

Old Stories, New Horrors: Examining Changes in Lovecraft's 'Pickman's Model' and 'The Dreams in the Witch-House' for Guillermo del Toro's 'Cabinet of Curiosities'

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Abstract: This paper delves into a comparative analysis of H.P. Lovecraft's iconic stories, "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch-House", and their modern adaptations in Guillermo del Toro's "Cabinet of Curiosities". Exploring the inherent themes of Lovecraftian cosmic horror, the study underscores the adaptations' faithfulness to original narratives while introducing contemporary elements that resonate with modern audiences. Through the lens of these adaptations, the paper sheds light on the evolution of cosmic horror, emphasizing the blend of ancient, otherworldly dread with modern psychological and emotional narratives. The adaptations not only provide a fresh perspective on Lovecraft's stories but also open avenues for future research in the realm of horror studies.

Keywords: H.P. Lovecraft, Guillermo del Toro, Cosmic Horror, Literary Adaptation, "Pickman's Model", "The Dreams in the Witch-House", "Cabinet of Curiosities", Modern Horror, Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

H.P. Lovecraft, an American author of the 20th century, achieved widespread recognition only after his death, despite his profound influence on the horror fiction genre. He remained virtually obscure throughout his lifetime, his work confined to pulp magazines and his life marred by poverty. Nonetheless, he is currently recognized as a crucial figure in the world of horror fiction, owing to his unique style of storytelling. Lovecraft's most significant contribution is the "Cthulhu Mythos," which emphasizes the cosmic horror of the unknown, a theme that has inspired countless other works of literature and given rise to a whole subgenre of horror.¹

Among Lovecraft's catalog of chilling tales, "Pickman's Model" stands out. Written in September 1926, it revolves around the story of Richard Upton Pickman², a Boston-based artist notorious for his disquieting creations. The tale is delivered from the perspective of Thurber, an artist, who narrates his encounters with Pickman to a friend. The narrative effectively juxtaposes the realms of art and disgust.

Another notable work from Lovecraft is "The Dreams in the Witch House," a short story that debuted in 1933. This tale chronicles the journey of a university student, Walter Gilman, who rents an attic room in a supposedly cursed boarding house in Arkham, Massachusetts, famously known as the "Witch House"³. This

¹S. T. Joshi. Howard Phillips Lovecraft: The Life of a Gentleman of Providence.

²PICKMAN, RICHARD UPTON was a naturally gifted artist, and his study at Minneiska University in Wisconsin, a center for decadent artists, only enhanced his own morbid instincts further. Pickman's ghastly realism set him apart from many of his fellow decadents. Although the public received his works coolly, certain collectors prized them highly. Pickman spent much of his life in poverty, occasionally giving lessons to aspiring painters to supplement his income. He is said to have kept a hidden studio in Boston's North End, though no trace of it has been found. For a brief time he attempted to create more mainstream works to gain the backing of the Boston Art Club. He eventually was forced to leave under pressure from most of the Club's members. In the year 1926, Pickman disappeared from his home in Boston, along with most of his unsold works. Some assert that he committed suicide, but others believe that he dwells somewhere in the Dreamlands. From what we know of that magical land, both of these theories may be true. A few artists imitated Pickman's work for a few years thereafter, but on the whole, Pickman represents merely a footnote in the history of American painting. The art community quickly forgot him, and many of his works are kept in private collections or have simply vanished." Daniel Harms. The Cthulhu Mythos Encyclopedia: A Guide to H. P. Lovecraft's Universe, p. 225.

³WITCH-HOUSE. House in Arkham at 197 E. Pickman Street which was the home of Keziah Mason. It gained some attention from antiquarians due to the curious angles of the walls in one of its rooms. After two centuries, it became a boarding house but was forced to close due to the attacks of vicious rodents. In March 1931, a gale severely damaged the house. When it was demolished that December, the workmen found some shocking items which were later donated to Miskatonic University. The occultist Morgan Smith later bought the site and erected a house on it, hoping to exploit the place's psychic energies." Daniel Harms. The Cthulhu Mythos Encyclopedia: A Guide to H. P. Lovecraft's Universe, p. 312.

