

Lovecraft's Murder Mystery: Revisit Poe's Haunted House

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Abstract:

H.P. Lovecraft admired Edgar Allen Poe as his “God of Fiction,” having stumbled upon the literary works of Poe at the age of eight. To Lovecraft, Poe then served to replace Greek mythology and the Arabian Nights as his muse. Unfortunately, the degree to which his writing style and mood were thus significantly influenced by Poe is unknown, since very few of his works completed during his juvenile years remain today. Moreover, he did not admit the implicit influence of Poe until 1935. Joshi attributed Lovecraft's denial of Poe's influence to Harold Bloom's concept of the “anxiety of influence.”¹ However, it is still possible to trace the impact of Poe in Lovecraft's literary works. Lovecraft's idea of cosmic decline stemmed from his early reading of Poe, adroitly applying Poe's gothic setting of terror to his own 20th-century stories. Throughout his body of work, however, Lovecraft developed a more pessimistic tone of cosmicism, with his Cthulhu Mythos and weird fiction; therein, his works stand apart from Poe's. The following is a comparison and contrast of Lovecraft's murder stories and those of Poe.

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In their discussion of terror and sublimity in Poe's murder stories, Poe scholars compare and contrast Burkean and Kantian sublimity with the sublimity of Poe. As Michael Cisco (2017) remarks, Poe's sublimity is pertinent to Kantian sublime, as both concern the relation between subject and object: “the Kantian sublime is a relation of subject and object *both*. This is illustrated in the bodily sensations that Poe minutely describes in his stories” (72). Relevant to Burke's theory of the sublime, Dennis Pahl (2009) points out that Poe adapts the process of encountering those terrible things associated with “the sensory-emotional effects of language and sounds on human subjectivity” (44). In the search for knowledge, Kant's “explorer enter[s] an unknowable territory beyond the subject, the

territory of the thing in itself” (Cisco 2017, 75); similarly, Poe’s inner sense is connected with the something (object) that does not exist in the mind and his “inner beyond is madness” (75). Yet, the result of Poe’s sublime experience – experiencing fear, melancholy or other sensory emotions – differs from Burkean and Kantian sublimity. Poe’s sublimity is “an internal one, sparked by the domestic, unheimlich return of the repressed” (McGhee 2013, 56), whereas Kantian sublimity is “a grandiose experience of the external world” (56) that “ultimately sustains and upholds the self-contained subject” (57). While Burke’s sublimity comes “with the sense of self-preservation, reverence, and awe” (Pahl 2009, 44), Poe’s sublimity is the gothic experience of terrible things that result in “undermining the unity of the self, in throwing the self into an irrecoverable state of instability and displacement” (44). Furthermore, Poe scholars point to two items that affect the subject’s gothic experience: one is the perverse character guiding the subject towards morbidity and self-destruction, while the other source is the exterior stimuli in the environment that affect the nervous system. This perverse character exerts dominance over the mind through executing the process of dissolution and disintegration of selfhood. These exterior stimuli (strange sounds or smells) catalyze the impulse of disintegration; the subject cannot help but get involved in self-destruction, as they are (un)consciously affected by such stimuli. In Poe’s stories, the will of scheming destruction and the mind being overpowered by exterior stimuli go hand in hand. In terms of sublimity, the subject in the process of experiencing terror eventually gains access to its ultimate dissolution – Poe’s sublimity.

In “Morbid Conditions: Poe and the Sublimity of Disease,” McGhee (2013) argues that perversity might be a positive force ushering Poe’s protagonists toward sublimity: Poe’s “protagonists’ diseased states allow them access to a special version of sublimity” through “the experience of a terrible void” (56).² As the perverse personality (the imp of the perverse) of Poe’s protagonists leads them to transcend “downward, through dissolution and the embrace of annihilation” (57), they might finally “journey downward” to sublime divinity as they experience “eras[ing] meaning and experienc[ing] the sublime dissolution of the most ordinary of objects” (58).

