting eyes. The man who told the narrator about the bus describes Sargent's features as typical of the people of Innsmouth, mentioning that there is "a strange kind of streak in the Innsmouth folks . . . some of 'em have queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut" (810-811) and that the narrator can "notice a little in Sargent" (810). Like the narrator's own observations, this description of the Innsmouth look marks large, staring eyes as a key characteristic for

those who have seen it. That people other than the narrator recognize this feature as a central part of the Innsmouth look also shows how the descriptions play on our instinctual focus on eyes. The people of the region share a communal distrust of Innsmouth and its residents, and that the Innsmouth look is one reason for their distrust shows a communal sense of threat detection.

The characters' use of eyes as a means of threat detection falls in line with our modern research on the subject. In the article "Beware the Eyes Behind the Mask," Carlson and his colleagues note "enlarged eye-whites and dilated pupils are a feature of primary importance for facilitating behavioral responses in observers of fearful facial expressions" (Carlson et al. 502). While the narrator does not describe Sargent as afraid, the large, unblinking eyes suggest more exposed eye-white than the average eye, and the connotation between the Innsmouth look and sea-life suggest the large, black pupils of a fish. The research isolates these two features as key physical triggers that draw the observer's attention. The eyes of the Innsmouth look signify the presence of a threat to any observer on an instinctual level.

Furthermore, the descriptions of the Innsmouth look also share some of the defining features of angry eyes. In "Attending to the Fear in Your Eyes" Carlson and Reinke explain that, "similar to fearful faces, angry expressions signal potential threat," but also note that angry eyes differ in shape and describe them as "focused staring eyes" (Carlson and Reinke 1399). When the narrator describes townspeople with the Innsmouth look, he notes how "their appearance—especially those staring, unwinking eyes which one never saw shut—was certainly shocking" (Lovecraft 821). The people of Innsmouth blink less and less as they age and undergo their metamorphosis into Deep Ones, and so

almost always evoke the sensation of staring. This added detail causes the Innsmouth look to include defining features of both fearful and angry eyes, blending the two expressions into one gaze. Because of this synthesis of features, the Innsmouth look includes the primary instinctual threat triggers from both fearful and angry eyes. The inclusion of instinctual threat signals from both expressions helps us understand how the Innsmouth look provokes such natural disdain.

Not only do Lovecraft's normal humans tend to avoid Innsmouth, but animals do as well. The same man who first mentions the bus to the narrator also says "Animals hate 'em—they used to have lots of horse trouble before autos came in" (811), and the narrator observes that "in all these streets no living thing was visible, and I wondered at the complete absence of cats and dogs from Innsmouth" (825). While none of the studies cited above mention any animals other than primates, the animals' instinctual avoidance of Innsmouth correlates with the way the people of the surrounding region avoid the town. This sort of instinctual behavior suggests that Innsmouth and its people pose a threat to animals and people alike. The people in neighboring towns have developed superstitions about the port city for good reason—they also avoid Innsmouth because of an instinctual awareness of danger. These people tell stories about cults and communion with devils in Innsmouth, but modern research suggests that the eyes of Innsmouth's population alone are enough to cause an instinctual aversion.

In Lovecraft's novella, those who have looked a native of Innsmouth in the eyes do not need any more reason to dislike the place. The study "Beware the Eyes Behind the Mask" shows that "the attention grabbing aspect of fearful eyes appears to occur automatically and without conscious awareness" (Carlson et al. 502). Because the

physiology of the eyes among those with the Innsmouth look contains the same attention grabbing features of fearful eyes (i.e. dilated pupils and large eye whites), people are automatically inclined to be wary even if they do not know about the threat of the Deep Ones. Innsmouth eyes signal to observers that there is an immediate threat, and the observers take the appropriate threat avoidance behaviors. Unlike fearful eyes or angry eyes, however, the Innsmouth look does not provide the observers with the conventional context of emotion. If the observers were to see an angry person looking at them then they could infer that this person might do harm to them. If the observers were to see a scared person looking away from them then they could infer that there is a threat where that person is looking. Those who see the Innsmouth look do not have the context of emotion to assist with further threat identification, so the observers avoid Innsmouth itself instead of any obvious threat.

