

Cosmic Horror After Lovecraft

The God of Dark Laughter
by Michael Chabon



Slide Show Content

- ▶ Review of Lovecraft
- ▶ Michael Chabon - The God of Dark
Laughter
- ▶ Cultural Successors of Lovecraft

Cosmicism

- ▶ *“Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes.” H. P. Lovecraft*



Lovecraftian Horror

- ▶ H. P. Lovecraft lived in virtual obscurity
- ▶ influence and popularity have grown hugely since his death
- ▶ Film, video, graphic novels, blogs and table games and video games, comic book series, even plush toys inspired by Lovecraft's fictional world
- ▶ His universe, his subject matter and underlying themes are pervasive in speculative fiction
- ▶ He incorporated cutting-edge science of the time into contemporary stories—ex. the discovery of King Tut's tomb and the planet Pluto, theories of Atlantis, and accounts of radium poisoning
- ▶ Focus on the fear of the unknown, as opposed to the shock and gore factor found in a lot of works of horror fiction at the time
- ▶ An emphasis on supernatural and extraterrestrial





H.P. LOVECRAFT

THE COMPLETE
CTHULHU
MYTHOS
TALES

Cosmicism, Review

- ▶ Cosmicism emphasizes the insignificance of humanity and its actions
- ▶ No power to change anything in the vast, indifferent universe that surrounds them
- ▶ The meaning or purpose of cosmic beings is completely unknowable to the humans
- ▶ Humanity is insignificant, has no destiny, and will one day die out and be forgotten
- ▶ Characters experience horror in Lovecraft's fiction from the oppressive feeling of insignificance and helplessness
- ▶ Honour, morality, or any sort of karmic balance, are not there, or are meaningless
- ▶ Where godlike beings appear, they're perhaps godlike to humans, but are completely mortal

Michael Chabon, Author The God of Dark Laughter and Showrunner - Star Trek Picard

“I just wanted to write a straight-out story about awful goings-on in this small western Pennsylvania town that turned out to be rooted in some ancient cult of the Elder Ones, just straight ahead Lovecraftian Mythos kind of stuff”



About Michael Chabon...

“Whatever it is that fires your passion, fires your imagination, so be it.” His fluency in what was once called lowbrow and highbrow storytelling has made him the perfect writer for our time — and the perfect artist, at a moment when superheroes, con artists and gangsters compete for eyeballs and awards, to make the jump from page to screen.”

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-01-23/michael-chabon-picard>



The God of Dark Laughter begins

- ▶ with the death of a man who is camping out in a cave in the countryside. He's shot, and then the skin from his head removed *"the cupped husk of a peeled orange"*.
- ▶ Detective Ganz calls District Attorney Satterlee, the district attorney whose job it is to investigate the crime and perhaps prosecute the perpetrator.
- ▶ Ganz explains that the dead man is certainly a vagrant, and that he was endowed with incredibly enormous feet.

"The dead man, as I have already mentioned, was attired in a curious suit—the trousers and jacket of threadbare purple velour, the waistcoat bright orange, the whole thing patched with outsized squares of fabric cut from a variety of loudly clashing plaids. It was on account of the patches, along with the victim's cracked and split-soled shoes and a certain undeniable shabbiness in the stuff of the suit, that the primary detective—a man not apt to see deeper than the outermost wrapper of the world (we do not attract, I must confess, the finest police talent in this doleful little corner of western Pennsylvania)—had already figured the victim for a vagrant, albeit one with extraordinarily big feet.

"Those cannot possibly be his real shoes, Ganz, you idiot," I gently suggested."



Setting

- ▶ set in Pennsylvania
- ▶ time period modern indeterminate, (library use of catalogues suggest mid 20th century)
- ▶ “gothic” and “whimsical” (Plunkettsburg)
- ▶ a western Pennsylvania county riddled with cave systems
- ▶ describes Yuggogheny as a “blighted and unfortunate county,” reminiscent of The Dunwich Horror

Characters

- ▶ The narrator is **Main Character Edward Satterlee**, District Attorney for Pennsylvania's Yuggogheny County
- ▶ Similar to the hard-boiled detectives of pulp fiction
- ▶ Satterlee keeps a bottle of whiskey on his desk along with a photo of his dead wife and son
- ▶ Has a tragic personal history, he loses his young son to a drunk driver he failed to prosecute earlier; his wife commits suicide, and he uses alcohol to numb himself
- ▶ These events left him cynical with a skeptic's view of the universe
- ▶ **Supporting character Detective Ganz**, assisted Satterlee in "outrageous and bizarre" cases such as deaths of Colonel Earnshawe and his sister Irene, of whom many strange rumors were whispered. Then there was the Primm affair (too "horrific" to detail) and the panic-stirring advent of the Green Man
- ▶ Satterlee directs the investigation of criminal cases handled by the county detectives.