In “Sounding the Sublime,” Pahl argues that certain sounds in materials within the environment might serve as external stimuli that affect its listeners, destabilizing them or even bringing about a nerve-shattering experience. Pertinent to Burke’s definition of sublimity, Poe’s sublimity as caused by the musicality of certain sounds is associated with the sensory experiences of terror, pain, and pleasure (Pahl 2009, 43). Poe’s sublimity differs from Burke’s, as the former finally ends in the disintegration of selfhood while the latter comes with a sense of self-preservation (44).

In many of Poe’s murder stories where Poe romanticizes death and dissolution – his monomaniacal characters striving “to assimilate others, especially female characters within the stories,

into their dissolving realities” (McGhee 2013, 60) – perverseness is connected to the mystery of “the ultimate aesthetic truths” and “a final unification with the divine” (60). In Poe’s Gothic tales, such as “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Assignation,” “Berenice,” and “Ligeia,” the murdered female characters are gradually drawn by an unknown force into death and sublimity as they are affected by the emotions of a monomaniacal/perverse male character. The female body proceeds with its “passive wasting”; female disease is the result of being contaminated by a contagious disease that comes from the perversity of the male character (61). Madeline, Marchesa Aphrodite, Berenice, and Rowena are drawn to death: their deaths are the most poetic because, as Richard Wilbur (1959) points out, their death represents the dissolution of earthly subject-matter in the process of elevation to spiritual beauty. Yet, the perversity of Poe’s male characters is not the only element that causes death; perversity goes hand in hand with the atmosphere of madness in an environment that unnerves the mind. For example, Roderick in a ghastly Gothic space, “overly sensitive to music,” can hear the unusual sounds of stringed instruments which point to “the sense of psychological disorientation, to the subversion of a whole, integrated, unified self” (Pahl 2009, 47).

The theme of sublimity in Poe’s crime/murder stories such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado” is more complicated. These stories are more complicated by not operating within a typical condition of sublimity, but rather within variations from it. The two agendas – perversity in personality and external stimuli within the environment – still affect the psychology of Poe’s protagonists. In his diseased state of mental deterioration, the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” schemes to murder the old man with an Evil Eye, though he in fact claims to love the old man. If the Evil Eye symbolizes the “Evil I,” this story is read as one of self-destruction rather than one of murdering others. In this reading, the narrator in a state of perverse madness dismembers the body of the old man (himself), enjoying pleasure and suffering; he seeks the feeling of thrill and his own uncanny dissolution via committing a horrendous self-sabotage. His perversity at the moment of dismembering the old man (himself) therefore exemplifies Poe’s theory of sublimity, which as posited by McGee (2013) is “always connected to bodily experiences of ecstasy and suffering” (65). The sound of the old man’s heart beating echoes “the rhythms of the narrator’s obsessive and murderous impulses” (Pahl 2009, 47). The sound in the narrator’s fantasy urges him to destroy himself. If the Evil Eye is not read as the “Evil I” of the narrator, the story comes across as a murder story of the other. In this reading, the narrator experiences terrible things – murdering the old man – when he loses his humanity as a result of being affected by perversity and weird sounds in his mind, but he does not eventually gain access to the ultimate dissolution of meaning (the ultimate state of void/ultimate divinity). The narrator’s final confession can have two interpretations. It might be

seen as “another form of perverse pleasure” deriving from “masochistic, self-destructive impulses” (56) if the confession is interpreted as a vehicle for further severance from rationality and a deeper plunge into self-sabotage. The other interpretation is that the narrator’s confession signals his will to return to humankind and/or rebuild his social relationship with humanity (Dern 2001). In his confession, he cunningly rationalizes murdering the old man as “a solemn undertaking” (58) of destroying the demonic eye. If his confession reveals his desire of reconstructing meaning via rhetorical skills, and his purpose is to attain social acceptance instead of falling into the abyss, then the story does not describe a madman thrust downward into the ultimate dissolution of divinity.