narrative explores themes of witchcraft, inter-dimensional travel, and the Cthulhu Mythos, offering a haunting exploration of otherworldly horror.⁴

The echoes of Lovecraft's chilling narratives can be found in contemporary horror as well. Acclaimed Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro, renowned for his affinity towards fantasy and horror, has utilized Lovecraft's stories as an inspiration for his Netflix anthology series "Cabinet of Curiosities". Each episode in this series is a standalone story, with a few like "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch-House" directly adapting Lovecraft's narratives. Del Toro's stylistic approach and narrative sensibilities offer a fresh perspective on Lovecraft's cosmic horror tales, introducing additional layers of interpretation and complexity. In particular, del Toro's fascination with Lovecraft's unique brand of horror, marked by ancient, incomprehensible entities and the terror of realities beyond human understanding, aligns with his own exploration of fear and the unknown. Also, the vivid and unsettling imagery inherent in Lovecraft's work provides ample visual storytelling opportunities, an aspect that del Toro, with his reputation for creating visually stunning films, effectively exploits. Additionally, the narrative complexity of Lovecraft's stories matches del Toro's storytelling style, often characterized by intricate plotlines and complex character development. Lastly, in adapting Lovecraft's work, del Toro also takes on the challenge of modernizing these narratives, addressing problematic elements, and making the stories more accessible and relevant for contemporary audiences.⁵ This reimagining of Lovecraft's cosmic horror tales brings new life to the classic stories, ensuring their continued relevance and impact in the realm of modern horror.

The two stories by Lovecraft selected for this paper, "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch-House", offer rich material for analysis due to their complex themes and distinctive narrative elements.

Both stories delve into the realm of cosmic horror⁶, a genre that Lovecraft is often credited with defining. This genre doesn't rely on traditional elements of fear; instead, it explores the terror of the unknowable and the insignificant role of humanity on the grand cosmic scale.

In "Pickman's Model", horror emerges from the unsettling artwork of Richard Upton Pickman, which is so profoundly disturbing that it suggests a dreadful reality beyond our comprehension. In "The Dreams in the Witch-House", the protagonist is subjected to terrifying experiences that transcend the bounds of our physical reality, suggesting the existence of a multi-dimensional universe teeming with malevolent entities. Both stories exemplify Lovecraft's ability to instill a sense of existential dread through his narrative.

Guillermo del Toro's "Cabinet of Curiosities", on the other hand, is a modern reinterpretation of these classic tales. While staying true to the spirit of cosmic horror, del Toro introduces new elements into the narratives and builds upon the original stories' themes. His adaptations are not mere reproductions, but creative explorations that add layers of meaning and complexity to Lovecraft's original stories.

In the case of "Pickman's Model", del Toro expands on the character of Thurber and presents the horror of Pickman's art in a more visceral and personal way. He also weaves in a dark backstory for Pickman, adding depth to the character and a tragic dimension to the narrative. For "The Dreams in the Witch-House", del Toro incorporates a more explicit exploration of witchcraft and human sacrifice, while also retaining the story's original themes of inter-dimensional travel and malevolent cosmic entities.

By examining these changes and their implications, this paper aims to shed light on how Lovecraft's narratives have been reimagined for a contemporary audience. It will also explore how these adaptations

⁴Graham Harman. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy, Part Two: Lovecraft's Style At Work*.

⁵Guillermo del Toro and Marc Zicree. *Guillermo del Toro Cabinet of Curiosities: My Notebooks, Collections, and Other Obsessions*.

⁶"Cosmic horror" is a subgenre of horror fiction that emphasizes the insignificance of humanity in the face of incomprehensible, alien forces that exist in the universe. The idea is that the true horror comes not from things that go bump in the night, but from the realization that humanity and our place in the universe is not special, and that there are entities in the cosmos that are beyond our comprehension and indifferent to our existence. In Lovecraft's works, cosmic horror often manifests through his detailed mythos involving ancient, powerful entities such as Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, and Azathoth, among others. These entities often possess power and knowledge far beyond human comprehension, and human encounters with them often lead to madness and despair. Apart from "The Call of Cthulhu", one of Lovecraft's most famous stories, "At the Mountains of Madness" is another quintessential Lovecraft story embodying cosmic horror. In this tale, an Antarctic expedition uncovers an ancient, alien city buried under the ice. The explorers gradually uncover the history of the city's former inhabitants, the Old Ones, and are confronted with the terrifying implications of their existence and the insignificance of humanity. The key element of cosmic horror is the focus on humanity's fear of the unknown and the unknowable. The entities and forces present in Lovecraft's stories represent aspects of the universe that are beyond human understanding, reflecting Lovecraft's view of a mechanistic, indifferent universe. Michel Houellebecq. *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*.