Satterlee a Lonely Rationalist in a Chaotic Universe

- ▶ "One of the most tedious human beings I have ever known was my own mother, who, early in my childhood, fell under the spell of Madame Blavatsky and her followers and proceeded to weary my youth and deplete my patrimony with her devotion to that indigestible caseation of balderdash and lies."
- ▶ As a result Satterlee chose and a career in law and the world view of skepticism
- ▶ "What disheartened me was not that I viewed a crime committed out of the promptings of an evil nature as inherently less liable to solution than the misdeeds of the foolish, the unlucky, or the habitually cruel. On the contrary, evil often expresses itself through refreshingly discernible patterns, through schedules and syllogisms. But the presence of evil, once scented, tends to bring out all that is most irrational and uncontrollable in the public imagination. It is a catalyst for pea-brained theories, gimcrack scholarship, and the credulous cosmologies of hysteria."

The God of Dark Laughter: Plot

- ▶ Thirteen days after the Entwhistle-Ealing Bros. circus left Ashtown, boys find a dead man clad in purple and orange velour and enormous floppy shoes.
- ▶ The corpse has no ID
- ▶ Had been living in a nearby cave. Along with camping gear and a revolver, a makeup kit and two books

*A book, *Über das Finstere Lachen* (Concerning Dark Laughter) by Friedrich von Junzt and a small black-bound volume printed in an unknown alphabet are left at the scene.*

The image shows the cover of the book 'El Dios de la Risa' by Michael Chabon. The cover features a large, stylized, and somewhat abstract illustration of a face with a wide, open mouth, rendered in shades of blue, white, and red. The title 'EL DIOS DE LA RISA' is printed in large, bold, red capital letters at the bottom. Above it, the author's name 'MICHAEL CHABON' is visible in smaller, white capital letters. The background of the cover is dark, and there are some abstract, colorful shapes on the right side.

MICHAEL CHABON
EL DIOS DE LA RISA

Homage to Poe, and Lovecraft

- ▶ A baboon near the cave was the pet of the dead man - Satterlee is reminded of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and wonders if the baboon is indeed the murderer.
- ▶ Books that are found in the cave offer clues
- ▶ One book is indecipherable the other in German.
- ▶ Satterlee finds references to the author, Friedrich von Junzt:
- ▶ “G.’s analysis of the meaning of such ceremonial blades admittedly was aided by the earlier discoveries of Freidrich von Junzt, at the sit of the former Temple of Yrrh, in north central Armenia, among them certain sacrificial artifacts pertaining to the worship of the proto-Urartian deity Ye-Heh, rather grandly (though regrettably without credible evidence) styled ‘the god of dark or mocking laughter’ by the German...”