The narrator’s will to murder in “The Cask of Amontillado” is as strong as that in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and it continues to be the exterior stimuli that urges the murderer to commit the crime. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” Montresor selects his family catacomb as the site of Fortunato’s murder, as it carries with it an atmosphere of terror that disturbs the mind. The drunk Fortunato seems unaffected by the smell of nitre and the frightening human bones, but he starts feeling afraid as he awakens from intoxication, conscious of being fettered by Montresor. The smell of nitre, however, markedly affects Montresor; the deeper Montresor and Fortunato descend into the catacomb, the more morbid Montresor becomes. The sounds of Fortunato in immurement destabilize Montresor no less than the smell of nitre and dampness in the catacomb. As Pahl (2009) points out, “uncertain sounds” in Poe’s tales cause terror and destabilize the mind, and finally they evoke sublimity: “Ligeia’s low voice,” “William Wilson’s whisper,” and the “low” and “flat, monotonous sounds” in “The Raven” are examples of uncertain sounds (54). “A succession of loud and shrill screams” (“The Cask of Amontillado”, 1262) from Fortunato’s immurement location terrifies Montresor. “For a brief moment I hesitated – I trembled,” admits Montresor. It is not a moral consciousness that interrupts Montresor, but terror that makes him hesitate. Montresor continues piling up the wall of the niche. “A low laugh” “succeeded by a sad voice” (1263) from Fortunato before his last breath might be an echo of Fortunato’s deepest self, containing the sensory power of sublimity. The smell of nitre and the sounds of Fortunato evoke a disturbing sublimity, but the story does not end in ultimate divinity. Though Montresor leads Fortunato to destruction and dissolution, he does not intend to do so in order to assimilate Fortunato into divinity. Montresor hates Fortunato as an enemy; he murders him in the diseased state to permanently sever his relationship with him, rather than holding them together through unification. Montresor experiences ecstasy while witnessing the suffering of the immured Fortunato; it satisfies his desire for revenge rather than accessing an ultimate divinity. He stands distant from the terror he foments for Fortunato. Later, in the confession of his murder, he intends to rebuild his relationship with society

through the rhetorical/speaking skill that he uses to ameliorate his crime of murdering Fortunato (Dern 2001). Montresor “appeals to a sense of chivalry and continually employs satire to denigrate and dehumanize his victim” (66); his purpose in dehumanizing Fortunato is to kill Fortunato rather than assisting him to raise himself up above the mundane. Nevertheless, “The Cask of Amontillado” is also Poe’s story of terror, murder, and sublimity. Fortunato might be the one who experiences sublimity in the morbid world that Montresor creates. As McGhee (2013) remarks, the path to sublimity for Poe is “an internal one” (56); it is a psychological uncanny experience of “a terrible void” (56), rather than a dependence on external forces or objects. Fortunato, the tortured one in the situation of immurement, cannot unfetter himself from the chains with which Montresor locks him in, but he still can help himself to transcend through dissolution and death. Though Poe does not continue the story for Fortunato after the sadist Montresor has left him in the Gothic catacomb, another imprisoned character of Poe – the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” – can serve as extension to the story of Fortunato in the situation of immurement.

Both Fortunato and the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” are symbolically buried underground. While the muddleheaded Fortunato slips into the trap set up by Montresor, the narrator in “The Pit and Pendulum” is condemned to death by the Spanish Inquisition. In “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the Spanish Inquisitors are the murderers of the narrator, though the reason why he is condemned to death is unknown in the story. As the narrator is confined in a cell, he experiences terror within a machine of terror. He faints several times; in his dreams, the narrator perceives “evil figures” that hail him to rest. As he awakens terrified, he is conscious of an approaching danger, yet he calmly figures out a way to escape. The most horrible dangers are the pit and the pendulum. He is tethered to a wooden frame by a long strap under a huge razor-edged pendulum swinging in a gradual sinking motion towards him. He escapes the razor-pendulum as ravenous rats gnaw through the strap after he smears the remains of his food on it to attract the rats, though he is then forced to withdraw to the pit as the walls become red-hot. At the last moment, the narrator is rescued by General Lasalle. The narrator’s experience of terror in confinement and dreams of evil figures exemplify Poe’s theory of terror and sublimity. The sounds and smells stir the sensual emotions; they have the sensory power that gives life beyond death. Allan Emery (2005) in “Evading the Pit and the Pendulum” argues that the narrator’s experience in the cell/prison-chamber is actually a posthumous human experience of transcendence through death: the story is “Poe’s allegorical account of the process of transcending life through death” in a grave (34). The story, according to Emery, echoes Poe’s theory in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” which posits that man’s consciousness does not depart as he dies. The narrator’s transcendence does not come easily