contribute to the evolving genre of cosmic horror, adding new dimensions to our understanding of Lovecraft's work and its ongoing influence. This study, therefore, serves as a valuable contribution to Lovecraftian scholarship, adaptation studies, and the broader field of horror literature and film.

In his adaptations of "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch-House", Guillermo del Toro navigates the fine line between maintaining Lovecraft's cosmic horror's essential elements and introducing new layers of complexity. This duality is the essence of the thesis: del Toro takes these 'old stories' and constructs 'new horrors', which implies both a homage to the source material and an ambition to reimagine these narratives within a contemporary context.

Del Toro's modifications in "Pickman's Model" exemplify this dual approach. While preserving the unsettling nature of Pickman's art, which serves as a window to a horrifying reality beyond human understanding, del Toro adds depth to the character of Thurber and introduces a tragic backstory for Pickman. These additions serve to provide a more personalized and visceral experience of horror, making it more relatable to a modern audience.

Similarly, in "The Dreams in the Witch-House", del Toro retains the original story's themes of interdimensional travel and malevolent cosmic entities. However, he also incorporates a more explicit exploration of witchcraft and human sacrifice, providing a new angle to the story that goes beyond the abstract cosmic horror of Lovecraft's original tale.

These creative decisions highlight del Toro's vision to contemporize Lovecraft's tales without diluting their original essence. His adaptations, therefore, serve as a bridge that connects the old to the new, providing a fresh perspective on these tales of cosmic dread while maintaining their foundational horror themes.

It is this innovative reinterpretation that the thesis refers to as 'new horrors'. They represent a new form of cosmic horror that builds upon Lovecraft's 'old stories', extending their scope and enhancing their relevance for a contemporary audience. By dissecting these changes and their implications, this paper will provide a comprehensive understanding of how Lovecraft's narratives are reimagined for the modern viewer, thereby enriching the scholarship on Lovecraftian horror and adaptation studies.

Background

H.P. Lovecraft's works are often characterized by their unique brand of horror, commonly referred to as "cosmic horror". Cosmic horror, also known as Lovecraftian horror, is a subgenre of horror that emphasizes the terror of the unknown and the insignificance of humanity in the face of incomprehensible cosmic entities or forces. This sense of cosmic dread is often combined with a kind of existential nihilism - the belief that life has no inherent meaning or purpose, which only amplifies the sense of horror.⁷

One of the key features of cosmic horror is the presence of entities or phenomena that are so far beyond human understanding that merely perceiving them often leads to madness. These entities are often described as ancient, God-like beings from beyond the stars, or from other dimensions entirely. Lovecraft's most famous creation, the entity known as Cthulhu, is a prime example of this.⁸

In Lovecraft's stories, these beings are often tied to ancient cults or forbidden knowledge, furthering the theme of humanity's insignificance and powerlessness. This can be seen in "The Call of Cthulhu", where the eponymous entity is worshipped by a secretive cult, and in "At the Mountains of Madness", where an ancient, alien civilization is discovered in Antarctica.⁹

When it comes to intertextual references, Lovecraft's works often reference each other and share common elements, creating a shared universe known as the Cthulhu Mythos.¹⁰ For example, the *Necronomicon*, a fictional grimoire (book of magic) authored by the "mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred, is frequently mentioned throughout his stories. Places like the fictional New England cities of Arkham, Innsmouth, and Dunwich also recur in his works. These references help to create a sense of continuity and a larger, interconnected world within his stories.

In his later works, Lovecraft also made references to works by other authors, incorporating their creations into his Mythos. This was part of what he called "Yog-Sothothery", and later fans labeled as the Cthulhu

⁷H. P. Lovecraft and the Myth of the 20th Century.