The collected body of scientific research I have discussed so far explains why the people of the neighboring cities experience ambiguous threat avoidance behaviors. According to Carlson and Mujica-Parodi, “fearful facial expressions communicate the existence of potential threat within the environment to other members of the species; yet, information about the location of this potential threat is not communicated by fearful expression alone” (73). The attention that the fearful eye draws is usually accompanied by other factors such as the direction of the gaze, but seeing the Innsmouth eye in and of itself does not provide any additional information to help locate a potential threat. Because the interbreeding with the Deep Ones augments human features with the ocean creatures’ inhuman features to create the Innsmouth look, residents of the town have

threat signifying features without the conventionally associated gaze direction. Thus, the human threat detection response that has evolved does not function as it should.

While all of the aforementioned studies have shed light on how humans react to fearful and angry eyes, and by extension to the threat signals carried by the Innsmouth look, each study shares one common aspect—the eyes and faces presented to the participants were all front-facing and staring at the participants directly. The article “Effects of Gaze on Amygdala Sensitivity to Anger and Fear Faces” by Reginald B. Adams Jr., Heather L. Gordon, Abigail A. Baird, Nalini Ambady, and Robert E. Kleck addresses how humans respond to the threat signals in fearful eyes and angry eyes with the context of gaze direction. These researchers refer to the specific collection of features commonly found in angry faces and fearful faces respectively as *anger faces* and *fear faces*. This context makes a difference in how quickly we notice fearful eyes and angry eyes and how much time we spend looking at them.

Adams and his colleagues determined their results by mapping the activity of the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes fear. The researchers’ work shows that “anger faces coupled with direct gaze and fear faces coupled with averted gaze are recognized more quickly and accurately than either anger faces coupled with averted gaze or fear faces coupled with direct gaze” (1536), and thus require less amygdala activity. If someone views another with anger then that person likely intends the other person harm, and if someone is looking away from another in fear then there is likely some other outside threat in that direction. The ambiguous perception of threat presented by the research’s alternative combinations, however, is not as quickly processed and elicits more activity in the amygdala, and thus results in a heightened state of fear.

Although the majority of eyes that include threat signals seen by the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” are the ambiguously menacing eyes of the Deep Ones’ descendants, Lovecraft does provide us with one example of an averted fear gaze with the sailor Old Zadok. At the end of his explanations of Innsmouth’s dark history and the current citizens’ cult activity with the Deep Ones, Zadok screams and the narrator says, “his eyes, looking past me toward the malodorous sea, were positively starting from his head; while his face was a mask of fear worthy of Greek tragedy . . . I turned my head to look at whatever he had glimpsed. There was nothing that I could see” (836). Just as one would expect from the research, the narrator notices Zadok’s fearful eyes and follows the sailor’s gaze to the ocean tide. The narrator reacts this way automatically to gather more information about the threat, even though he finds none—Zadok, however, sees Deep Ones in the ocean waves behind the narrator and alerts him to a very real danger.

Zadok’s warning scares the narrator and evokes fear, but this fear, like Zadok’s averted gaze, is more conventional than that which we encounter toward the end of the novella. Lovecraft presents us with a less conventional instance of fearful eyes in a direct gaze as the narrator begins the slow process of becoming a Deep One himself two years after his night at Innsmouth. The narrator says, “I found myself at times almost unable to shut my eyes. It was then that I began to study the mirror with mounting alarm . . . the mirror definitely told me I had acquired *the Innsmouth look*” (857-858). Although it is his own fearful eyes he sees, the research suggests that his dread is more profound than was his scare with Zadok. As the work of Adams and his colleagues suggests, if the narrator sees someone staring at him in fear then he would need to process the situation longer and more intently than if the person were to look past him like Zadok. In front of the

mirror the narrator cannot process his fear as quickly as he could otherwise because no other threat to turn to is there.

### Chapter 3: “*Cthulhu fhtagn*”: Questioning Sanity in “The Call of Cthulhu”

The believability of Lovecraft’s stories is integral to the creation of an atmosphere of dread within each. The reliability of the rational world in which the story is set must remain firm to properly ground the supernatural elements that Lovecraft’s characters encounter. Having a believably sane character as a protagonist lends to the verisimilitude of the story in question, thus heightening the sense of dread when otherworldly threats reveal themselves. When encounters with such threats in Lovecraft’s fiction change the protagonist’s perception of the world, that protagonist often loses or is perceived to have lost his sanity. Of these two outcomes, the latter is more frightening. When other characters challenge the protagonist’s sanity, they simultaneously challenge the sanity of any readers who believe the protagonist’s story. The stronger the bond between the fiction and reality, the more immediate and threatening this questioning of sanity becomes.