nor instantaneously, since he has to experience terror before such transcendence. His consciousness, as fomented by his fear-inducing church/education, has not departed as he enters the grave; thus, he is tormented by “moral horrors” (34). The pit, the pendulum, and the walls symbolize “the autocrats” of space and time – “the powerful constraints imposed on human existence” (36) – from which the narrator escapes thanks to “the direful disintegration of the body” as aided by the rats, Poe’s “The Conqueror Worm” (35). Finally, his unexpected rescue by General Lasalle symbolizes “the Life Eternal” (37). “The Pit and the Pendulum” was written before “The Cask of Amontillado,” but it can be seen as an extension of the story of Fortunato in immurement, in that it concerns posthumous terrors and a hope of transcendence in a confined space.

In Poe’s murder stories, whether in the form of romanticization or maniacal revenge, the haunted space opens the door to sublime terror. The murderer might unexpectedly encounter an uncanny force within his surroundings: a strange smell or sound which disturbs the mind to morbidity. Or perhaps the murderer might have been merged into the unknown force; he becomes a master-artist employing the sensory power in the environment to scheme the structure of destruction. For example, Roderick Usher, in a specific house style – the Gothic style, the Arabesque design, the Egyptian pyramid, the Druid’s Stonehenge, or the hybrid characteristic of any of them – creates a gothic world of gloomy and muffled atmosphere that propels himself and others toward dissolution. The murdered participate in the progress of transcendence through death. They might be assimilated into dissolution, absolute dissolution of humanity, or they might seek their access to transcendence through posthumous terrors.

Lovecraft, heavily influenced by Poe, reconstructed Poe’s haunted house in his murder/crime stories regarding cosmic horror. Yet the elements of Poe’s cosmic sublimity and the strong volition of a human murderer were removed from Lovecraft’s cosmic horror. Like Poe’s house engulfed in an atmosphere of terror, Lovecraft’s is also filled with absolute terror. While Poe’s characters experience ultimate dissolution and after-life cosmic transcendence, Lovecraft’s characters are “completely overwhelmed and left in a state of unending terror” without transcendence (Houstoun 2011, 168). Lovecraft’s characters cannot scheme either self-destruction or the destruction of others; they grapple with impending destruction as bodily instinctive reactions to impending extinction – there is no hope of an after-life in the destruction of selfhood. Lovecraft’s theory of cosmic horror questions anthropocentrism and emphasizes the absolute meaninglessness of human existence: “The course of human existence will come and go and will have no effect on the monstrosity...his life is absolutely meaningless in the face of such an entity” (177). When Lovecraft’s characters find themselves in a state of madness, they are “confronted by a phenomenon that they are completely

unable to grasp” (176), and “the creature” they are confronted with “is a signifier of an entire form of existence that [has] greatly predated mankind and will seemingly continue to exist regardless of mankind’s self-believed control of the world” (177). In his murder stories such as “The Rats in the Wall” and “The Picture in the House,” Lovecraft reveals that human beings, including the murderers and the murdered, will not find transcendence but will simply be swallowed up as something insignificant when they are unfortunately confronted by the cosmic monstrosity, the entity, or an unknown phenomenon.

