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Brianna Williams

*University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*, [ply691@mocs.utc.edu](mailto:ply691@mocs.utc.edu)

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Weird and Cosmic Short Horror Fiction and the Illustration of Existential Fears

Brianna Williams

Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

English Department

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Dr. Michael Jaynes

Senior Lecturer of English

Thesis Director

Dr. Matthew Guy

Associate Professor of English

Departmental Examiner

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Author's Note:

In this paper, the work and writings of author H.P. Lovecraft are discussed. While his influence on the weird and cosmic subgenres of horror fiction are considered substantial within this thesis, everyone involved in the paper firmly denounce Lovecraft's well-documented anti-Semitic and racist beliefs, along with any aspects of his work that contain racist or anti-Semitic attitudes.

## Introduction:

Horror fiction is a genre of literature unique in its ability to present its readers with the appalling, the scandalous, the shocking, and the disturbing while remaining acceptable to view and enjoy. Because of this ability, the genre is able to mirror real-life horrors or anxieties that readers face in their own lives. In fact, horror fiction allows people to address things happening around or to them that are often too frightening to directly accept. In this sense, horror fiction can serve as a type of catharsis—a means through which readers not only *can*, but *must* realize their own fears and anxieties. Existing research discusses how more circumscribed or concrete “horrors” in the world, such as the AIDS epidemic or world wars, are reflected in horror fiction. Additionally, criticism of horror points to more immediate fears and realities being reflected in horror fiction, such as fears of Communism, authoritarianism, or environmental disasters. In this paper, however, I will examine the more pervasive, abstract, and existential fears—such as fear of the unknown, death and dying, and the meaning of existence—specifically found in weird and cosmic horror. The paper will also discuss how these works of literature allow readers to indirectly confront those fears. Through examining specific works in the often conflated weird and cosmic horror subgenres, such as famous works like H.P. Lovecraft’s cosmic “The Call of Cthulhu” and lesser-known and discussed short stories like Neil Gaiman’s weird “Feeders and Eaters,” this paper reveals how these specific subgenres of horror are able to mirror and reveal real existential fears of their readers. The paper concludes with an exploration of why horror fiction, a genre primarily existing to elicit fear, is somehow a more tolerable form through which to look at real-life horror and anxieties. In that section, the paper will look directly at how cosmic and weird horror are able to be horrific, repellent, and terrifying, while also remaining significant and compelling by providing an allegorical reading of the reader’s own anxieties.

## Defining horror, cosmic horror, and weird horror:

Because of its many subgenres and the lack of an entirely clear defining feature, defining horror as a literary genre is deceptively complex. Though the horror genre often contains distinct characterizing figures such as the vampire, monster, demon, ghost, psychopath, and serial killer, these characters in themselves are not necessarily limited to the horror genre (for example, works of science fiction or fantasy can contain beasts and monsters), nor are they always present within a specific work of horror fiction, and therefore cannot serve as *defining* characteristics of the genre. In fact, due to the multiple subgenres of horror and their varying intricacies, defining horror as a comprehensive genre itself is very difficult. Noël Carroll summarizes the complexity of defining artistic genres, and specifically horror fiction, in *Philosophy of Horror*: “it should not be assumed that all genres can be analyzed in the same way. Westerns, for example, are identified primarily by virtue of their setting. Novels, films, plays, paintings, and other works, that are grouped under the label ‘horror’ are identified according to a different sort of criteria” (14). Carroll goes on to argue that this criteria is largely the emotion that the genre intends to evoke. Horror and other similar genres (i.e., suspense, thriller, etc.) “derive their very names from the effects they are intended to promote” (Carroll 14). Likewise, Mocna *et al.* generally defines the literary form of horror as “a genre of popular literature focused on evoking emotions of dread, fear, and tension,” as quoted in Viktória Prohászková’s “The Genre of Horror” (Prohászková 134). While this definition of horror—a genre that intends to and succeeds in evoking a literal sense of horror— will suffice for the purposes of this paper, it is notable that the various subgenres of horror accomplish, and are comprised of, more than the emotions that they evoke. In other words, the definition of the horror genre as one that evokes a sense of horror from readers is true and an excellent

identifying characteristic for the genre, but it should not be used as a means to limit the horror genre's capabilities.

Prohászková goes further in her definition of horror, stating that “the most accurate [definition of horror] is the one that defines horror through each of its categories and its subgenres” (132). The two subgenres of horror that will be discussed and examined most notably in my research are weird and cosmic horror, both of which are often traced back to author H.P. Lovecraft and are generally used synonymously. In his work *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H.P. Lovecraft said that he writes weird fiction, a subgenre of horror fiction that is *made of* cosmic horror elements. In this way, Lovecraft himself seems to conflate the two and even uses them interchangeably within this specific work. However, while Lovecraft's weird horror tales most always contained cosmic horror elements that allowed him to fuse the two in description (for instance, when he writes that “... the more restrained approaches to cosmic horror in *Lamia* and many of Keats's other poems, are typical British illustrations of the advent of the weird to formal literature.”) (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”), all weird horror is not cosmic horror—the two subgenres, though often used synonymously, do diverge in some ways. For instance, Lovecraft defines the weird tale as such:

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. (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”)

While many aspects of the weird tale, according to Lovecraft's definition, are present in cosmic horror, cosmicism encompasses more than the weird tale does. In a letter written in 1927, Lovecraft defines his philosophy of cosmicism present within his stories:

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. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. ("The Cthulhu Mythos")