Many of Lovecraft’s characters either go insane or are perceived to go insane by fellow characters or the readers in one way or another, such as the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and Francis Wayland Thurston, the narrator of “The Call of Cthulhu.” Through the process of behavioral analysis of unconscious instinctual self-preservation behaviors in Lovecraft’s descriptions, we can make a case to support the sanity or insanity of a given character. By gauging whether or not the character displays healthy threat avoidance behaviors, we can see whether the character has a healthily functioning mind in regards to his perception of the environment. Because the research I have chosen relies on the body’s physical reaction to physical environmental stimuli, it can also help use a character’s behavior to determine whether or not there is truly a

physical threat as opposed to some kind of hallucination. This determination is particularly important in “The Call of Cthulhu” in regards to how we view the sanity of the character Thurston.

“The Call of Cthulhu” is a collection of notes concerning the existence of the “Cthulhu Cult” and the strange happenings associated with it. It is putatively written by one Francis Wayland Thurston in three parts. Thurston’s uncle Angell, an expert in ancient languages, had been collecting information about the Cthulhu cult and began to grow suspicious that the cult wanted him dead because he knew too much. Angell then died when he fell down a flight of stairs after being attacked by a drunken sailor. After Angell’s mysterious death, Thurston finds his deceased uncle’s notes on the Cthulhu cult, and Thurston begins to investigate the matter himself.

Each section of the notes addresses a different narrative connected to the cult. The first section concerns a young sculptor named Wilcox who visits Professor Angell. Wilcox is tormented by dreams of a strange alien city and has carved a clay tablet inscribed with the writings and images he sees while asleep. The second narrative connects Wilcox’s inscriptions with a bizarre idol of Cthulhu with the same script. Angell’s notes tell of his examination of the idol for Inspector Legrasse of New Orleans and of the officer’s subsequent tale. Legrasse recovered the idol in a police raid into the bayou, where they detained a number of violent cultists, and police interrogations revealed some details about the cult’s practices. After following up on his uncle’s research, Thurston discovers the story of Gustaf Johansen, a Norwegian sailor who was assailed by pirate cultists of Cthulhu before he and his surviving crewmates made landfall on a strange island and unwittingly set an avatar of Cthulhu free. When Thurston travels

to speak with Johansen, he learns that he has already died under mysterious circumstances similar to those that killed his own uncle. By the end of the narrative, Thurston believes all of the details he has uncovered about the cult, including their killing of anyone who learns too much about their ways, and he fears that he will be the next to die.

Both Thurston and his uncle become increasingly paranoid the more they encounter information pertaining to otherworldly threats through the cult. At first Thurston does not believe his uncle's notes and thinks that the Professor's sanity is compromised, but by the end of the story Thurston risks appearing insane himself. The potential mental instability of Thurston and of the narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" makes them unreliable as narrators and so invites us to view their stories with the same critical eye with which the other characters must view them. The process of assessing a character's sanity by analyzing their instinctual self-preservation behavior, however, is only possible with the presence of Lovecraft's nuanced descriptions of the characters' behavior. In "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," the narrator was himself part of the bizarre circumstances of his story. Because of this involvement, Lovecraft provides us with the narrator's responses to the environmental threats and the process of behavioral analysis is possible. Thurston, however, collects details from three separate stories and pieces together a conspiracy about cult activity. Because he is removed from the strange elements of these stories, we have only his word to convince us of their veracity and his sanity. Without the detailed behavioral description we have access to in "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," Thurston cannot benefit from our modern understanding of psychology to support his story. Deprived of this boon, a critical eye

finds that Thurston falls into paranoia and delusion by the end of his narrative. As a result, the story's verisimilitude suffers from an unstable foundation of believability and the temptation to suspend enough disbelief to accept Thurston's claims as true is lessened.

Because of the nature of his story, Thurston himself has no immediate contact with the far-reaching cultic influence and supernatural forces he believes to be at work. This separation also denies us any sort of instinctual threat avoidance behavior to analyze. In order to ascertain whether these events are true or if Thurston has begun to suffer from general paranoia and a grandiose delusional disorder, we must analyze his own reflections on the cult research. Thurston provides evidence to support his claims, but if this evidence is to be believed one must still consider the strength of the evidence itself. The existence of a cult worshipping an entity called Cthulhu is not called into question, but the existence of Cthulhu itself and Thurston's belief in its terrible intelligence challenges the stability of his mental health.