While Poe celebrates the disintegration of selfhood, Lovecraft expresses extreme horror for the disintegration of humanity. Through curiosity or the quest for scientific knowledge, Lovecraft’s characters embark on their in-depth scientific exploration for an unknown world; however, the result of their quest leads them not to a remarkable achievement, but to an unknown phenomenon that unnerves the mind and even disintegrates humanity. Pessimistically, Lovecraft did not hold that modern civilization could shelter human beings from unknown phenomena, since modern civilization “provides only a thin barrier against the cosmic and ever-present pressures ensuring our eventual destruction” (Link 2016, xiii). Though human beings choose to shelter themselves in a normative society, such unknown phenomena can still penetrate through religious rituals or cultural customs that have preserved the antiquated memories of the existence of monstrosities that predate mankind. The two most common themes in Lovecraft murder stories – interbreeding and cannibalism – exemplify the most ancient monstrosities in modern civilization; the murderers are no longer human, but represent the monstrosity or the “mankind” cooperating with/submitting to such a monstrosity. Lovecraft’s monstrosity does not deliberately kill human beings; there is no deliberate design of the disintegration of humanity as seen in Poe’s tales. Murder occurs indifferently to human beings whose existence is insignificant in Lovecraft’s cosmic horror.

In contrast to Poe’s murder stories that might develop into what Wilbur (1959) denotes a “mechanism of destructive transcendence” (17), Lovecraft denies transcendence in his murder stories. Poe is inclined to regard the destructive force as associated with biological or natural blight. For Poe, murder implies a blissful annihilation of earthly identity. Lovecraft also convinces readers of the irrevocable blight in life, but he at times links this biological decline to the decline of traditional New England civilization: humanity declines due to the arrival of an age of mechanized and democratic capitalism that will eventually destroy all heritage bequeathed by a prominent aristocratic intellectuality (Joshi 1990).

The Lovecraft horror story “The Picture in the House” is one of his horror stories regarding cannibalism in which the narrator escapes a cannibalistic murderer. The story begins with a

researcher of genealogical data (the narrator), who on the shortest cut to Arkham finds refuge from a big storm in an antique building. He is not impressed with the quaint apartment; both the house and its sole inhabitant inspire feelings within him of fear and hatred. At the beginning, curiosity overpowers his fears. Upon entering one chamber, the genealogical data researcher is attracted by Pigafetta's *Regnum Congo*, an old book that portrays gruesome details of a butcher's shop of the cannibalistic Anziques on Plate XII. In conversing with the inhabitant, a stout old man in tattered clothing, this book opens itself to the gruesome Plate XII. The narrator is gradually preoccupied by a sense of horror when listening to the inhabitant's account of his acquisition of Pigafetta's *Regnum Congo* and of his interest in the gastronomy of cannibalism. It dawns upon him that the inhabitant is a cannibal when the latter says that the picture of the butcher's shop began to make him hungry for victuals he cannot raise nor buy. A drop of red blood falling from the ceiling splashes on a page of the book; it is blood that falls from the floor of the room that the old man left an hour before. The story ends with a titanic thunderbolt destroying the house, though the narrator survives.

Lovecraft's "The Picture in the House" resembles Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" with its structure of gothic atmosphere, but it develops into Lovecraft's cosmic horror. Upon arriving at an old family mansion belonging to his friend, Roderick Usher, and perceiving the house and its surroundings to be in decay, the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" senses an atmosphere of gloom, depression, sadness, and terror. Moreover, he gets a sense of awe and sublimity: "there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth" ("The Fall of the House of Usher", 398). The narrator of "The Picture in the House" is not invited to any old house; he glimpses the house by chance under the circumstance wherein he has to escape the storm. This unexpected visit to the antique house does not arouse in him a feeling of sublimity, though he senses terror. He does not like the house, describing it as "the antique and repellent wooden building" ("The Picture in the House", 104). Upon entering the house, he feels "an increase in that aversion" (105); the atmosphere in the house seems "redolent of unhallowed age, of unpleasant crudeness, and of secrets which should be forgotten" (105). The narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is drawn to Roderick, as the latter is emblematic of an aristocratic and godlike aspect, delicate and remote; he even sympathizes with Roderick, as the latter is overwhelmed by grief and fear. In trying to alleviate Roderick's anxiety, he reads a medieval romance entitled *The Mad Trist*. In contrast, Lovecraft's narrator dislikes the inhabitant of the house. As the old man appears, the narrator dislikes his walking gait because it is heavy. The old man is characteristic of "horrible unkemptness" in "a mass of tatters" with a "Yankee dialect" (106). The narrator fears and hates him: "The appearance of