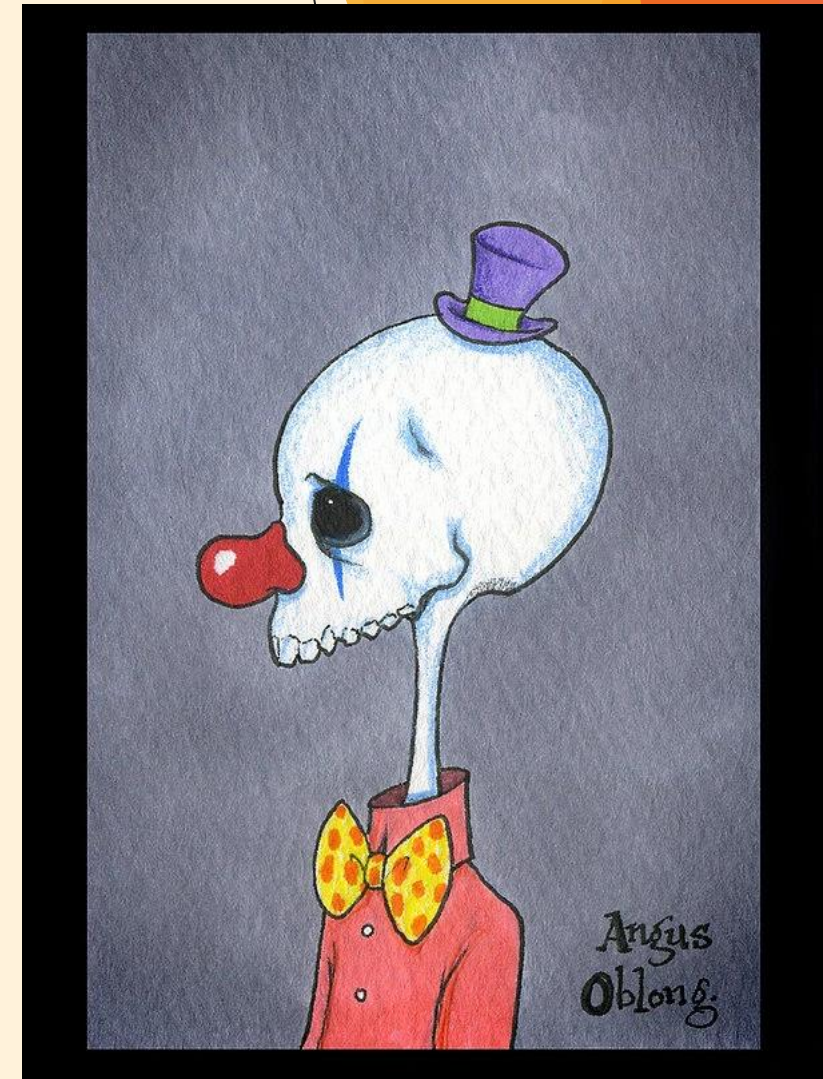


Two Cults

Über das Finstere Lachen (Concerning Dark Laughter) describes two cults **Ye-Hehists** and **Ai-ites** who react differently to the moral chaos of their father god Yrrh

- followers of baboon-headed Ye-Heh, the “god of dark or mocking laughter,” see the universe as a “cosmic hoax”
Over generations, inbreeding marked them with distended grins and chalk-white skin. They hid in traveling circuses, recognized only by their fellow clowns and Ai-iteists
- Followers of the Cult of Ai, God of Unbearable and Ubiquitous Sorrow. react to Yrrh’s “cosmic hoax” with “permanent wailing.” They also murder their laughing rivals, believing that when the last Ye-Hehist was gone, Yrrh would return.

Regarding life’s horror and tragedy: The Ye-Hehists laugh. The Ai-ites cry
Subgods have onomatopoeic names derived from the typical/ritual vocalizations of their followers: *Ye-heh* is a laugh, *Ai* a cry of despair





What are some Cosmic Horror Elements You Notice?

- ▶ Theme of meaninglessness of the universe
- ▶ Extraterrestrials
- ▶ Cultists whose appearance and behaviour is described in detail
- ▶ Haunting dreams
- ▶ Mysterious books, a small volume bound in black leather and “printed in no alphabet known to me, the letters sinuous and furred with wild diacritical marks.”
- ▶ And...?

What Elements of Parody Do you Notice?

- ▶ Name of town, Plunkettsburg
- ▶ Use of clowns
- ▶ Comic vocalizations of cultists
- ▶ Appearance of baboon
- ▶ Sense of the ridiculous, some humour
- ▶ Final prediction if Yrrh ever does show up to save or destroy His universe, He'll do it with no godly proclamation but “a single, a terrible guffaw.”



Lovecraft's Influence

- ▶ profound influence on a generation of horror authors, such as Stephen King, Ramsey Campbell, and Alan Moore
- ▶ The Cthulhu Mythos has been fascinating audiences for generations, and is one of the largest shared universes
- ▶ countless stories, novels, movies, tabletop and videogames since the original publication of H.P. Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*.
- ▶ Adaptions and references have formed a widespread legacy stretching back to the very beginning of the 20th century, latching on to the key fear of the human psyche: that of the unknown.



A manga cover for 'Taimashin' featuring a character with spiky blonde hair and a white jacket. The cover has a yellow background with black and white text. A red banner at the top right says 'COVER NO. 1 FINAL'.