Using these definitions of cosmic and weird horror, it can be concluded that while every cosmic horror tale is also a weird tale— given that the nature of cosmicism accomplishes the same goals as the weird tale— but that not every weird horror tale is also a cosmic horror story, due to cosmicism's need for specific elements (such as the lack of validity or significance of human concepts in the cosmos-at-large—in other words, the insignificance of humanity as we know it) that are not always present in the weird tale. It is likely due to this idea that the two subgenres are so often used synonymously. Nonetheless, both of these subgenres of horror are not pieces of horror literature that are perhaps most often recalled when one thinks of the genre: those filled with ghosts, murderers, vampires, or eerie graveyards. Rather, weird and cosmic tales are categorized as horror fiction due to their ability to procure "a profound sense of dread" ("Supernatural Horror in Literature") from readers through truly strange, unknown, or undefined circumstances, characters, and plots. And, while weird and cosmic horror are in many ways very similar and are often used interchangeably to categorize the sub-genre of horror

which contains existential fears and anxieties beyond human control, it is important to keep in mind that the weird tale is not an inherently cosmic tale.

### **How the horror genre reveals real-life anxieties:**

Jeffrey Cohen's theory from his work *Monster Theory* serves as much of the groundwork for my research. According to Cohen's *Monster Theory*, "the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant." Here, Cohen reveals that the word monster is derived from the Latin word *monstrum*—a word that means "that which reveals" (4). Similarly, in her article "What is a Monster," Natalie Lawrence suggests that the word monster derives from the Latin "monstrare," translated to "to demonstrate." Both Cohen and Lawrence's understanding of the word 'monster's roots mean the same thing fundamentally— that monsters "reveal, portend, show and make evident, often uncomfortably so" (Lawrence). Cohen extends this statement in his work by saying that that the genre of monsters—horror fiction—presents, whether it be through physical monsters or horrifying situations, a type of "glyph" that readers then decipher as the "hierophants" (4). In other words, these horror glyphs are significant in that they present real-life fears for readers to grasp. The glyphs of horror offer readers a palatable way to absorb the things that they are often too afraid to bring up, discuss, or even think about. Scholars suggest that in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for instance, the plot and characters reveal the fears and anxieties surrounding new science in the early 1800s: "It is not merely the creation of life itself, the technical ambition of science, that is called into question [in *Frankenstein*]. It is the unfolding moral choices and unforeseen ethical responsibilities that may come with scientific advances: artificial intelligence or artificial life, nuclear power or nuclear weaponry, the genome sequence or invasive genetic editing" (Holmes). Later in history, Richard Matheson also used horror fiction as a means to bring up real cultural fears with his novel *I Am Legend*. Written in the mid-1950s

—in the heart of the Cold War—the horror novel tells the story of Robert Neville, one of the last survivors of a vampiric pandemic whose virus he is immune to. The novel is a thinly-veiled representation of Matheson’s and many other Americans’ fears of the time: “the fear of nuclear and biological warfare looms over much of Matheson’s nineteen-fifties work, and in *I Am Legend*, Neville and his wife speculate in a flashback on a possible relationship between nuclear bombings and the vampire virus, or rather, mutated insects as disease carriers” (Clasen 317). Roughly a decade later, Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby*—a horror novel about a woman living in Manhattan who gives birth to the child of Satan—was published. Some view Levin’s 1967 novel, and the subsequent film that came out a year later based on her book, as a representation of the fears many women had during the late 1960s and 1970s regarding childbirth. “The era saw a lifting of taboos concerning childbirth,” meaning both that pregnancy was not necessarily a subject that had to be regarded romantically anymore, and that women were facing and discussing the fact that pregnancy could be dangerous and “characterized by ‘anxiety, depression, and the sense of being a sacrificial victim’” (Fischer 6). Likewise, other feminist translations detail that the novel also reveals the growing women’s movement that fought for abortion rights in the 1960s after finally being given the chance to think of birthing as something that can be frightening (Valerius). In all three of these examples taken from the history of literature’s horror fiction genre, their content served as fictional illustrations of their generation’s cultural fears. The words that Clasen uses to describe Matheson’s *I Am Legend* seem to poignantly epitomize this statement for all of the genre: “... plot and situation...give compelling symbolic form to universal human fears” (314). As Cohen and Lawrence would probably agree, these horror works do, indeed, give “symbolic form to universal human fears” (Clasen 314), serving as the glyphs that their reader hierophants deciphered as their own personal, very real, horrors and fears.

*Frankenstein*, *I am Legend*, and *Rosemary's Baby* all serve as a lens through which readers can observe socio-historical, cultural fears—more “concrete” in nature, the fears observed in horror novels such as these have their basis in widely understood fears of a certain time, situation, or place, like that of the advancement of science and its morality, in *Frankenstein's* case. The horror fiction genre’s ability to represent these socio-historical fears through literature is well researched and extensively discussed in scholarly circumstances, and there are far more examples of how the genre does so than the three that I briefly examined. However, there are many fears of mankind that cannot be defined in the same way that the ones I brought up in *Frankenstein*, *I am Legend*, or *Rosemary's Baby* can. These different fears are distinct in that unlike the more “concrete” ones previously mentioned, they are not rooted in any specific or particular time, place, event, or situation. To more succinctly refer to these specific types of fear, I will call them “existential fears,” drawn from Walter Kaufmann’s analysis of existentialism: “The self is essentially intangible and must be understood in terms of possibilities, dread, and decisions. When I behold my responsibilities, I experience that dread which is the ‘dizziness of freedom’ and my choice is made in fear and trembling. These are motifs that remain central in all so-called existentialism” (Kaufmann 17). G.D. Walters expands on the psychological elements of existentialism and existential fear:

Existential fear is the natural consequence of a human organism's capacity to view itself as separate from the environment and cognitively cope with situations and events that threaten its existence...[it] encompasses both the anxiety associated with an emerging awareness of human finitude and a sense of isolation from the world brought on by perceptions of separateness from the environment.” (Walters)

In other words, it is in being human and existence itself that existentialism has its basis; in my research, what I define as existential fears surround the idea of existence and the anxieties that come along with it from anything that we perceive to threaten our existence, and due to the

human nature of assuming that we are separate from our environment. For example, fear of one's own or a loved one's death, the unknown, and the meaning of existence—all of which result from being inherently human and the idea that our existence and wellbeing are threatened — are all existential fears that have endured throughout time and place. They are not “concrete,” but rather, are more pervasive and abstract in nature. These are the fears that much of my remaining research will hone in on—the ability of horror fiction, and more specifically, the weird and cosmic subgenres of horror fiction, to reveal these pervasive, abstract, existential fears.