this man, and the instinctive fear he inspired, prepared me for something like enmity” (106). Evidently, the old man represents barbarism or the loss of the civilization that Lovecraft so valued within the traditional society of New England (Joshi 1990). The narrator translates the Latin version of Pigafetta’s *Regnum Congo* into English as the old man asks him to read it, though the old man’s proximity is obnoxious to the narrator (“The Picture in the House”, 107). The narrator most certainly has reason to hate the old man; the old man is a cannibal, reviving the ancient ritual of cannibalism for satisfying his appetite and prolonging his life. Poe and Lovecraft did not define murder as simply “taking someone else’s life.” Poe’s Roderick immediately buries Madeline as she has just passed away under the condition that he knows she might recover from the temporary lifeless phenomenon of catalepsy; as such, Roderick kills his twin sister to assimilate her into ultimate dissolution, thus transforming her and himself from earthly corruptive matter to Eternal Life. In contrast, the old man’s act of cannibalism in “The Picture in the House” exposes a horrible reality in which an ancient monstrosity that predates mankind can still pervade humanity through the form of cannibalism, even though cannibalism has been forbidden in modern civilizations. For Lovecraft, the murder mystery does not bring Eternal Life to humanity. As Lovecraft’s narrator escapes destruction at the moment of collapse of the house, he escapes being devoured as a monster’s source of nutrients.

“The Rats in the Wall,” another of Lovecraft’s gothic murder stories, concerns a cannibalistic history in the venerable family of de la Poer. The story begins with the return of a New England man named Delapore to an old medieval house, Exham Priory – his ancestral estate in England – on July 16, 1923. Delapore (the narrator) recounts the history of the old priory that he has learned about from the villagers’ tales. The priory was built on the site of a prehistoric temple which had experienced rituals regarding the Druids, ante-Druids, Roman Cybele, etc. It was granted by Henry the Third to an ancestor of the narrator, Gilbert de Poer, First Baron of Exham, in 1261. The family lived on the site for centuries. Based on the chronicle, the narrator finds that his family had a reference to being “cursed of God”: the family living in the priory was regarded as race of daemons by nearby villagers, as it had harbored a series of deaths and mysteries that inspired fear among the villagers. Walter de la Poer, eleventh Baron of Exham, killed his family members – his father, three brothers, and two sisters; however, though not condemned to death for the murder, he was severely condoned by James the First. Walter de la Poer fled to Virginia, New England, and resumed life with a new surname, “Delapore.” Since the tragedy, the priory had been uninhabited for centuries as owned by the Norrys, and the reason why Walter de la Poer went insane and killed his family had yet to be revealed before the narrator’s arrival. Perhaps the secret was recorded and sealed within an