Lovecraft Influence on Popular Culture

- ▶ Lovecraft and his stories have had a profound impact on popular culture: film directors John Carpenter, Stuart Gordon, Guillermo del Toro, and artist H. R. Giger.
- ▶ Japan has also participated in Cthulhu Mythos, spreading the influence of Lovecraft among the anime base] Along with Junji Ito, other influential manga artists have also been inspired by Lovecraft. Novelist and manga author Hideyuki Kikuchi incorporated a number of locations, beings and events from the works of Lovecraft into the manga *Taimashin*.
- ▶] In 2016, Lovecraft was inducted into the Museum of Pop Culture's Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame.

https://infogalactic.com/info/H._P._Lovecraft

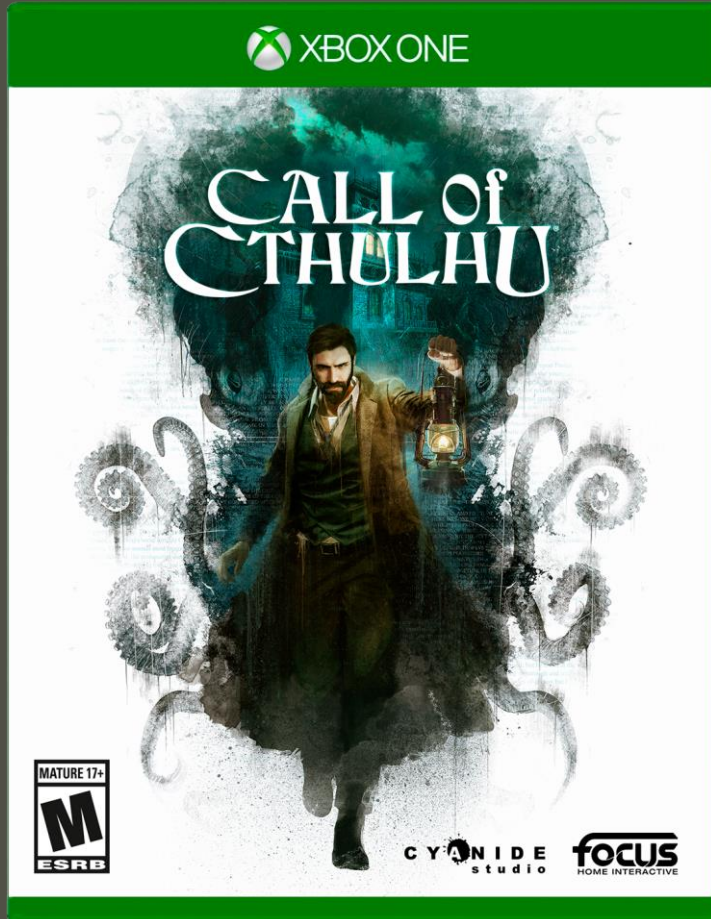


The Necronomicon

- ▶ The Necronomicon originated as a fictional book in the works of H.P. Lovecraft, and grew into an extended literary in-joke as other horror writers organically added to the Cthulhu mythos. According to Lovecraft, it was written by Abdul Alhazred, 'a mad Arab poet of the Yemen', in 950 A.D. in Damascus. In many of the stories written by Lovecraft and his successors, merely reading or possessing the Necronomicon leads to insanity ...or worse.

