



“MATH, NOT EVEN ONCE: ALTERED STATES AS AN
AESTHETIC AND GENERIC STRATEGY IN H.P.
LOVECRAFT’S ‘THE DREAMS IN THE WITCH HOUSE’”

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Plan

- Defining the Weird
- Altered states in Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature*
- "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1933)
 - Altered as a narrative strategy
 - Dreams, aesthetics, and knowledge
 - Gilman as a Weird taler

Defining the Weird?

- Unclear definition
- Quoting Sorenson 2010, Noys & Murphy characterize the weird as an “unsettling transnational hybrid of science fiction, horror, and fantasy” that “was born in the hothouse of late-Victorian and Edwardian low culture and reached maturity in the ‘pulp modernism’ of H.P. Lovecraft.”
- “a provisional definition for Old Weird’ fiction: late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stories that undercut anthropocentrism by thematizing the insufficiency of science and human reason to comprehend the universe. [...] Old Weird fiction utilizes elements of horror, science fiction and fantasy to showcase the impotence and insignificance of human beings within a much larger universe populated by often malign powers and forces that greatly exceed the human capacity to understand or control them.” (Weinstock 182-183)
- **“Although weird fiction is a profoundly hybrid form, central to attempts to define the weird as a genre has been its estrangement of our sense of reality.”** (Noys & Murphy 117)

Altered states in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

- Lovecraft's aims: to "establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form", despite its being assaulted by the "materialistic sophistication" of modern literature, "which clings to frequently felt emotions and external events, and of a naïvely insipid idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to 'uplift' the reader toward a suitable degree of smirking optimism" (1).
- The Weird takes its roots in the supernatural explanations offered to the "fear of the unknown", which were first suggested by dreams and unexplained natural phenomena.
- It , relies on "principles whose appeal, if not always universal, must necessarily be poignant and permanent to minds of the requisite sensitiveness" (1-2).

Lovecraft's definition

“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; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.” (4-5)

The Weird as an altered state

- Carl Sederholm: “At their best, weird tales do not merely frighten readers; they transform feelings of fear and dread into actual concern for one’s safety and sanity. An effective weird tale may even leave readers feeling stunned and helpless, unable to process what they know to be real” (163).
- Michel Houellebecq goes a step further, claiming that Lovecraft’s work is effective to the point that his readers might begin to “find the iodine odour of floatsam foul and repulsive” and that “it is difficult, after having read HPL, to imagine a batrachian calmly.” (19)

Altered states as an aesthetic goal

- “Certain of Poe’s tales possess an almost absolute perfection of artistic form which make them veritable beacon-lights in the province of the short story. Poe could, when he wished, give his prose a richly poetic cast [...] and in the case where he has done this we have an effect of lyrical phantasy almost narcotic in essence—an opium pageant of dream in the language of dream” (52-53).
- In his first letter to Clark Ashton Smith, Lovecraft describes the latter’s work as “a world of opiate phantasy & horror”, and laments having “no work of even approximately equal genius to exhibit in reciprocation”, which he proposes “is the fault of [his] mediocre ability & not of [his] inclination” (SL 109).

The Dreams in the Witch House

- “Whether the dreams brought on the fever or the fever brought on the dreams Walter Gilman did not know” (612).
- Unclear ontological status.

Dreams as an aesthetic experience

- 4 levels of dreams:
 - *the apparently mundane world,*
 - *the “lighter dreams” (WH 617),*
 - *the fourth-dimensional space or “deeper dreams” (621),*
 - *and the alien planets.*

Fourth Dimension

- “Gilman’s dreams consisted largely in plunges through limitless abysses of inexplicably coloured twilight and bafflingly disordered sounds; abysses whose material and gravitational properties, and whose relation to his own entity, he could not even begin to explain.”
- “All the objects — organic and inorganic alike — were totally beyond description or even comprehension. Gilman sometimes compared the inorganic matter to prisms, labyrinths, clusters of cubes and planes, and Cyclopean buildings; and the organic things struck him variously as groups of bubbles, octopi, centipedes, living Hindoo idols, and intricate arabesques roused into a kind of ophidian animation. Everything he saw was unspeakably menacing and horrible; and whenever one of the organic entities appeared by its motions to be noticing him, he felt a stark, hideous fright which generally jolted him awake.” (616)

Alien planets

- “He was half lying on a fantastically balustraded terrace above a boundless jungle of outlandish, incredible peaks, balanced planes, domes, minarets, horizontal disks poised on pinnacles, and numberless forms of still greater wildness—some of stone and some of metal—which glittered gorgeously in the mixed, almost blistering glare from a polychromatic sky. [...] The pavement from which he easily raised himself was a veined polished stone beyond his power to identify, and the tiles were cut in bizarre-angled shapes which struck him as less asymmetrical than based on some unearthly symmetry whose laws he could not comprehend. The balustrade was chest-high, delicate, and fantastically wrought, while along the rail were ranged at short intervals little figures of grotesque design and exquisite workmanship.” (624-625)

