The CALL of CTHULHU

By H.P. LOVECRAFT

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Preface

Few works of twentieth-century supernatural fiction have exercised an influence as profound and enduring as H. P. Lovecraft's The Call of Cthulhu. First published in Weird Tales in 1928, the story has long since escaped the boundaries of the pulp magazine in which it originally appeared. Its imagery, mythology, and underlying philosophy have become inseparable from the modern vocabulary of horror. Yet the true significance of The Call of Cthulhu lies not simply in the creation of an unforgettable monster. It lies in the terrifying conception of the universe that the story reveals: a cosmos immeasurably older than humanity, inhabited by forces beyond human understanding, and fundamentally indifferent to our existence.

At the heart of Lovecraft's fiction stands a radical reversal of perspective. Human beings instinctively interpret the world according to human proportions. We construct histories, religions, sciences, and moral systems that place our experience at the center of meaning. Civilization itself depends, to some degree,

upon the assumption that reality can be understood and organized. Lovecraft's cosmic horror begins precisely where that confidence fails.

In The Call of Cthulhu, knowledge does not liberate. It destabilizes.

The famous opening meditation of the story establishes this principle immediately. Humanity survives, Lovecraft suggests, because the human mind has not yet assembled all that it knows into a complete picture of reality. Knowledge exists in fragments, safely separated. Archaeology, anthropology, dreams, newspaper reports, police investigations, ancient legends, and the testimony of isolated witnesses appear unrelated until someone begins to connect them. The horror arises not from ignorance but from synthesis—from the moment when scattered facts suddenly form a coherent and intolerable whole.

This structure is essential to the power of the tale. Lovecraft does not present Cthulhu directly at the beginning, nor does he construct his narrative as a conventional confrontation between hero and monster. Instead, the reader follows Francis Wayland Thurston as he

reconstructs a mystery from documents left by his deceased grand-uncle, Professor George Gammell Angell. A strange bas-relief, the disturbing dreams of an artist, the testimony of an inspector, an obscure religious cult, archaeological evidence, and finally the extraordinary account of a sailor gradually reveal that the same pattern has appeared across different continents and cultures.

The method resembles historical or scientific investigation. Each fragment appears to confirm another. What initially seems irrational acquires evidence; what seems impossible becomes increasingly difficult to deny. Lovecraft thereby transforms scholarship itself into an instrument of terror. The protagonist is threatened not primarily because something pursues him, but because he has learned how to interpret the evidence before him.

This technique reflects one of Lovecraft's deepest intellectual preoccupations: the relationship between scientific discovery and humanity's conception of itself. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had profoundly altered traditional understandings of human history and human importance. Geology revealed an Earth vastly older than recorded

civilization. Evolution placed humanity within the biological history of nature rather than outside it. Astronomy revealed distances and scales that reduced the Earth to an almost inconceivably small position within the cosmos. For Lovecraft, such discoveries possessed not only scientific importance but tremendous imaginative power.

He carried their implications into the realm of horror.

If humanity occupies no privileged biological or astronomical position, why should it occupy a privileged metaphysical one? If human civilization represents only an instant within geological time, what civilizations might have existed before it? And if the universe contains worlds separated by unimaginable distances, what forms of existence might have developed elsewhere?

The Call of Cthulhu transforms such questions into nightmare.

Cthulhu is therefore more than a monstrous creature. He represents an order of existence that renders ordinary human categories inadequate. The Great Old Ones belong to a

history preceding humanity and perhaps transcending the distinctions by which human beings understand life, death, matter, and consciousness. Their existence suggests that human civilization is merely a temporary episode within a vastly greater cosmic history.

This is the essence of what later critics would call Lovecraftian cosmicism.

Traditional Gothic horror often depends upon moral structures. The ghost may return because a crime has been committed. The vampire violates religious and natural boundaries. The demon represents evil within a universe where good and evil possess objective significance. Lovecraft's universe is more disturbing because it offers no guarantee that such categories matter beyond humanity.

Cthulhu does not need to hate mankind.

Humanity may simply be insignificant.

This distinction is crucial. Cosmic horror emerges from the possibility that the universe is not organized around human values at all. Its oldest powers may be neither benevolent nor malevolent in any recognizable sense. Their relationship to humanity may resemble

humanity's relationship to organisms too small or insignificant to attract our attention. Terror arises from disproportion.

Lovecraft reinforces this disproportion through scale. His story constantly expands outward: from an individual scholar to an artist's dreams, from Providence to Louisiana, from isolated cults to archaeological discoveries, from contemporary civilization to prehistoric epochs, and finally from the known world toward the incomprehensible depths of cosmic history. The investigation becomes larger with every revelation.

Yet Lovecraft carefully balances this immensity with material detail. Dates, names, documents, geographical locations, academic institutions, newspaper clippings, and eyewitness testimony give the narrative the texture of a dossier. The fantastic is surrounded by the language of evidence. This documentary method lends the impossible an appearance of authenticity and would become one of the defining techniques of Lovecraft's mature fiction.

Equally important is the role of dreams. Across distant parts of the world, sensitive individuals