- ▶ <https://sacred-texts.com/nec/index.htm>

Video Game with Lovecraftian horror: *Call of Cthulhu*



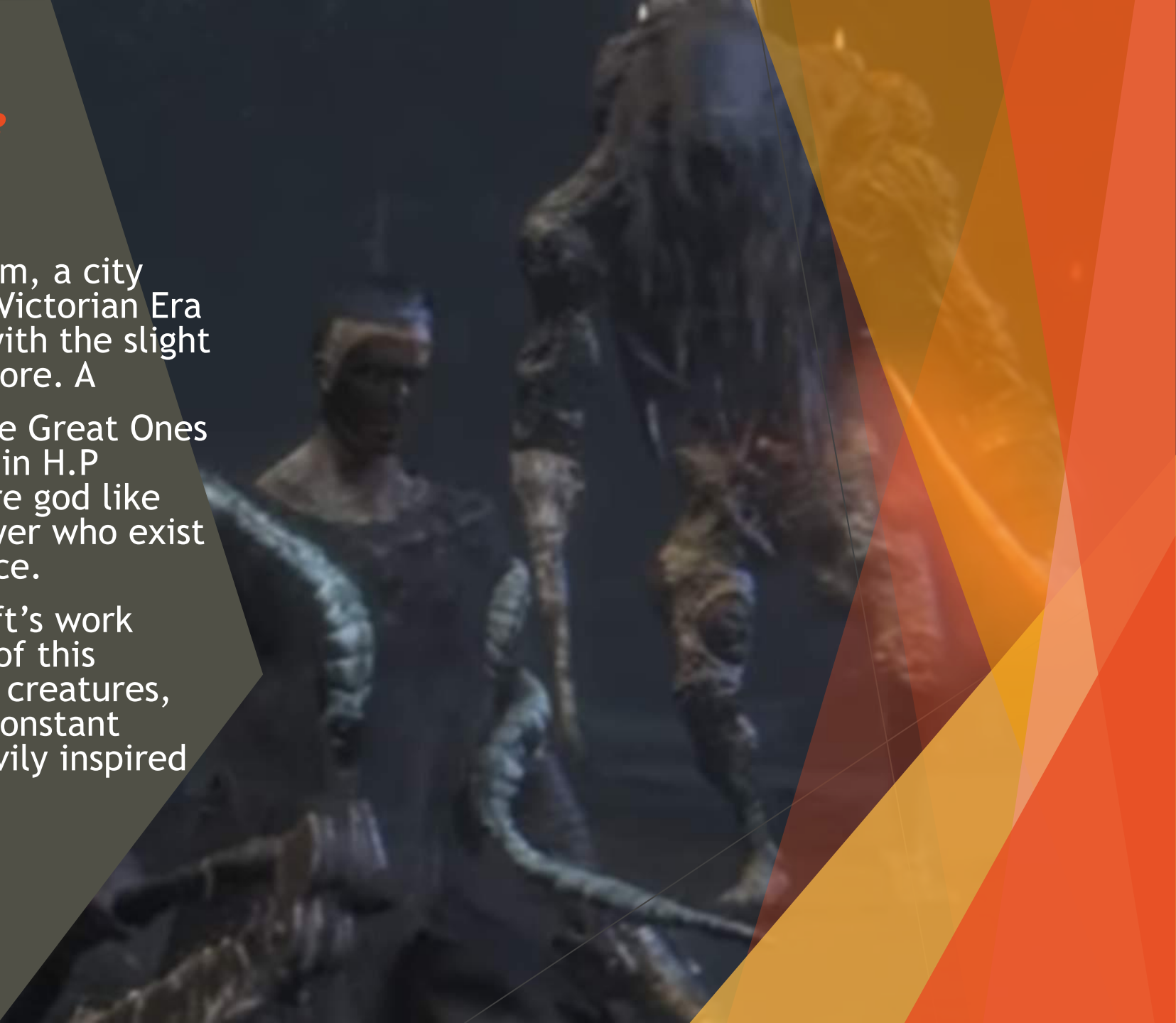
▶ “A survival RPG that implements character decisions to influence narrative endings. It’s the official Cthulhu video game adapted from the classic tabletop RPG experience. Playing as an investigator, you must solve a mystery that will spiral into madness as the secrets of the island are unmasked. Since the H.P. Lovecraft’s *The Call of Cthulhu* was published, the mythos of the Old Gods has inspired innumerable stories in books, movies, and games. That exploration of the line between sanity and mania, central to so many of those tales, finds another home in *Call of Cthulhu*. Released on PC, PS4, and Xbox One on October 30th 2019, the horror game is now available on the Nintendo Switch.” <http://gametyrant.com/news/call-of-cthulhu-review-a-dread-filled-story-that-kept-forgetting-it-was-a-game>

copyright of his work, which is considered public domain

Bloodborne Video Game *- Lovecraft Mythos*

- ▶ his game takes place in Yharnam, a city depicted as a mixture of the Victorian Era and the gothic architecture with the slight touch of the H.P Lovecraft's lore. A
- ▶ world that is controlled by the Great Ones (yes, even the same name as in H.P Lovecraft's mythos). These are god like creatures with incredible power who exist in different planes of existence.
- ▶ The influence of H.P Lovecraft's work reflects on different aspects of this videogame. This shows in the creatures, the scenarios and even that constant feeling of uneasiness are heavily inspired by the Lovecraftian horror.