Thurston's research includes the testimony of one of the surviving cultists from Legrasse's raid by the name of Castro. This cultist explains that they worship "The Great Old Ones," a group of entities including Cthulhu, and that the cult "had always existed and always would exist, hidden in distant wastes and dark places all over the world" (366). The cultists' chant in the strange language, which is also inscribed on the idol of Cthulhu retrieved in Louisiana, means "In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming" (366). Furthermore, Castro says, "the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive . . . molding their dreams" (367). With this information in mind, a connection with Wilcox's

bas-relief carving is clear. The bas-relief contains some of the words of the chant in its original language, and Wilcox allegedly heard the words in his dreams of an ancient city.

In regards to Wilcox's dream and the sculpted tablet the artist produced, Thurston himself initially remains skeptical. In order to explain the shared language from Wilcox's dreams and the chants from the Cthulhu cult gathering in Louisiana, Thurston says, "Wilcox, I was sure, had heard of the cult in some casual way, and has soon forgotten it . . . by virtue it had found subconscious expression in dreams, in the bas-relief, and in the terrible statue I now beheld" (370). This explanation would also account for the words "*Cthulhu fhtagn*" (358) from the cultists' chant that Wilcox hears in his dreams and that he carves in his sculpture. Thurston's supposition is logical, for if the cult is as ancient and widespread as Thurston believes then it is possible that a curious artist like Wilcox might have come across the writing and images before. If Wilcox had previously heard any details about the chant, the ancient city of R'lyeh, or the supposed communication of the Old Ones through dreams, then the integrity of any evidence from his account regarding the existence of Cthulhu is compromised.

Without the corroboration of Wilcox's dreams, Thurston's belief that Cthulhu and the Old Ones exist is reliant on the words of the cultist Castro and the narrative of Gustaf Johansen, a sailor aboard the ship *Emma*. Thurston's belief in Cthulhu is helped by Johansen's account of finding a strange city and of afterwards being attacked by pirate cultists and unleashing a monster that fits the description of Cthulhu, but at this point in his research Thurston is already convinced. We must therefore consider the distinct possibility of confirmation bias, that Thurston is reading Johansen's account looking for supporting evidence and ignoring other possible explanations.

When writing of Johansen's account, Thurston immediately supposes that the city the sailors have found themselves in is "the nightmare corpse-city of R'lyeh, that was built in measureless aeons behind history by the vast, loathsome shapes that seeped down from the dark stars . . . All this Johansen did not suspect, but God knows he soon saw enough!" (375). Thurston speaks earnestly here, already making assumptions about Johansen's narrative based on what he has read about the cultist Castro's testimony. His words begin to mix with Johansen's account to add more evidence to support the Old One's existence, but the only other evidence Thurston has left to rely on is the word of a cultist arrested for ritual murders in a Louisiana bayou. The word of a deranged zealot is far from a credible source of information. While Thurston entertains the idea that Wilcox and his situation may have been influenced by previous knowledge of the cult, he fails to consider the same possibility with Johansen.

The very detail that brings Thurston's attention to Johansen's story also supplies the strongest case against the reliability of Johansen's initial account. The newspaper clipping addressing the sailor's rescue contains a picture "of a hideous stone image almost identical with that which Legrasse had found in the swamp" (371). Furthermore, Johansen's initial account says that when his rescuers save him from being lost at sea as the sole survivor of the whole incident, his rescuers find him "clutching a horrible stone idol of unknown origin" that Johansen "says he found in the cabin of the [cultists pirates'] yacht, in a small carved shrine of common pattern" (372). Because Johansen has access to this idol and the cult's shrine after fending off the pirates, commandeering their ship, and being lost at sea for over a week, his own account of events is possibly compromised by his exposure to information regarding the Cthulhu cult. Johansen's own

mental state and the veracity of his account may also have been compromised by his traumatic time adrift at sea, having as companions only his one surviving crewmate, who has already fallen into insanity and will eventually die, and the disturbing idol of Cthulhu. Many of the cultists are sailors, as Thurston shows by providing the testimony of the sailor Castro and noting Legrasse's capture of various seamen during his raid, and any stories of the cult that Johansen might have found on the ship or heard whispered in seaports could have altered his memory of his time lost at sea.

