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ADAPTING LOVECRAFT'S MYTHOLOGY FOR A YOUNGER AUDIENCE:
COMIC BOOKS AND ANIMATION

Howard Phillips Lovecraft is rightly considered the founder of cosmic horror in literature. His works, though not thought of highly during his lifetime, have now become a source of infinite inspiration for various spheres of entertainment – from

films and computer games to music and escape rooms. Authors all over the world try to imitate his style of writing and contribute to the Cthulhu Mythos. But how can the young generation get to know the world of Lovecraft's mythology without being too shocked by the Great Old Ones and their doings from the very start? Modern mass culture has an answer to this – through comic books and cartoons, which make the atrocities of this lore seem less terrifying and add humanity to the characters. In this article, we'll take a closer look at some of them to see how the life of Howard Lovecraft and his mythology can be entwined into the canvas of a children's cartoon and the young adult graphic novel.

The graphic novel trilogy *Howard Lovecraft and the Three Kingdoms* (2009–2013), written by Bruce Brown and illustrated by Thomas Boatwright, shows the readers Howard Lovecraft as a child. His father Winfield, who is “stark raving mad” after getting a glimpse of the unknown during his travels, is confined in Butler Sanitarium. And when one evening, after visiting Winfield in the sanitarium, Howard's mother Sarah gives him a journal written by his father years ago, sinister things begin to happen with little Howard as he gets to the other world known as R'Lyeh through a portal in his room. This is what starts *Howard Lovecraft and the Frozen Kingdom*, which is followed by *The Undersea Kingdom* and *The Kingdom of Madness*. Seven years later Sean Patrick O'Reilly, a Canadian director, decided to create a trilogy of animated films of the same names based on the graphic novels. The cartoons do not mimic the comics word for word. On the contrary, there are many differences and deviations from the books, especially in the second and third parts, which mostly take the location and some characters from the novels but change the events beyond recognition. Anyway, there are plenty of interesting features to look at that make both the novels and the films fit well into the Lovecraft universe.

A curious thing about the comics and the cartoons is that each of them has an epigraph, and in the case of the films, an afterword as well. The novels take their epigraphs from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* (e.g., “*Ah, distinctly I remember / it was in the bleak December; / And each separate dying ember / wrought its ghost upon the floor.*” [1]) and *A Dream within a Dream* (“*All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream*” [2]). The animated films are framed by quotes taken from Lovecraft's various works – the series begins with the opening sentence of his critical essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (“*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown*” [3]). Other quotes include fragments from a letter to a group of friends called ‘Keicomolo’ and several stories (*The Picture in the House*, *Dagon*, *The White Ship*, *The Call of Cthulhu*). Each of the epigraphs reveals the key concepts of the part they accompany, and the afterwords sum up the main idea and serve as a kind of conclusion for the events in the films.

Another notable aspect of the comics and cartoons is the characters and the way they are portrayed. The creators of the books and films in question employed a number of particular features (e. g., the language they use, their facial expressions, peculiar behavior) to make the characters vivid, memorable and really individualized. So let us take a closer look at the major characters.

First and foremost, it is young Howard Lovecraft, of course. Although the age of the boy differs in the novels and the films (four and eight respectively), he is still a child in both. Howard is portrayed as a lonely boy desperately wanting to have real friends. So when he meets Thu Thu Hmong, the Sleeper of R'Lyeh, who is to become Cthulhu the Destroyer of Worlds, and saves his life, they become friends. In a most childish naïve way Howard, unable to memorize his real name, gives him a pet name: "*I always wanted a dog. I shall call you Spot.*" [4]. This episode brings the character closer to young readers, who might have the same wish for a pet-friend, on the one hand. On the other, not saying the actual name of something or someone fearsome often makes them less terrifying, which might be the case with Cthulhu here. We can also feel the age of the main character in such small details as constant questions about the same thing ("*Are we there yet?*" [5]), strong desire to play (he talks Thu Thu Hmong into playing snowballs and making snowmen in R'Lyeh), unconditional love and devotion to his close ones (he is ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of his parents and friends). And, quite logically, young Howard was voiced by then 9-year-old Kiefer O'Reilly, which accounts for the character being even more believable.

Howard's friend Spot is another important character in the stories. He is depicted as a huge creature of greenish colour with facial tentacles and bat-like wings. Here is the description of Cthulhu as put by Lovecraft: "*<The figure> represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind*" [6]. In the cartoons, Spot's speech, albeit human, is very simplistic, with mostly basic forms and often incomplete sentence structures ("*Me – Thu Thu Hmong. You?*"; "*Family dangerous, scary in R'Lyeh*"). As a character he is just as devoted to his friends as Howard is – ready to help at all times, sometimes even going against his own principles and interests. In the cartoon version of *The Kingdom of Madness*, Thu Thu Hmong chooses to give up his good form and turn into Cthulhu only to rid Howard of the threat to his life. And even then, having become the Destroyer of Worlds, he helps Howard to save the worlds by sacrificing himself. This is something unthought-of in Lovecraft's mythical universe, but at the same time, it teaches young people to be selfless and kind.