<https://wottaread.com/the-influence-of-h-p-lovecraft/>



Influence on Modern Horror Film

- ▶ Alien movies design inspired by Lovecraft. Director Ridley Scott hired artist HR Giger based on his book of disturbing Lovecraftian illustrations titled Necronomicon.
- ▶ John Carpenter's movie The Thing also based on Lovecraftian images. Acclaimed director Guillermo Del Toro has also cited Lovecraft as a major influence on his career

<https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/hp-lovecraft-and-his-lasting-impact-on-cinema/>

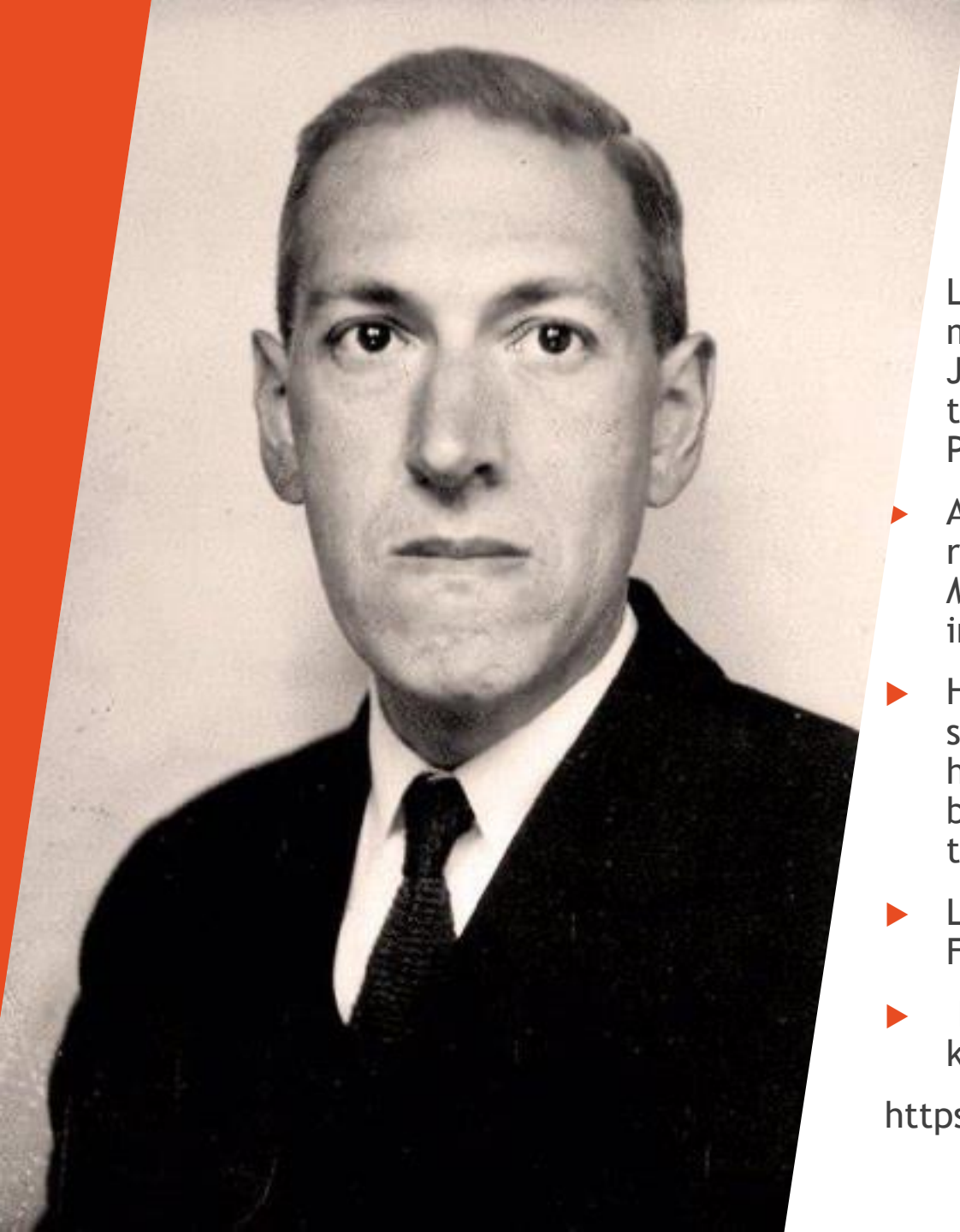


Film Adaptations of Lovecraft Writings

Include...