Just as a variety of horror fiction literature can serve as a screen through which readers are able to find and comprehend the real-world, socio-historical, concrete fears they and others around them may have or have had, the same can happen with existential fears within the genre. Through my research, I've found that most often, these more existential fears can be found within two specific subgenres of horror fiction—cosmic and weird horror. While it is certainly possible to identify existential fears within other horror subgenres, the nature of weird and cosmic horror lends itself to the discovery of more existential, pervasive fears. In fact, the often-cited father of cosmic horror, who is also known as being an author who popularized weird horror, H.P. Lovecraft wrote that the “really weird” tale must instill a considerable sense of dread within the reader, a feeling of fear regarding contact with the unknown, and provide an overall atmosphere of uneasiness (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”). A pioneer of both cosmic and weird horror, Lovecraft himself described the subgenres as those that incite fears such as “a profound sense of dread” or “contact with unknown spheres and powers” (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”). Thus, the subgenres of horror that must “[excite] in the reader” (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”) some type of decidedly existential atmosphere—cosmic and weird— are the ones that most often serve as a screen for readers to identify and discover their own personal existential fears.

### **Analysis of specific cosmic and weird horror literature:**

The first example of cosmic horror—and thus, given the aforementioned idea that all cosmic horror stories are also weird tales, weird horror— that I will use is one of the most well-known within the subgenre, H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu.” The story is one of the first that was actually identified as weird or cosmic horror, due to Lovecraft himself defining his style of writing, and serves as a lens through which leaders can look to see their own fears of the unknown. While Lovecraft was certainly not the first to write horror that allows readers to see their less concrete and more existential fears, he was the first to define and popularize the cosmic and weird subgenres of horror. “The Call of Cthulhu” tells the story of a narrator who, after finding his late uncle’s research surrounding a strange figure and an unnerving cult, begins further research on the subject and eventually learns of Cthulhu, a monstrous creature that defies human logic and waits to begin ruling the world once again. The story would be not unlike most other, more typical horror stories featuring strange monsters and hopeless victims, were it not for the way Lovecraft delivers the tale. The sighting of the story’s monster, Cthulhu, is only told in a few paragraphs near the end of the tale, and even in that moment of the story Lovecraft focuses not on the details of Cthulhu itself—in the story, the narrator claims that “The Thing cannot be described” (“The Call of Cthulhu”)—but instead describes the unsettling nature of the whole experience, and how it pertains to everything humans claim to know:

Three men were swept up by the flabby claws before anybody turned. God rest them, if there be any rest in the universe. They were Donovan, Guerrero, and Ångstrom. Parker slipped as the other three were plunging frenziedly over endless vistas of green-crustled rock to the boat, and Johansen swears he was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn’t have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse. (“The Call of Cthulhu”)

Lovecraft's story differs materially from traditional horror stories like that of *Frankenstein* or *Dracula* in that the focus is not necessarily on how horrific the monster itself is, but on what the existence of this monster means. Moreover, "The Call of Cthulhu" is not so much focused on the plot surrounding the monster and what it does, but rather, how the monster's existence affects life now and could affect life in the future. In this way, Lovecraft creates a tale in which readers are not most afraid of the monster but what the monster's existence signifies—a situation, concept, or object that humans cannot control. Lovecraft further ingrains this fear when the narrator shares that Cthulu will rise again when mankind becomes like "the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy" ("The Call of Cthulhu"). In this quote, the narrator seems to say that perhaps it is in the control of humans. This idea of control is fleeting, however, when readers recognize that despite any one person's actions, humankind is hopelessly becoming more like this description of the Great Old Ones. Again, this idea is not frightening because it means we are subject to Cthulhu's return—readers know that Cthulhu itself is a monster of fiction; it is frightening because it allows readers to see the way that the world has become like that of the Great Old Ones. We need not fear the return of some great, unknown monster such as Cthulhu because we have already become the horrible world that Cthulhu would introduce. The most horrifying discovery in reading "The Call of Cthulu," however, is that what exists of our whole world—biology, the galaxy, psychology, eons of history that we've learned and taught—is only a small, indistinguishable piece of the universe: "something frightfully suggestive of old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conceptions have no part" ("The Call of Cthulhu"). Moreover, this idea lends itself to the existential fear that humans, and life as we know it, is meaningless—that everything we have worked thousands of years to learn more about and grow from is simply a small, meaningless part of a much larger force. Readers are

able to grasp and subsequently contemplate this fear, one that may not often come up in daily life or conversation, through reading Lovecraft's tale.