envelope, but the envelope was destroyed with the burning of Carfax where the narrator's grandfather died. The narrator purchased Exham Priory in 1918, and a war comrade of the narrator's son helped the narrator to restore Exham Priory after the death of the narrator's son. After moving in, Delapore and his cat are frequently disturbed by the sounds of rats scurrying behind the arras, though there is no trace of any rats. Urged forth by curiosity, the narrator investigates the stone wall with Edward Norrys. When looking into the sub-cellar, Delapore and Norrys find an ancient altar in the center of the chamber. Through further exploration of the ground under the altar, with the help of Norrys and a team of archeologists, the narrator explores a vault deeper than the sub-cellar: a centuries-old underground city teeming with human and rat bones. It dawns upon the narrator that his ancestors raised "human cattle" – some of which had regressed to a quadrupedal state – as a fresh human replenishment. To put an end to this horror, Walter de la Poer killed his entire family in their sleep. As he left, the remaining "human cattle" were devoured by the hungry rats. In the darkness of the vault, suddenly overcome by insanity, the narrator eats Norrys, with his cat tearing at the narrator's throat. The research team arrives to stop Delapore, and they subsequently destroy the priory. Delapore is sent to a mental institution; he completely forgets what he has done to Norrys, claiming it was the rats that ate poor Norrys, and continues to hear the sound of rats within the walls.

Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls," in its disclosure of the murder mystery of the de la Poer clan, is a revision of Poe's Gothic tales. Lovecraft's murder mystery concerns a cosmic monstrosity/entity embodied as rat-like entities. Far from the rats in Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" which are allegorized as "the Conqueror Worm" in helping the dead to achieve transcendence through death to Eternal Life when they gnaw off the strap for the narrator to escape from the pendulum (a "moral horror"), the rats in Lovecraft's story symbolize an original primal state of savagery and barbarism. As the de la Poer had committed homicide for centuries – raising humans as livestock for consumption – they regressed back to the most primal state of bestiality. Walter de la Poer, while still holding a human conscience, killed his family members in order to stop this savagery. Nonetheless, this family was still unable to separate itself from primal barbarism. The narrator, the last linear descendant of Walter de la Poer, returns to Exham Priory and commits to restoring it. What the narrator restores is not merely a medieval building, but a place which harbors ancient memories of barbarism succumbing to the cosmic horror of a monstrosity. He is not conscious of his intrinsic savagery when hearing the sounds of the rats in dreams, and later, in madness, devouring Norrys. As Houstoun (2011) points out, the narrator's "actions within the grotto completely negate this separation as he acts exactly as the primitive and barbaric inhabitants of that subterranean realm" (172). Delapore's transformation into a rodent echoes Lovecraft's *Mythos*: "in terms of the drive to

destruction, or genetic, in terms of ruinous hereditary traits,” each human being is inclined toward “the disintegration of our humanity” (Ralickas 2007, 371). In contrast to Poe’s disintegration of humanity that leads to sublimity, Lovecraft’s leads to cosmic horror, a primal state of “the subject’s descent into the abyss of the id” (370): “mankind would have become as 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”, 394-395). By interweaving the three murder mysteries – the de la Poers’ cannibalistic history, Walter de la Poer’s murder of his families, and the narrator’s devouring of Norriss – Lovecraft addresses both the horror of humanity’s intrinsic primal barbarism as allegiant to a cosmic monstrosity as well as the impossibility of its obliteration.

Conclusion

The murder mysteries of both Poe and Lovecraft concern the gothic experience of terrible things that result in the disintegration of selfhood. Each of them confirms that the disintegration of selfhood is an irrecoverable state. For Poe, disintegration could be blissful, as it leads to the ultimate destruction of earthly matter in exchange for divine Eternal Life. Poe’s outlook offers an alternative for this irrecoverable state of the absolute dissolution of humanity. In contrast, Lovecraft’s murder mystery corroborates the disintegration of selfhood as a subjective crisis. He does not resolve the subjective crisis, nor does he offer any form of belief system. His theory of cosmic horror as concomitant to his murder stories corroborates the erosion of culture, reason, and humanity, and there is no belief system that can reconstitute transcendence within the afterlife.

Endnotes:

1. See S. T. Joshi’s “Foreword: Poe and Lovecraft,” page x-xi. See also Joshi’s *H.P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*, page 56-57.
2. Cisco also mentions that experiencing madness might be the process of exploring unknowable territory: “Poe’s inner beyond is madness, and his outer beyond is a cosmic indistinctness that makes madness impossible to distinguish from sanity” (p. 75)

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