The extenuating circumstances of these three events undermine the credibility of much of Thurston's evidence. The only empirical evidence that we can reliably observe is that the cult exists, that Johansen was the only survivor of an attack by pirates associated with the same cult, and that Johansen and his ship, the *Emma*, likely landed on some unknown island. Beyond this, the most compelling support that Thurston provides for Cthulhu's existence is that the dates of Johansen's experience and the sculptor Wilcox's dreams coincide. Thurston says that "from February 28th to April 2nd a large portion of [artists associated with Wilcox] dreamed very bizarre things" (360), on "March 23rd the crew of the *Emma* landed on an unknown island . . . and on that date the dreams of sensitive men assumed a heightened vividness" (373), and that when Johansen escaped on "April 2nd . . . all dreams of the dank city ceased" (373). Aside from the corresponding dates between the two incidents, Thurston has little substantial evidence in favor of his belief that he has discovered the existence of an ancient evil known to a select few.

If we had more reliable behavioral evidence to analyze, as we do in the stories referenced in previous chapters, then we might be more willing to believe Thurston's

claims. Without such evidence, however, we see a man whose mental health is compromised. Furthermore, Thurston's uncle was also obsessed with cult activity, and this obsession shows a potential family history of mental illness. By referencing "Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders" (45) in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* ("DSM-5"), a text used by psychiatrists today for the use of "coding, classification, and diagnosis of mental disorders" (vii), we see that Thurston displays symptoms conforming to the psychiatric definition of a "Delusional Disorder" (45) of the "Grandiose Type" (46). He suffers from "the presence of one (or more) delusions with a duration of 1 month or longer" (45) and "the central theme of the delusion is the conviction of having some great (but unrecognized) talent or insight or having made some important discovery" (46). Furthermore, his delusions are made up of "bizarre content . . . clearly implausible, not understandable, and not derived from ordinary life experiences" (46). Even by today's standards Thurston would almost certainly be found mentally ill without any further evidence. Thurston's impaired believability lessens the story's effectiveness and therefore its verisimilitude. As a result, the dread of a believably sane character being perceived as insane is absent, as well as the associated dread of potential insanity to the reader who believes this character's claims. The narrator of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, however, does not suffer from the same lack of credible evidence. This descendant of the Deep Ones has the benefit of more detailed behavioral descriptions of his own experiences, and so we have the opportunity to use modern research on fear to better understand his questionable sanity. If we establish that the narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is reacting to real physical stimuli and thus has a healthy mind, then the believability of his

claims and the verisimilitude of the story reinforce the implicit dread of the sanity of a sane character being challenged.

Chapter 4: “Nor do I know how much is hideous truth and how much madness”:

The Question of Sanity in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”

Lovecraft has many protagonists that end their journeys in madness, whether their insanity is genuine or merely perceived by their peers. Much as does Thurston in “The Call of Cthulhu,” the narrator of Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” begins his tale a skeptic and ends questioning his wits. We can benefit from Lovecraft’s rich imagery and behavioral descriptions by applying recent psychological fear research to our analysis in order to assess the validity of this potentially unreliable narrator’s claims. While we may not be able to prove his sanity outright, we can prove the presence of physical threats in the story and analyze how the narrator reacts to these environmental stimuli. By doing so, we can see how Lovecraft’s intuitive understanding of fear and his behavioral descriptions add to the readers’ sense of verisimilitude through the unconscious association between healthy threat avoidance behaviors and sanity. In “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” the narrator’s reactions to environmental threats and the Innsmouth look provide us with evidence that he is sane.

The Innsmouth look provokes natural, automatic, and unconscious threat detection behavior, suggesting that the narrator’s experiences are healthy reactions to threats in his environment and not symptoms of delusion. While the psychological studies previously discussed in chapter three do not allow us to conclusively determine the precise nature of these threats or whether or not the narrator suffers from bizarre delusions of grandeur, they do allow us to prove that the narrator is nonetheless reacting to physical threats and not some kind of hallucination, even if the situation is fantastical. The narrator would consciously perceive an imagined threat born of delusion: in order to

perceive a delusional threat that is not actually present, the narrator would have to consciously believe that such a threat exists. Because the narrator's threat detection and avoidance behaviors are automatic and unconscious reactions to threats, however, we know that these threats are real environmental dangers despite the narrator's questionable sanity. The presence of these physical stimuli reinforces the connections the readers have to the reality of the story.

The narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is an unreliable narrator, compromised by what is either degrading sanity or otherworldly influences. By the end of his narrative we learn that he believes he is undergoing a metamorphosis to become one among an ancient and immortal race of sea people called the Deep Ones, and he desires to join them and live the rest of his days in their sunken cities deep below the ocean's surface. Like Thurston, the narrator in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" makes wild claims about a cult in Innsmouth and the existence of malicious inhuman entities. When we apply a critical eye to the narrator's account, we initially see evidence that he has bizarre delusions of grandeur.

The narrator's claims in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth, like Thurston's in "The Call of Cthulhu" (see pages 31 and 32), point to beliefs that the DSM-5 categorizes as symptoms of a "Delusional Disorder" (45) of the "Grandiose Type . . . with bizarre content" (46), with the narrator believing in this case that he is one of a scarce few of the population to possess a twisted immortality through a blood relation to monsters from the seas. These beliefs are as delusional, if not more so, as Thurston's belief in "The Call of Cthulhu" that a terrible alien creature predating humanity has awoken from its slumber in a sunken city and that he is one of the few who knows the secret of an ancient cult that

wants him dead. Both narrators present a story in which they are each one among a few privileged people who have made a significant discovery about the world they live in and are thus more important than most others. If we analyze the narrator's sanity in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" in the same way we have analyzed Thurston's sanity by temporarily setting aside the presence of unconscious threat avoidance behaviors and the strange appearance of Innsmouth's residents, we find that the evidence the narrator presents is unreliable and insufficient to banish any doubts that he has altered or fabricated his story.

The narrator's primary source of information on the town's secret history is from the sailor Old Zadok, which proves to be a poor source. According to the description of a young man from Arkham who commutes to his job in Innsmouth, the most reliable source of information on the port city, Zadok is "ninety-six years old and somewhat touched in the head, besides being the town drunkard. He [is] a strange, furtive creature who constantly look[s] over his shoulder as if afraid of something, and when sober [can] not be persuaded to talk at all with strangers" (822). Between Zadok's questionable mental state, paranoid behavior, and refusal to speak to the narrator until he has drunk nearly a quart of whiskey, the sailor's account of Innsmouth's shadowed history is questionable at best. The narrator gathers from Zadok all of the details concerning the Deep Ones and their interbreeding with the people of Innsmouth, and the only evidence that can corroborate the strangeness of the seaport other than the narrator's own compromised account is idle gossip from neighboring cities.

We know that the narrator writes his story "more than two years" (857) after he already believes in the stories about Innsmouth, and the degrading effects of time on

memory and the events preceding the night might reasonably have affected his narrative. His recollection of the night the cult hunts him in Innsmouth follows a stressful day when he learns about the superstitions people have about the seaport. At this time, he also struggles to complete his journey to Arkham with a detour, he finds a near deserted city filled with people who unnerve him, and he listens to the tale of a superstitious old sailor who might be insane himself. It is possible that this series of stressful events coupled with the experience of fleeing from a mob of what the narrator perceives as cultists could excite his imagination and lead to delusional beliefs. Furthermore, the narrator seems to have a history of mental illness in his family and is thus possibly at risk of illness himself.

The narrator describes the mental illness that has plagued the Innsmouth-descended side of his family after learning about his ancestry and the Innsmouth Heritage passed down through his Arkham-born grandmother and great-grandmother, whose maiden name is Marsh just like the prominent Innsmouth families. His younger cousin Lawrence's "condition took him to the permanent seclusion of a sanitarium at Canton. I had not seen him in four years, but my uncle once implied that his state, both mental and physical, was very bad" (855-856), and his uncle Douglas "had shot himself after a trip to New England" (855). Furthermore, the narrator himself struggles with suicidal thoughts after he begins to acquire the Innsmouth look, saying that he "bought an automatic and almost took the step" (858). His family's history of mental illness and his own suicidal thoughts strengthen the likelihood that the narrator suffers from mental illness himself. Lovecraft does not clarify the cause of Douglas's suicide or specify what symptoms forced Lawrence into a sanitarium, but he does provide a common link between the two family members other than their familial relation and their compromised mental stability.