Another similar horror story that can fit into both the subgenres of cosmic and weird horror— due to the cosmic elements of pointlessness in regards to the cosmos-at-large and the weird elements of dread of unknown forces— is Donald A. Wollheim's "Mimic," a shorter and less dramatic Cthulu-esque tale. Originally published in 1942, "Mimic" is a first-person short story told by an unidentified narrator whose life-long, introverted, slightly odd neighbor turns out to be a beetle-like insect who successfully lived among humans in New York City before giving birth to similar insect children. The story's summary seems more ridiculous than unsettling or frightful—it seems almost laughable. Yet in reading the short tale itself, it becomes much less comical. Wollheim does not necessarily conceal the fact that the narrator's neighbor is another creature just to give a shocking and absurd ending. Rather, he teases out this idea, immediately stating in the work's second paragraph "...We think we know a lot. We know little or nothing" (Wollheim 280) to foreshadow the revelation that what the narrator believed was a human is, in fact, an unknown insect. Shortly after this opening statement that begins to unsettle the reader, the narrator begins to discuss the oddness of nature and how "you realize how nature uses the art of camouflage" (Wollheim 281) to further foreshadow the story's ending. Besides foreshadowing the tale's strange ending, though, these indicative statements also serve another purpose in Wollheim's story—to begin introducing the reader to the real-life existential fears the story is revealing. Despite the chance that a reader will likely guess most aspects of the story's ending before reaching it, and the fact that the plot itself is not immediately frightening, Wollheim effectively creates a chilling and unsettling tale by mirroring very real human fears within the story. Besides mirroring the generalized existential "fear of the unknown" by telling a story of a strange, unknown creature passing as a human under our own noses, "Mimic" also reveals two more specific existential anxieties that go hand in hand—the

fear that humans are not as superior as we like to believe, and the fear that the world is much grander than we know. A primary chunk of the story is made up of the narrator describing nature and its uncanny ability to camouflage. The narrator describes a multitude of creatures who, being weaker than other “enemies,” mimic the enemies around them as a way to survive a world or situation otherwise threatening to them: “weak caterpillars that look like big armored beetles,” “a moth in Central America that looks like a wasp,” “beetles that look like army ants” who “have false markings like ant thoraxes and they run along in imitation of ant speed” (Wollheim 280-281). The narrator goes on to mention humans—“the greatest killer, the greatest hunter of them all”—implying that if other creatures mimic more dominant ones, would they not mimic the most dominant of all? Despite the words used to describe humans in this line—“greatest killer” and “greatest hunter”—the full story implies a very different description of mankind. The reader only needs to return to the first few sentences of Wollheim’s short story to be reminded of this: “We know little or nothing” (Wollheim 280). If humans are, truly, the smartest, most dominant, “irresistible master[s]” (Wollheim 281) of the world, why is it that we can not distinguish a beetle from any other normal human living among us? While the story’s example may be somewhat foolish, it mirrors the real “beetles” who have lived and currently live among us. “Beetles” like Hitler, who former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met and spoke with on various occasions and found to be completely harmless, or Larry Nassar, who sexually assaulted dozens of young women while their parents were in the room as it happened. It is these real instances that the reader’s mind can wander to while reading this story, and that reveals that the narrator’s original statement is true—we know little or nothing. While man’s ego and human’s perceptions of man are very high, “Mimic” cuts away at that superiority and paints humans in a more realistic, but unflattering light. It brings out one of the deepest existential fears—that we are truly just the same as other creatures on this planet, and our perceived dominance and superiority is nothing more than a lie that we tell ourselves, pointing to the cosmic idea that the

universe is more complex than humans can understand. This existential fear that is revealed is extended by the very end of the story, in which the narrator reveals that he saw something else when the beetle's children flew off into the night, a "bat-winged thing" camouflaged into a building's chimney that flew away after the cloud of beetle-like children (Wollheim 283). In finding another creature hiding among normalcy, the narrator states "nature practices deception in every angle. Evolution will create a being for every niche that can be found, no matter how unlikely" (Wollheim 283), leaving the reader to question which niches in our own world can be filled by something unknown, or unseen to us. These cosmic elements of the story in which the narrator discovers beings outside of typical human understanding reveal that "human laws ... have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large" ("The Cthulhu Mythos"), solidifying the existential fears found within this story that our perceived dominance and superiority are false, and that the subsequent meaning of our existence that we derive from those perceptions does not exist; therefore, life is truly meaningless.

Neil Gaiman's "Feeders and Eaters" is another example of a weird, though not cosmic, horror story whose contents allow readers to uncover a real and preexisting existential fear. The frame narrative, starting with an unnamed narrator who runs into an old coworker, Eddie Barrow, from whom the majority of the story is told, is about Eddie's experience living in a house with a family and an old woman—a woman who, as Eddie later implies, has eaten the raw meat of a living cat and himself to presumably stay alive. Within this gruesome tale lies a widely shared existential fear of death, but one perhaps less glaring than those found in Wollheim's "Mimic." The woman in the story, Miss Corvier, must eat, or at least believes that she must eat, raw meat in order to stay healthy and, assumably, stay alive. This belief of hers is first revealed when Eddie finds her lying in bed, after the family with whom they live asked him to check on her after her week-long disappearance:

'Do you need a doctor? I says.

'She shakes her head. I'm not ill, she says. I'm hungry. That's all.

'Are you sure, I say, because I can call someone, it's not a bother...

'She says, Edward? I don't want to be a burden on anyone, but I'm so hungry...