- ▶ The Whisperer in Darkness (released in 2011),
- ▶ The Last Lovecraft: Relic of Cthulhu (2009)
- ▶ *Cthulhu* (2007)





Lovecraft as a Fictional Character

Lovecraft continues to be used as a character in supernatural fiction. He makes a brief appearance in an early version of Ray Bradbury's *The Exiles*. John Shirley's story *When Death Wakes Me To Myself* offers a tale of a therapy patient slowly remembering a former incarnation when he was H. P. Lovecraft.

- ▶ A satirical version of Lovecraft named H. P. Hatecraft appeared as a recurring character on the Cartoon Network television series *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*. Another character based on Lovecraft appears in *Afterlife with Archie*.
- ▶ He appears as a minor character in Brian Clevinger's comic book series *Atomic Robo* having been driven insane by his exposure to the hidden horrors of the wider universe. He is eventually killed when his body becomes host to an extradimensional being infecting the timestream.[
- ▶ Lovecraft is a central plot element, as well as a character in Paul La Farge's 2017 novel, *The Night Ocean*.
- ▶ In the Japanese manga and anime *Bungo Stray Dogs* there is a character known as Howard Phillips Lovecraft

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._P._Lovecraft

Music



- ▶ Lovecraft's fictional Mythos has influenced a number of musicians, especially in rock music. The psychedelic rock band H. P. Lovecraft songs included *The White Ship* and *At the Mountains of Madness*, both titled after Lovecraft stories.
- ▶ Metallica recorded a song inspired by "The Call of Cthulhu", an instrumental titled *The Call of Ktulu*, a song based on *The Shadow over Innsmouth* titled *The Thing That Should Not Be* and another based on Frank Belknap Long's *Hounds of Tindalos* titled *All Nightmare Long*. Later, they released the song *Dream No More*, which mentions the awakening of Cthulhu.
- ▶ Technical death metal outfit Revocation (band) frequently write songs based on Lovecraft's stories and frequently use him as inspiration in their original works.
- ▶ In 2019, the synthwave band Gunship released a track called *Cthulhu*

https://frankensaurus.com/Frank_Belknap_Long

The Real Cthulhu

► Comes in four different colors, dark green, light green, pink, and turquoise. The dark green model is available now at any participating retailers, including Wal'Mart, Target, Gamestop, Fye, Best Buy, and plenty more.

► <https://www.nerdmuch.com/funko-supercute-the-real-cthulhu/>





N. K. Jemisin Remarks on Lovecraft and Racism

- ▶ H.P. Lovecraft comes up in your new novel more than once. Your writing is clearly influenced by him and the kind of horror writing that he is known for. And yet he was a horrible bigot. Is it OK to take the good stuff from him and ditch the rest?
- ▶ Yes... Pretty much any science fiction and fantasy writer needs to tackle the fact that he is one of the seminal voices in our genre. There's a reason that people honor him—the terror of the other or [the] terror of the unknown is a component of our entire genre that most writers need to be able to engage with. The catch is you need to understand where that's coming from. You need to understand that even if you've chosen to use Lovecraft as inspiration to write about aliens, he was using it to write about human beings. That same sense of fear and alienation and nausea—because he was actively revolted by people who were different from himself—all come from a particular place. I find it useful to understand how they think, as someone who's had to deal with bigots throughout her life. It's slightly horrifying how much of his history and behavioral patterns have been elided in understanding the impact of the power that he's had on our genre.

Author N.K. Jemisin

- ▶ I don't believe we should hide authors or artwork that was created with bigotry. I do believe we should warn people before they dive head first into it, because not everyone is ready to deal with that. Hiding it doesn't make it go away, and we can learn what we can from it and discard the rest.



Glossary of Terms

- ▶ Shared universe
- ▶ Cosmicism
- ▶ Coulrophobia
- ▶ Mythos
(in literature) a traditional or recurrent narrative theme or plot structure

Questions to guide reading and Class Discussion

- ▶ In what ways does The God of Dark Laughter remind you of Lovecraft?
- ▶ What are some ways the story is different from what you know about Lovecraft?

Next Week

- ▶ Break Week- Happy Thanksgiving
- ▶ Back for Week 6 and Science Fiction 1