Both Douglas and Lawrence, like the narrator and his grandmother, shared the unnerving features that make up the Innsmouth look. The narrator recalls, “this uncle had resembled her, and I had never liked him either. Something about the staring, unwinking expression of both of them had given me a vague, unaccountable uneasiness. My mother and uncle Walter had not looked like that” (855), and says that Lawrence “had been an almost perfect duplicate of his grandmother” (855). Lovecraft makes no mention of mental instability when describing the narrator’s mother or uncle Walter. That the narrator’s uncle Douglas and his cousin Lawrence share physical characteristics similar to the Innsmouth look and both suffer from some kind of mental illness shows a correlation between poor mental health and the Innsmouth look. Because the narrator acquires the Innsmouth look himself, the possibility of his mental illness becomes more likely in light of this correlation. Much like Thurston in “The Call of Cthulhu,” there is enough reason considering the narrator’s mental health to doubt his reliability as a source of information. The narrator’s account, however, still sounds as if it is true despite the extenuating circumstances that threaten his credibility and his alleged family history of mental illness, and so his story is difficult to dismiss as the product of delusions.

Unlike Thurston, the narrator’s experiences in Innsmouth are his own, not the collected knowledge of others, and so his account includes detailed descriptions of his behavior that we can use as evidence to support his reliability as a narrator with recent psychological studies. With the insight of these scientific studies we can see reason in the actions of a compromised narrator. After he has physical evidence suggesting that he is descended from the Deep Ones, the narrator says, “from that day on my life has been a nightmare of brooding and apprehension, nor do I know how much is hideous truth and

how much is madness” (857). While the readers may or may not view the narrator as insane, the other characters in the story likely would if they heard his tale. Among the research on fear and eyes, however, we have evidence to support the case for the narrator’s sanity.

In “Beware the Eyes Behind the Mask,” the research article explaining humans’ threat avoidance behaviors in reaction to fearful eyes both consciously and unconsciously (see pages 19-21), Carlson and his colleagues say that people “with psychopathic traits have difficulties recognizing fearful expressions in others, which is linked to an inability to reflexively orient their gaze towards to others’ eyes” (503). These findings suggest that eye contact is a learned behavior for these individuals, not an instinctual one. Research by Mark R. Dadds supports this claim. In the article “Attention to the Eyes and Fear-Recognition Deficits in Child Psychopathy,” Dadds says, “the ability to recognize fear is impaired in people with damage to the amygdala” (280). Considering the narrator’s numerous instinctual fear reactions to others’ eyes, we know the narrator’s behavior is that of a person with a healthy amygdala. The recognition of fear and eyes trigger these instinctual reactions, and someone with a damaged amygdala would not have these fear reactions because he would not instinctually recognize the triggering stimuli. If the narrator has healthy amygdala functions, then his capacity for threat detection is not compromised.

We see the signs of a healthy amygdala in the narrator most clearly in the scene with the narrator’s reaction to Zadok as they speak by the sea. When Zadok looks out into the oncoming waves with fright the narrator sees the old man’s averted fear gaze. The narrator says, “I turned my head to look at whatever he had glimpsed. There was nothing

that I could see” (836). Recognizing the fear in Zadok’s eyes and following the sailor’s gaze to further assess the potential danger is an automatic and unconscious reaction that indicates healthy amygdala function (see page 23). Someone with impaired amygdala function likely would not notice or recognize Zadok’s fearful expression and therefore would not have engaged in the narrator’s threat avoidance behavior. This scene is the clearest example of the narrator’s healthy fear recognition behavior because Lovecraft provides us with a clear description of both the stimulus and the reaction. The narrator’s healthy threat avoidance behavior remains consistent until he acquires the Innsmouth look himself at the end of the novella.

When the narrator accepts that he is going through a metamorphosis and becoming a Deep One, he becomes desensitized from the fear he previously associated with Innsmouth. He makes no further mention of the Innsmouth look and instead says, “I shall plan my cousin’s escape from that Canton madhouse . . . and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever” (858). This is the point where the narrator’s account seems the most delusional. His belief that he and his cousin have inherited immortality as the lineage of sentient sea creatures defies rational thought as a bizarre delusion of grandeur. There is, however, a problem in labeling the narrator’s beliefs as delusions—threat avoidance responses to the Innsmouth look are automatic, unconscious products of the brain’s neuroanatomy.