That's when she surprised me. She looks embarrassed. Then she says, very quietly, *Meat*. It's got to be fresh and raw. (Gaiman 940)

Later, after Eddie discovers the family cat alive and half-eaten in Miss Carvier's room and kills it out of mercy, he tells of Miss Carvier returning and crying over the dead cat, saying "I'm an old woman...I need my meat" (Gaiman 941). It is Miss Carvier's obsession with immortality, her fear of lying in bed worthless, that makes her believe so strongly that raw meat is what keeps her going. Whether her belief is factually true or not, Miss Carvier's obsession with this "saving grace" brings her to commit horrible acts, ones that she herself is embarrassed by, like keeping a cat and eventually a man alive while picking at their flesh and eating their meat. This obsession and desperate belief that she clings to in hopes of some type of immortality can be likened to our own obsessive beliefs that keep us from fearing death—reincarnation, Heaven and Hell, passing on to "another life," and other similar spiritual or religious beliefs. In reading "Feeders and Eaters," readers can see in Miss Carvier's beliefs their own, and subsequently are faced with the existential fear of death and the fact that perhaps their obsessive beliefs appear to others how Miss Carvier's appear to us—outrageous and harmful to others in our life.

Towards the end of the story, when the narrative has switched back to the unnamed narrator, this fear is heightened as he notices the "old woman" that Eddie described in his horrific story: "But the woman waiting for him, outside, on the pavement, couldn't have been much over thirty. She had long, long hair, though...She looked a bit like a hippy, I suppose. Sort of pretty, in a hungry kind of way" (Gaiman 942). This observation brings more questions: Did eating raw meat truly reverse Miss Carvier's age or appearance? Was Eddie lying to himself as a way to make himself feel better about letting the woman eat at his body? Did Miss Carvier appear old and

frail to both herself and Eddie, when in reality, she was fine? Regardless of the interpretation the reader finds him or herself accepting, this revelation only magnifies the fears that “Feeders and Eaters” has revealed—if eating raw meat was, in fact, the solution to immortality, who’s to say which of our worldly beliefs about death and the afterlife is correct?; if Eddie seeing Miss Carvier as an elderly woman is a fabricated excuse as to why he is killing himself for her, which false ideals or beliefs are we handing ourselves over to as a way to comfort ourselves, when in reality they only harm us?; if both Miss Carvier and Eddie truly believe that she is an old, frail woman, despite her being no older than 30, what are we believing along with people who affirm these beliefs, and worse—who knows what we believe is false, but doesn’t tell us? Indeed, Gaiman’s “Feeders and Eaters” is one whose appalling contents reveal even more horrific existential fears—what if the very beliefs that lie at our foundation are all false? Drawing on Walter’s analysis of existential fear, Miss Carvier’s attempts to cope with the threat of her existence mirrors our fear that is a “natural consequence of...cognitively cop[ing] with situations and events that threaten [our] existence” (Walters). The bizarre final paragraph of this short story, though rather unclear, leaves readers with one last look at the strange ways we attempt to immortalize ourselves and others: “on the milk train back to the city I sat opposite a woman carrying a baby. It was floating in formaldehyde, in a heavy glass container” (Gaiman 492).

A truly “weird” horror story, though one that features more conventional horror motifs like skeletons and ghosts, “A Child in the Bush of Ghosts” by Olympe Bhêly-Quénum is another that deals with the existential fear of death, though in a different way than “Feeders and Eaters.” Bhêly-Quénum’s story is told by an 11-year-old child named Codjo, who describes walking through a dense forest in his town, Houêto, and eventually discovering a skeleton that leads him to an underground cave of many other skeletons and a paradise that Codjo says is called Wassai. The story is truly strange in that after Codjo’s first experience with the skeleton before he returned and was taken by it to Wassai, he is no longer frightened by anything he sees:

panthers and lions, “seventy-seven skeletons” (Bhêly-Quénum 308), and graffiti depicting sexual organs and human skulls do not frighten Codjo during his peculiar journey. His lack of fear seems to stem from his belief that death is not scary or real, which he exclaims several times in the story: “After all, what was there to be afraid of? Holding in my hand the hand of a human skeleton? ... Was I not with something human? Was I not sure now that my first encounter was simply the effect of a delusion? No, really, I was no longer afraid” (Bhêly-Quénum 307). It is in this 11-year-old child’s confident belief and experience that death isn’t real, or at least isn’t what we make of it, that our own existential fears can be found—are we, like Codjo so fearlessly did in his journey, walking amongst or near those we thought had died? Is the afterlife that we believe to be some type of alternate universe just across a river, as Codjo found? Even more frightening, moreover, is Codjo’s response upon returning from his three-day dreamlike journey and finding family and friends mourning his death: “Nobody’s dead. Death doesn't exist and if it does, no dead man will ever return” (Bhêly-Quénum 309). In this bold comment, Codjo is stating that even what he experienced—the skeletons, the death of his grandparents when he was 9, the “little house of joy without a keeper” called Wassai—was not evidence of death; rather, in Codjo’s words, readers find that which is evidence of the opposite, evidence that what we think of as death is not real, and that while we may no longer live on in the same way we did before, nobody truly dies. Because existentialism and existential fear surround that which threatens our existence, it is not just death that we fear, but anything surrounding the end of our existence that is not conclusive or cannot be understood. For these reasons, “A Child in the Bush of Ghosts” is perhaps more deeply unsettling than any other form of horror in the way that it does not provide frightful answers to our preexisting fears, like *Frankenstein* did for man’s fear of science, but only provides us with more frightful questions about our preexisting existential fear of death.

