

# The curious absence of the horror in the dunwich horror

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Within his short story, *The Dunwich Horror*, H. P. Lovecraft tells of the strange events surrounding a town in the New England backwaters; however, we never truly see the horror itself. Lovecraft hints at the importance of the absence in the exergue, in which Charles Lamb asks, “How else should the recital of that which we know in a waking sense to be false come to affect us at all?” In context with Lamb’s quote, the monsters and mythological beings of olden days inhabit this recital of terror which “[affects] us all”.

As Lamb says, we know them “to be false”, yet he states that they remain present to the human being because “They date beyond the body”. How can we ignore this blatant quote which Lovecraft has given us as the key to opening up this text? If these creatures that currently do not reside on this plain of existence can impact our lives so greatly, then what does that mean for us? The nihilist might say that the absence of the creature would suggest that it bears no significant meaning at all, and that it brings no insight on human nature. However, both Lamb and Lovecraft make a point of these creatures existing long before the beginning of the human race, implying that their impact on the human being has meaning, although we will never fully comprehend what exactly that meaning is. Towards this notion, H. P. Lovecraft never reveals the horror of *The Dunwich Horror*, suggesting that the human being can never understand the reason for her existence.

From chapters I through VI, Lovecraft rarely mentions the horror; instead he focuses on the events surrounding the life and death of Wilbur Whateley, a monster that he later reveals to be the Horror’s brother. Throughout Wilbur’s life, the Whateleys renovate their farmhouse multiple times, always focusing on expanding the same room. Upon one’s first reading, the descriptions of

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the renovations lead the reader to believe that the Whateley's use the area to sacrifice cattle, an assumption that will not prove entirely false. Of course, Lovecraft later reveals that the horror resides in this space, and consumes the cattle in order to grow to its tremendous size. By giving the reader the effects of this horror, but withholding the horror from her, the actual object of the story remains absent.

It puzzles me that the story should construct itself in such a fashion that reasons come after the actions. Perhaps this harkens to Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* 125, *The Madman*, a story dealing with the absence of the divine. After yelling at the people in the marketplace that they have killed God, he goes to "[Strike] up his requiem aeternam deo", or the eternal rest of God, in several churches. When asked about his actions, he responds with, "' What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?'" To bring this into dialogue with *The Dunwich Horror*, like the church, the reader only recognizes the room as the horror's room in its absence. On my hermeneutic understanding of this, in both the case of the church and the renovated room, the places become connected to these invisible presences only after they have left. Again, the rhetorical structure of the story mimics this idea, rebeginning in order to explain the events which have already transpired.

Lovecraft claims that all of the previous chapters "[were] only the prologue of the actual Dunwich horror", a strange statement considering it comes on the rhetorical note halfway through the story. Normally a prologue would set up for the events to follow; however, in this case, the prologue defines itself

from the events that follow. The underlying circularity of this story suggests an inevitability of the events that unfold. What makes this unseen horror inevitable when we only see how it affects the people of Dunwich? In a passage which Dr. Armitage, a character in *The Horror*, reads from the *Necronomicon*, it states, “ Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where man rules now”.

Like the rhetorical structure of *The Dunwich Horror*, this statement seems recursive. On my reading of the passage, the inevitability of the horror stems from its previous existence, and the absence of the horror can only be seen through its presence in the past and future. Herein lies a problem with the Dunwich horror: it's presence. When Armitage arrives in Dunwich to combat it, he conjures a magic formula in order to view it, as well as leaving a telescope with the denizens of Dunwich who watch from a distance. At the moment that Armitage uses his concoction, the man viewing the scene from the telescope loses consciousness and drops the ocular device.

This reaction seems absurd to such an instantaneous flash, yet when brought into dialogue with the story of Semele, the mother of Dionysus, his actions seem justified. In the legend, Semele, one of the most attractive mortals, proves irresistible for Zeus, causing him to visit her on many occasions, and eventually impregnating her. However, on his final visit, Zeus promises on the river Styx that he shall give her whatever she desires, to which she asks him to show her his divine form. After unsuccessfully begging her to change her wish, he eventually reveals himself to her, destroying her instantaneously. Similarly, after a mere glimpse of the horror, the man using

a device to see it more clearly physically and mentally collapses. In this sense, the horror must remain absent from the text for the protection of the human being.

Amid the text, however, looms an even more powerful absent being, Yog-Sothoth, the father of Wilbur and the horror itself. Armitage relays the information he knows about the horror's lineage in the final paragraph of the story: " It was [Wilbur's] twin brother, but it looked more like the father than he did." I find this description of the strange family important, because it implies that Wilbur, the only one of these three who appears present in the text, shares less in common with Yog-Sothoth than his brother does.

Furthermore, if Wilbur can stay present in the text without harming the reader while the horror causes the one man that views it clearly to collapse, then I can not imagine what catching so much as a glimpse of Yog-Sothoth would do to a human being. At best, she would probably suffer the same fate as Semele. So what does this imply for us? Why can the human being not view the force or god that affects life as she knows it? If we can behold this absence, does this suggest that a deeper meaning to life exists? As she recognizes that the forces around her remain absent from her life, the human being finds that she, herself is absent.

Harkening to such an absence, we can turn our ears to Nietzsche's verdict on humanity that, " We have killed [God]", suggesting that the reason we can not see these forces lies within ourselves, absent from superficial understandings. Like these forces, however, we find that we remain absent from our own lives, unable to behold ourselves, and are rather beheld by

other outside forces. Likewise, we resort to reflections and copies of our image for validation of our existence, furthering ourselves from the truth of our existence. As we begin to find ourselves situated in the same position of the horror, one of an absent presence, struggling with our own existence and searching for meaning in our lives in the same way that the horror searches for Yog-Sothoth, we feel obligated to question the relative validity of our own existence. However, much like Yog-Sothoth, our existence, although seemingly absent, leaves us with the present looming responsibility of defining ourselves without the ever absent forces that pervade our lives.