The character that is definitely curious is Winfield Lovecraft, Howard's father. Just as it was in reality, Winfield is an inmate in a lunatic asylum, Butler Sanitarium. He was driven to madness by some sinister events that occurred during his travels, one of which is meeting Abdul Al Hazred, the mad Arab who wrote the Necronomicon, the book of the dead in Lovecraft's mythology. He is a middle-aged man with messy uncombed hair and crazy eyes (one of the pupils is always dilated), wearing sanitarium robes and walking barefoot at all times. To stress his madness the creators have made his speech extremely colourful. Winfield talks to himself ("*Think, you bumbling baboon, think!*" [7]), interrupts other characters ("*Is it why...? – Why I'm crazy as a bedbug? Yes, yes, yes!*" [7]) and uses odd language. In the comic books he laughs demonically ("*Hahahaha!!!*" [4]) and

speaks in an uncanny manner (“Eeeeeevil!!!” [4]). The expressions he uses are often rather childish, which creates a comical effect. For example, he speaks in rhymes on several occasions: “*Liar, liar, pants on fire!*”, “*One! Two! Three! Diddly-dee! 24, 25, 26, pick up sticks! 30, 30, time to get dirty!*” [7]. Nevertheless, despite the seeming inability to think straight, Winfield makes absolutely sane decisions when it comes to saving his family and possibly the world.

There is another noteworthy personage in the graphic novels – Constable Smith. Though a minor character, Smithie is of interest due to the traits attributed to him. Constable Smith is a Civil War veteran, and this point of his biography is stressed by different means. Several times throughout the graphic novels, we notice him singing the same song: “*Mine eyes ha’ seen the glory of the coming o’ the Looooord... He’s tramplin’ out th’ vintage where them grapes o’ wraith are stooooored...*” [7]. This is *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, a popular American patriotic song by the abolitionist writer Julia Ward Howe. Smithie often speaks in army terms, like “*Retreat!*” for escaping and “*Eat lead!*” when firing his gun at some creatures. In the song quote, we can also see spoken language imitated in writing, which testifies to the constable coming from a simple background. To emphasize this fact he also uses such expressions as “*I’m a wee rusty*”, “*It’s easy as pie*”, etc. Eventually Smith, too, is eager to save the world by means of his own life, when he decides to stay behind and close the portal to another dimension with the Necronomicon.

In the animated films we encounter several minor characters from the original universe, most of whom work at Miskatonic University. The university itself is often mentioned in Lovecraft’s short stories and was modeled on the universities of the Ivy League, and the stories mention many scientists from various departments. Doctor Henry Armitage, Chief Librarian of Miskatonic, was first mentioned in *The Dunwich Horror* together with Professor Warren Rice, who specializes in classical languages. Other professors of the university featured in the cartoons are Professor William Dyer (geology, *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Shadow out of Time*), Professor Ellery (chemistry, *The Dreams in the Witch House*), and Professor Atwood (physics, *At the Mountains of Madness*). These five make up the expert group for the supernatural in the last part of the animation trilogy. We also encounter Herbert West, “*a small, slender, spectacled youth with delicate features, yellow hair, pale blue eyes, and a soft voice*” [8]. He is the title character of *Herbert West – Reanimator* (1922), and similarly to the short story, his sphere of interest is bringing the dead back to life. One of his subjects in the cartoon is the zombie version of Captain Obed Marsh, first mentioned in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, where he appears to be the initiator of the pact with the Deep Ones and the founder of the esoteric order of Dagon.

Besides the characters taken from the works of H. P. Lovecraft, there are some of the most recognizable gods and creatures in both the novels and the films. Primarily, it is Azathoth, the ruler of the Outer Gods. He is described by Lovecraft as “*that amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity – the boundless daemon sultan Azathoth*” [9], the quote

that is used in the cartoon at the appearance of the Lord of All Things, as he is sometimes referred to. He is the central villainous character in *The Undersea Kingdom* comic book and a serious threat to the worlds in *The Kingdom of Madness* cartoon.

Another one of the well-known Outer Gods is Nyarlathotep, with his first appearance in Lovecraft's 1920 prose poem of the same name. He is a malign deity resembling an ancient Egyptian pharaoh (thus wearing a nemes and holding the crook and flail in the cartoon) and possessing the ability to take human form. Nyarlathotep appears in all parts of the animation trilogy, and his character develops with every part. At first he is shown as an adviser to Kind Abdul [Al Hazred] and is not named in the course of the film. In the second part, we see him as the true authority over Abdul and the one that guides the evil in the plot. Eventually, in *The Kingdom of Madness*, he is revealed as the messenger and voice of the Outer Gods, finally taking his demonic form and heralding the appearance of Cthulhu and the destruction of all worlds.