Jerome Bixby's "It's a Good Life" presents readers with perhaps the most common and general existential fear—what the meaning or purpose of existence even is. This theme of life's meaninglessness found in the story lends itself to "It's a Good Life" fitting into both the cosmic and weird horror subgenres. A short story originally written by Jerome Bixby in 1953 that has been made into two *Twilight Zone* episodes and used in a variety of pop culture references, "It's A Good Life" is the story of a town called Peaksville controlled by a three-year-old creature named Anthony who can manipulate the town's happenings by simply thinking of what he wants to occur. While Anthony's backstory is not revealed until the end of the story, it is eventually explained that after he was born the doctor who delivered Anthony, terrified of the creature he had just delivered, caused Anthony to have "whined and done the thing"—that "thing" being either separating Peaksville from the rest of the world or destroying the rest of the world and leaving only Peaksville remaining—"nobody knew which" (Bixby 347). As readers delve into a day in the life of Peaksville's citizens, who must pretend everything is good and must not make Anthony think that anything is going wrong for fear that he may try to "help" in a way that typically makes things worse, the point of existence in a town like Peaksville becomes a prominent question. The citizens cannot sing, for after someone in the town did so Anthony had "done something that made everyone afraid of singing from then on"(Bixby 344); children were to be kept away from Anthony always after "little Fred Smith had tried to play with Anthony on a dare" (Bixby 344); every task, even butchering meat and threshing wheat, had to be done by hand; the possibility that Anthony may undo the horrible things he'd done "when he was older, and maybe sorry" (Bixby 339) was only a desperate hope (of course, it was also possible that life could never return to completely normal if the rest of the world was destroyed at Anthony's birth); and in Peaksville, in order to survive, "everything *has* to be good" (Bixby 343) or at least appear good to Anthony. This type of existence seems horrifying and pointless—after all, what eventual good is there to come from surviving in this town that may be alone in the universe—

yet the story of Peaksville can also be read as merely a different version of our own world. Like in Peaksville, we too desperately seek to appease the “Anthony’s” of our lives, whether they be people like parents, bosses, and friends; situations or materials like assignments, social media, social interactions, or social standards; or gods and other higher beings. And, just as in Peaksville, we spend our time trying to appease these people and situations without any true idea of why it matters or how it will eventually make life better. In this way, “It’s a Good Life” presents the most overt existential fear and dread there is—that of the purpose of life—and reveals how it is present not just in Peaksville, but in our daily lives. Are we, too, merely pawns — watching what we say in front of specific people, eating and not eating certain things to look a certain way, working harder than we should have to, and attempting to “stay positive” despite the horrors that we face day in and day out— for a greater being or force that could be no better than a toddler with random and ever-changing whims? In reading Bixby’s story, readers must confront the fear of life’s meaning and the meaning of existence along with the characters of Peaksville. Yet at the end of the story, Bixby also details the pointlessness in the fear of why we exist itself: “It did no good to wonder about it. Nothing at all did any good—except to live as they must live” (Bixby 347). Though an entertaining read, “It’s a Good Life” is dreadfully depressing when one finds in it the real human experience and anxieties that mirror those of Peaksville’s citizens.

In each of these examples of cosmic and weird horror, there are clearly legitimate human anxieties and fears regarding existence and life that readers can draw from the story. These fears, like that of death and the stories we create to comfort us about death shown in “Feeders and Eaters” and “A Child in the Bush of Ghosts,” or the hopelessness and meaninglessness of life shown in “The Call of Cthulhu” and “It’s a Good Life,” have and will exist throughout time. These fears are not merely situated within a certain time frame or circumstance. Moreover, each of these existential fears is multi-layered and multi-faceted,

hence the difference in ways that stories like “The Call of Cthulhu” and “It’s a Good Life” are able to present the fear of a meaningless life. In one, meaninglessness reveals itself in the unknown and all-powerful beings or places (such as Cthulhu and R’lyeh) that we are unaware of —this causes the fear that everything we have put into learning and knowing our world over centuries is pointless in context. In another, meaninglessness presents itself in the form of minute, daily activities that are done without a second thought—this reveals the fear that our daily habits, the ones that make us restless or uneasy or unhappy anyways, may be pointless, and that no substantial and meaningful good comes from them. The ability of these subgenres to illustrate the complex and intricate anxieties of humans, and to do so in a way that its readers not only enjoy, but seek out, is indication that weird and cosmic horror are genres with considerable value, and perhaps value that is often overlooked due to the content of these tales that at surface-level may appear ridiculous or merely entertaining. Lovecraft summarizes the great ability of weird and cosmic horror with this quote interwoven into “The Call of Cthulhu”:

“Was I tottering on the brink of cosmic horrors beyond man’s power to bear? If so, they must be horrors of the mind alone.” Indeed, weird and cosmic horror do not deal with concrete horrors of the world, but horrors that are found within the human mind. The two subgenres somehow totter on the brink of horrors that are often beyond man’s power to bear, yet they offer up these horrors in a way that they can more easily be accepted and understood.

### **Why (Weird, Cosmic) Horror Works**

Why is it that works such as these—ones wherein the defining character of their genre is to purposefully instill fear and horror within their readers—are decidedly acceptable ways to confront real-life anxieties? While some would never confront the idea of the meaninglessness of life or the possibility that there is more beyond the known galaxies, through horror, they will

willingly and enthusiastically do so. Many critics, researchers, and writers have in the past attempted—and in many ways, succeeded—in explaining the paradox of why horror is so desirable. One such person is American Philosopher Noel Carroll, who discussed every well-known explanation to this paradox, discounted most, and used others to create his own theory of why humans choose to consume horror in his *Philosophy of Horror*. Carroll discounts so many previous theories because they are, according to him, “failed attempts to provide a comprehensive way of coming to terms with the paradox of horror” (Carroll 178). Carroll’s focus was not on only one subgenre of horror, nor one form of horror such as literature, but rather, he sought to provide one general explanation that could explain the paradox for all forms and subgenres of horror—visual art, film, literature; cosmic, supernatural, occult, etc. For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on explaining the paradox of only one form of horror (literature) and two often conflated subgenres of horror (weird and cosmic). This narrow concentration is primarily because the horror genre is so broad; while Carroll believed that there was one, all-encompassing answer to the question, I disagree. Just as Prohászková suggested when saying that “the most accurate [definition of horror] is the one that defines horror through each of its categories and its subgenres” (Prohászková 132), there may not be one perfect explanation for “why horror” that can fit every aspect of the genre. Lovecraft summarizes this well—though specifically discussing weird horror, the statement can apply to the horror genre in general: “Naturally we cannot expect all weird tales to conform absolutely to any theoretical model. Creative minds are uneven, and the best of fabrics have their dull spots” (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”). Furthermore, I also intend to answer a question somewhat different than Carroll’s—while he asked “why do people consume horror,” I wonder “why is the most frightening and appalling genre, horror, an acceptable and successful means to confront real-life anxieties?”.