Until this point in the story, the narrator has shown consistent healthy threat avoidance behavior. Only after saying that he has acquired the Innsmouth look and subsequently contemplated suicide does the narrator break this consistency by saying, “the tense extremes of horror are lessening, and I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown

sea-deeps instead of fearing them” (858). His recognition of threat signifiers in eyes and of fearful facial expressions suggests a normal functioning amygdala until this point. Because his fear of the Innsmouth look stems from biologically hardwired neuroanatomical pathways, he should continue to be unsettled by the Innsmouth look despite any beliefs he has. The dilated pupils and large eye whites of the Innsmouth look are instinctual triggers for automatic, unconscious threat avoidance behaviors, not learned features that one associates with danger. Thus, the Innsmouth look should continue to activate the instinctual responses regulated by the amygdala regardless of the narrator’s conscious perception.

A degrading understanding of reality on the narrator’s part does not explain why he would no longer react to the Innsmouth look with aversion. In order to subvert the narrator’s previous healthy threat avoidance behavior, his amygdala has to have become physically impaired through some kind of change. The narrator makes no mention of receiving any head trauma after his escape, and the only change in his physical health is the development of the Innsmouth look. The inconsistency of threat avoidance behavior before and after he believes he is changing into a Deep One reveals that his body is actually changing. While we cannot determine the precise nature of this change, the change itself strengthens the reliability of the narrator’s account and thus the effectiveness of the story’s sense of dread.

## Conclusion

H. P. Lovecraft's stories are rich with vivid imagery and descriptions of sensory details. While he shapes ominous settings and builds atmospheres of dread with his descriptions, his same attention to detail and his intuitive understanding of fear provides a solid foundation for psychological analyses of his characters. Lovecraft's rich behavioral descriptions coupled with recent studies in psychology regarding neuroanatomy and instinctual threat avoidance behaviors show how realistic details bolster the sense of verisimilitude in his stories, thus enhancing the sensation of dread.

Lovecraft's short story "The Dunwich Horror" serves as an example of how we can apply these bodies of research to our readings of Lovecraft's stories when they contain sufficient behavioral description. This story shows how reliable Lovecraft's descriptions of fear can be, and by extension how effective the resultant verisimilitude is at inspiring fear. His short story "The Call of Cthulhu," however, serves as an example of how limited an analysis of an unreliable narrator's mental state can be if sufficient behavioral description is absent. Because Thurston, the narrator and protagonist, experiences the majority of the story's action second-hand, we lack the same sort of behavioral verification that we find in "The Dunwich Horror." Without these behavioral empirical tests, we find almost no support for Thurston's reliability when we examine his sanity, and as a result the story lacks the strengthened verisimilitude that direct behavioral descriptions can offer. This story's effectiveness at inspiring dread is thus due to some other unrelated factor. Lovecraft's novella "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" strikes a balance between the other two stories, containing both vivid behavioral descriptions and a seemingly compromised narrator.

By analyzing the behavior of the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” with the context of these studies, we find scientifically based evidence to support the claims of an otherwise unreliable narrator. Even in the fictional setting of Lovecraft’s world, the science described in recent studies on eyes and threat avoidance behavior still maintains its accuracy. Lovecraft’s intuitive understanding of fear has allowed his descriptions to remain accurate under the harsh light of science almost a century later and reinforces his stories’ verisimilitude by showing how close his fiction is to our reality.

As the situation stands, we see that Lovecraft’s unreliable narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” is not quite as unreliable as we might think. Advances in psychology offer evidence to support some of the narrator’s seemingly wild claims. The fear of the unknown that Lovecraft emphasizes in the first sentence of his “Supernatural Horror in Literature” shows itself in how we read “The Shadow Over Innsmouth.” Lovecraft believed that we naturally fear what we do not understand. If this belief holds true, then reading the story as the account of a man suffering from mental illness becomes a less frightening interpretation. Advances in science force us to lean further towards the reading that the narrator did encounter the Deep Ones and that the tainted blood of Innsmouth might be flowing through anyone’s veins, even if they are outsiders like the narrator. This reading forces us to confront forces that are beyond the understanding of human minds within Lovecraft’s world, making it the more frightening choice. Because the psychological studies support the latter reading, they predispose us to a more frightening experience. In regards to achieving a more complete understanding of our world, these scientific studies carry a torch forward with the intention of lighting the path

ahead of us. In regards to illuminating the darkness of Lovecraft's world, however, the bright light of scientific advancement makes our shadows all the darker.

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