Mundane reality

- “Sometimes he would take walks through shadowy tangles of unpaved musty-smelling lanes where eldritch brown houses of unknown age leaned and tottered and leered mockingly through narrow, small-paned windows. Here he knew strange things had happened once, and there was a faint suggestion behind the surface that everything of that monstrous past might not — at least in the darkest, narrowest, and most intricately crooked alleys — have utterly perished.” (614)

Dreams grant knowledge

- “He was getting an intuitive knack for solving Riemannian equations, and astonished Professor Upham by his comprehension of fourth-dimensional and other problems which had floored all the rest of the class” (618). Similarly, Gilman is surprised by his growing knowledge pertaining to Keziah Mason’s magic: “How did he know so much about what they expected? How did he know the time when Nahab and her acolyte were due to bear the brimming bowl which would follow the black cock and the black goat?” (618).
- “How did he know so much about what they expected? How did he know the time when Nahab and her acolyte were due to bear the brimming bowl which would follow the black cock and the black goat?” (636).

Dreams grant knowledge

- “Just what had really happened was maddeningly obscure, and for a moment both Gilman and Elwood exchanged whispered theories of the wildest kind. Had Gilman unconsciously succeeded better than he knew in his studies of space and its dimensions? Had he actually slipped outside our sphere to points unguessed and unimaginable? Where—if anywhere—had he been on those nights of daemonic alienage? The roaring twilight abysses—the green hillside—the blistering terrace—the pulls from the stars—the ultimate black vortex—the black man—the muddy alley and the stairs—the old witch and the fanged, furry horror—the bubble-congeries and the little polyhedron—the strange sunburn—the wrist-wound—the unexplained image—the muddy feet—the throat marks—the tales and fears of the superstitious foreigners—what did all this mean? To what extent could the laws of sanity apply to such a case?” (635).

Dreams grant knowledge science cannot account for

- “For three days Gilman and Elwood canvassed the local museums in an effort to identify the strange spiky image, but always without success. In every quarter, however, interest was intense; for the utter alienage of the thing was a tremendous challenge to scientific curiosity. One of the small radiating arms was broken off and subjected to chemical analysis. Professor Ellery found platinum, iron and tellurium in the strange alloy; but mixed with these were at least three other apparent elements of high atomic weight which chemistry was absolutely powerless to classify. Not only did they fail to correspond with any known element, but they did not even fit the vacant places reserved for probable elements in the periodic system” (631).

The Weird as epistemology

- The aesthetic experiences of altered states in "The Dreams in the Witch house" reveal the fundamental inadequacy of explanations based on what is normal.
- **"It involves a sensation of *wrongness*: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here.** Yet if that entity or object *is* here, then **the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid.** The weird this is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate" (Fisher 15)
- As Jeffrey Weinstock proposes, in Lovecraft's fiction, "modern rationalist understanding of how the universe works are shown to be merely a flimsy façade erected over the shifting substrate of premodern belief vindicated as true" (181).

The Dreams in the Witch House as the Weird

- “Possibly Gilman ought not to have studied so hard. Non-Euclidean calculus and quantum physics are enough to stretch any brain, and when one mixes them with folklore, and tries to trace a strange background of multi-dimensional reality behind the ghoulish hints of the Gothic tale and the wild whispers of the chimney-corner, one can hardly expect to be wholly free from mental tension” (612).
- In SHL, Lovecraft argues that “the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper” (2) is one of the inexpugnable manifestations of the longstanding human fascination for tales of cosmic horror, and proposes the “Gothic school” as the direct predecessor of the Weird, inasmuch as it “inspired real weavers of cosmic terror” (15-16).

The Dreams in the Witch House as the Weird

- Gilman's interests, which make the story possible, are the two prerequisite of the true Weird tale
- “For those who relish speculation regarding the future, the tale of supernatural horror provides an interesting field. Combated by a mounting wave of plodding realism, cynical flippancy, and sophisticated disillusionment, it is yet encouraged by a parallel tide of growing mysticism, as developed both through the fatigued reaction of “occultists” and religious fundamentalists against materialistic discovery and through the stimulation of wonder and fancy by such enlarged vistas and broken barriers as modern science has given us with its intra-atomic chemistry, advancing astrophysics, doctrines of relativity, and probings into biology and human thought.” (SHL 106-107)

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