In 1773, Anna Laetitia Aikin posed a similar question in her essay “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror.” She theorized that horror is so appealing because of human curiosity and suspense—that when we begin a work of horror, we feel compelled to finish it because we are curious to know more (Aikin). Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, while not necessarily regarding horror, also offers an explanation in his poem “On the Pleasure of Standing on Shore Watching a Shipwreck” through Schadenfreude—the feeling of pleasure that can come by watching another person’s troubles:

Pleasant it is, when on the great sea, the winds trouble the waters,

to gaze from shore upon another’s great tribulation:

Not because any man’s troubles are a delectable joy,

but because to perceive what ill you are free from yourself is pleasant. (Lucretius)

Carroll’s final theory is in many ways a combination of both of these ideas, fleshed out and more detailed so as to create a more precise answer. Carroll eventually describes the paradox of horror by saying that when humans are faced with a horrific being in a specific work of horror—whether it be a monster, a serial killer, a ghost, etc.—we are fascinated by them because there is something about them that is unknown and that we want to understand. Carroll explains that “this fascination can be savored, because the distress in question is not behaviorally pressing; it is a response to the thought of a monster, not to the actual presence of a disgusting or fearsome thing” (Carroll 190). In this way, it is both the curiosity of humans that Aikin describes and the pleasure of being outside of the danger that Lucretius writes of that draws humans to horror. And while there are situations, creatures, and people outside of the horror genre that can also fascinate humans, those that are found in the genre of horror are different since it is the disgust, terror, confusion, and fright that we feel towards them that also makes them fascinating. The frightening aspects of horror are an anomaly; they are strange, unknown, and in that way, they are scary—but it is that same strangeness and the unknown factor which makes them scary,

that also makes them fascinating: “Their deviation from the paradigms of our classificatory scheme captures our attention immediately. It holds us spellbound. It commands and retains our attention... One wants to gaze upon the unusual, even when it is simultaneously repelling” (Carroll 188).

Aikin, Lucretius, and Carroll seem to describe the paradox of horror well, but they do not discuss any aspect of the majority of my research—how horror fiction can mirror real-life fears and anxieties and assist individuals in confronting them. While their theories may provide an explanation as to why horror as a whole is enjoyable for many, they fail to answer why the genre whose purpose is to terrify is a valuable and acceptable means of showing people the real anxieties present in their lives, specifically how weird and cosmic horror do so in regards to existential fears. In discounting one specific explanation to the paradox of horror, Carroll describes the two prongs of horror critiques—one is that which rejects horror by primarily focusing on the repellent, horrific aspects of the work, and one is that which praises horror for the allegorical readings it offers. This paper itself is most like that of the latter. Carroll rejects this idea of finding allegory in horror by discussing film critic Robin Wood’s feminist reading of *Sisters*:

About *Sisters*, [Robin Wood] writes:

*Sisters* analyzes the ways in which women are oppressed within patriarchal society which one can define as the professional (Grace) and the psychosexual (Danielle/Dominique).

One wants to say “perhaps, but....” Specifically, what about the unnerving, gory murders and the brackish, fecal bond that links the Siamese twins? In general, Wood’s strategy is to characterize monsters as heroic because, for him, they represent what society, in the name of normality (and, often, the nuclear family) unconsciously represses. However, in

elucidating what he takes to be the emancipatory and uplifting aspects of monsters, sight is lost of their essentially repulsive nature. (Carroll 160)

Carroll's dismissal of horror literature's importance as allegorical readings—due to the lack of acknowledgment of the actual horrific aspects found within these works—may remain meaningful for certain works and subgenres of horror literature. For cosmic and weird horror, however, these important allegorical readings can only be found through the horrific aspects of each tale. In other words, the gruesome, repelling, and terrifying aspects of weird and cosmic horror lend themselves to the allegorical reading itself—without them, these allegorical readings would not be possible. In this way, cosmic and weird horror literature do not ignore the “repulsive nature” of horror fiction, but use that nature as a way to provide an allegorical reading of the work. Each of the weird and cosmic works I discussed earlier in the paper also suggests that this theory is true. In Lovecraft's “The Call of Cthulhu,” for example, it is the horrible, monstrous Cthulhu and his disorienting, frightening city of R'lyeh that lend themselves to the reading of this work as one that shows readers their own existential anxieties. While Lovecraft's Cthulhu is perhaps less gory and unnerving than the 1972 film *Sisters*, it still stands that without the terrifying descriptions of Cthulhu as an “[abysm] of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch [contradiction] of all matter, force, and cosmic order” (“The Call of Cthulhu”), readers could not find in the tale the same anxieties of their own lives—if Cthulhu were not *this* horrific and strange, then it would not cause readers to ponder their own fears about what is unknown in our universe, and what is beyond the realm of our understanding. After all, if the unknown were just somewhat odd or different, like a fairy or gnome from fantasy stories, then it would not be a frightening concept that causes readers to discover their fears. Carroll's own description of monstrous things in horror complements this idea: “The impossible being does disgust; but that disgust is part of an overall narrative address which is not only pleasurable, but whose potential pleasure depends on the confirmation of the existence of the monster as a being that violates,