There are other creatures from the Mythos in the comics and the cartoons, less significant but still often mentioned in the creative work of Lovecraft. These include Shoggoths ("*normally shapeless entities composed of a viscous jelly which looked like an agglutination of bubbles, and each averaged about fifteen feet in diameter when a sphere*" [10]), Elder Things ("*Like a barrel with five bulging ridges in place of staves... In furrows between ridges are curious growths—combs or wings that fold up and spread out like fans*" [10]) and Nightgaunts ("*black things with smooth, oily, whale-like surfaces, unpleasant horns that curved inward toward each other, bat wings whose beating made no sound, ugly prehensile paws, and barbed tails that lashed needlessly and disquietingly*" [9]). In the second and third cartoons, Dagon and his fish-frog men also known as the Deep Ones, are shown. All of these creatures are depicted in a way that is practically identical to their descriptions in the original short stories.

The language of the books and the films is definitely in tune with that of Lovecraft's short stories. Both abound in adjectives with distinct negative connotations, such as *horrific, blasphemous, unsanctified, profane, fearsome, ghastly, ghoulish, demonic, dire*, etc. The characters emphasize the overall mood of mental instability by such expressions as *stark raving mad, his mind is a shattered looking glass, crazy as a bedbug, utter madness* and others. Expanding the connection to the Cthulhu Mythos, the fictional Aklo language is used for spells and magical formulae: *Nr'Fga Ra'Nazen Flugn!*, *Ph'Nglui Mglw'nafh Cthulhu!* [4]. The language was first mentioned by Arthur Machen in a short story in 1899. Lovecraft admired the story greatly and later used Aklo in several of his own stories. Shoggoths also pronounce the sounds from the original stories. The closing sentence of *At the Mountains of Madness* goes: "*At the time his shrieks were confined to the repetition of a single mad word of all too obvious source: 'Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!'*" [10]. The sound is exactly the same in both the comics and the cartoons.

An interesting detail, though typical of this genre of literature, is how the atmosphere-creating sounds are rendered in the graphic novels. Creaking doors and floors (*skriiitch, craaack*), roaring monsters (*ROAAAR*), water splashing (*sploooosh*), arrows flying (*thwip*) – all help the reader to dive into the spooky surroundings of the three kingdoms. When in unexpected situations, characters feel surprised (**gasp**), frightened (**gulp**), scream in worry (*OHMYGOSH*) or shout in irritation (*NOYOU CANNOT HAVE ONE!*). So, despite the absence of descriptive texts and audio effects, it is quite easy for the reader to picture the surrounding sounds.

One of the peculiarities of animated films is definitely the voicing of the characters. In the case with the Three Kingdoms trilogy, some of the characters are more curious than others in this aspect. As mentioned before, young Howard was voiced by a peer, who is expressive in his intonations, showing all the true emotions of a child. Spot has a deep voice, which is made somewhat unreal with the help of sound-altering technologies. The same goes for Nyarlathotep, whose voice is metallic and multilayered, which definitely gives it an astral tint. Professors Rice's and Atwood's nationalities are manifested by the accents of their voicing actors – the former a Scotsman, the latter an Indian.

Another aspect of creating an eerie atmosphere that is common for the novels and the films is their visual side. The colours are mostly dark, often monochrome for particular locations – white for the snowy R'Lyeh, green for the underwater city of Y'ha Nthlei, red for the infernal world of V'rool. The weather in Providence is mostly rainy or foggy, with indistinct shapes and angular lines, which enhances the mysteriousness of the surroundings. There is thunder and lightning at the moment of Cthulhu's arrival to R'Lyeh, which, together with Nyarlathotep quoting the Bible's *Book of Revelation*, make the whole scene absolutely apocalyptic.

In spite of being based on the dark lore of the Cthulhu Mythos, both versions of the trilogy show the best correlation with the ideas normally seen essential in children's and teenage culture. We can easily trace the motif of the importance of friendship for every creature – be it a lonely ostracized child or a fearsome monster from outer space. The relationship between Howard and his parents illustrates how vital it is to love and value your family members, although they can make mistakes and their life choices are questionable sometimes. The trilogy teaches young people to see themselves as a part of something bigger than just an individual. However, individuality is also a trait to be honoured but not mocked at.

Having looked at the reflection of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos in the graphic novels and animated films trilogy *Howard Lovecraft and the Three Kingdoms*, we have come to the following conclusions. It is a valid way to get a younger audience acquainted with H. P. Lovecraft as an author, which sticks to the original mythology, on the one hand, and teaches universal moral values, on the other. The characters are vivid and realistic in their depiction. The special Lovecraftian atmosphere is rendered through the language, sounds and colours. And the plot is an illustration of how the biography and creative work of a writer can be intertwined to create a whole new fictional reality.

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