defies, or problematizes standing cultural classifications” (Carroll 186). Gaiman’s “Feeders and Eaters” is perhaps an example more similar to *Sisters*, given its gory and repulsive elements. If arguing along with Carroll’s theory, although “Feeders and Eaters” may provide an allegorical reading that presents readers with their own fears about death, this allegorical reading alone is not enough to answer why a reader would choose the work because it ignores the fact that the work is also gruesome, gory, and of course, terrifying. However, this idea fails to recognize that without the gruesome and terrifying aspects of “Feeders and Eaters”—specifically, lines like “... from the chest up, it was alive, and breathing, and fur and everything. But its back legs, its rib cage. Like chicken carcass. Just bones,” or “it was only when you looked below the wrist that you saw most of the flesh had been picked from the [human] bones... leaving only dried morsels of meat, scraps, and crumbs...” (Gaiman 941-942)—the allegorical reading would not exist, or would only exist less convincingly. These descriptions are necessary for creating the allegorical reading because they allow readers to see the frightening idea behind the fact that there is a similarity between Miss Carvier’s obsessive beliefs—and how they lead her to commit unspeakable acts—and their own obsessive beliefs that have been created to ease their fear of death. Without the goriness of the explanations, the deeper meaning of the tale is lost, and with it, the ability for readers to grasp and accept their own existential fears. Each of the other weird and cosmic horror stories I previously discussed serves as evidence to the same point. Without the strange and disturbing description in Wollheim’s “Mimic” of the previously supposed man as a (now dead) insect-like creature—“What we thought was a coat was a huge black wing sheath...He had a thorax like an insect...there was a sharp, round hole newly pierced in his chest just above the arms, oozing a watery liquid” (Wollheim 282)—the story’s metaphorical reading of our human existential fears of the unknown would not be as strong because the unknown figure would not be strange or frightening to us, and therefore would not lead us to the conclusion that we have fears about what is unknown in our own world. Bhêly-Quénum’s “A

Child in the Bush of Ghosts” suggests the same point. The tale needs the silent skeletons, the crypt, the “horses without heads” and “sexual organs” (Bhêly-Quénum 308) that Codjo sees in the tunnel in order for readers to question why Codjo still does not believe in death or is not frightened by its aspect, and therefore ponder and discover their own fears about death within the story. Without these details that help make the story one of horror, it would not present readers with the same existential fears that it does as is because it would not present readers with something that “violates, defies, or problematizes standing cultural classifications” (Carroll 186) in such a way that forces readers to look at their own lives and fears. Finally, Bixby’s “It’s a Good Life” also needs the repulsive, horrific aspects of its tale, namely the all-powerful creature Anthony, in order to read as an illustration of real human fears towards the meaninglessness of life—if Anthony were not terrifying, the story would not read as if the people of Peaksville are living pointless lives, and would therefore not cause readers to discover the fears of pointlessness in their own lives. In each of these examples, the horror aspects of the tales are what provide the allegorical readings. Therefore, at least in cosmic and weird horror specifically relating to allegorical readings regarding real-life human fears, the horror function is *necessary* in order to reveal to readers their personal fears and anxieties. These fears can often not be presented to readers in other genres like fantasy because it is the anomaly of horrific elements and the “whole structure and staging of curiosity in the narrative, in virtue of the experience of the extended play of fascination it affords” (Carroll 190) of cosmic and weird horror fiction that allows them to confront these fears. For this reason, it is understandable why cosmic and weird horror are acceptable ways through which readers can confront their own existential fears.

## **Conclusion**

Cosmic and weird horror literature are decidedly capable of not only including but presenting real human existential fears and anxieties to their readers, just as other forms of horror literature are able to present real human socio-historical, cultural, “concrete” fears as has been discussed in the classroom and literary world. Though cosmic and weird horror vary in the sense that cosmic horror must include the idea that humanity is insignificant and completely helpless in relation to the cosmos-at-large, the two often-conflated subgenres of horror are both able to successfully illustrate these existential fears especially well, due to their qualities of instilling a sense of dread and creating unexplainable, unknown atmospheres. Both weird and cosmic horror illustrate existential fears *of* readers, *to* readers by presenting them in the form of entertaining stories. It is through these fictional and entertaining stories, however, that readers are given more than just fictional accounts—the fictional aspects of the story are what draw readers in, but what makes the stories significant are the readers’ own fears that are shown and allegorically discussed within these works. While some may argue that these allegorical readings of existential fear could be created without the horrific or gruesome aspects of cosmic and weird horror, I argue that this argument is actually the opposite of the truth—it is only in the repulsive, frightening nature of these stories that existential fears can be found and explored in a significant way. While it is possible that other art forms and literary genres could take on that same role of cosmic and weird horror—the role of allowing readers to confront their own existential anxieties—cosmic and weird horror, as part of the horror genre, are unique in their ability to immediately reveal these fears to readers in a way that evokes actual fear—which, as aforementioned, is a necessary component from readers in deciding whether a work can occupy the horror genre— but allows them to encounter and ponder that fear (and their authentic reaction to the fear) without being in true, immediate danger. In this way, without cosmic and weird horror fiction to serve as an illustration of real existential fears, these anxieties could be hidden within the reader’s subconscious or never fully accepted and confronted. Moreover, the

ability of these subgenres whose works differ from the typical works found within the English literary canon—such as Shakespeare or Hemingway—to still provide significant and allegorical readings, just as Shakespeare, Hemingway, and others do, indicates that cosmic and weird horror fiction are not merely for cult audiences and have merit beyond their entertainment value.

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