⁸Ibid.

⁹H. P. Lovecraft. *At the Mountains of Madness*.

¹⁰The term "Cthulhu Mythos" was first coined by August Derleth, a contemporary correspondent of Lovecraft, who used it to categorize and expand upon the shared elements, settings, and themes found in Lovecraft's stories. Key elements of the Cthulhu Mythos include Great Old Ones and Outer Gods, Forbidden Knowledge, Non-Human Races, Shared Setting, and Indifferent Universe.

Mythos, which also includes works by authors like Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, and August Derleth, who expanded on Lovecraft's universe with his permission and encouragement.¹¹

In "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch-House", Lovecraft's use of cosmic horror is evident through the introduction of terrifying realities that exist just beyond our perception or comprehension. In "Pickman's Model", the horror of the unknown is embodied by the monstrous creatures in Pickman's artworks. These creatures, often depicted in ghastly detail in urban and underground settings, are far removed from the conventional understanding of reality. They suggest the existence of an alternate, terrifying reality, thus inducing cosmic horror. The protagonist's growing obsession with Pickman's art and the subsequent revelation of the source of Pickman's inspiration add to this sense of dread.¹²

"The Dreams in the Witch-House" takes this concept a step further by introducing alternate dimensions and the possibility of inter-dimensional travel. The protagonist's experiences, while living in a room that was once inhabited by a witch, involve increasingly vivid and terrifying dreams. These dreams blur the boundaries between reality and nightmare, suggesting the existence of a multi-dimensional universe teeming with malevolent entities. This concept is a key feature of cosmic horror, indicating the presence of forces and realities far beyond human comprehension.¹³

While "Pickman's Model" does not have explicit references to other Lovecraftian tales, "The Dreams in the Witch-House", however, does include references to the infamous Necronomicon and the entity Nyarlathotep¹⁴, thereby tying it to the broader Cthulhu Mythos.¹⁵

Analysis of "Pickman's Model"

"Pickman's Model" is a short story by H.P. Lovecraft that first appeared in *Weird Tales* magazine in 1927. The story is narrated by a man named Thurber who recounts his experiences with the eccentric and reclusive artist, Richard Upton Pickman.

Pickman's artwork, which depicts gruesome and monstrous creatures in disturbingly realistic detail, has made him a pariah in the art community. Despite this, Thurber admires Pickman's work and decides to visit him at his studio in Boston's North End, an area notorious for its ancient and decaying architecture.

¹¹The term "Yog-Sothothery" combines the name of the entity Yog-Sothoth, one of the cosmic deities in Lovecraft's fiction, with the "-ery" suffix that denotes a practice or body of knowledge (like "geometry" or "pottery"). It suggests a system of lore or knowledge about Yog-Sothoth and the other entities, locations, books, and themes that make up Lovecraft's mythos. Yog-Sothoth itself is one of the most important entities in Lovecraft's mythos. It is described as a conglomeration of glowing spheres and is associated with time, space, and knowledge. It is said to be omnipresent and omniscient, existing at all points in time simultaneously. It is often invoked in spells and rituals in Lovecraft's stories, and knowledge about it is often dangerous or sanity-blasting. H.P. Lovecraft. *Yog Sothothery - The Definitive H.P. Lovecraft Anthology*.

¹²H. P. Lovecraft. *Omnibus 3: The Haunter of the Dark and Other Tales*, pp. 44-60.

¹³H. P. Lovecraft. *Omnibus 1: At the Mountains of Madness*, pp. 303-350.

¹⁴Nyarlathotep, also known as the Crawling Chaos, is a complex and important figure in H.P. Lovecraft's works. Unlike most of Lovecraft's gods and entities, who are often depicted as indifferent or uncaring about human beings, Nyarlathotep takes an active interest in humanity, often with disastrous results. Nyarlathotep first appeared in Lovecraft's prose poem of the same name, published in 1920. In that story, he is described as a tall, swarthy man who resembles an ancient Egyptian pharaoh. In this guise, Nyarlathotep wanders the Earth, gathering legions of followers through the use of strange, otherworldly devices that demonstrate his supernatural power. The devices and the demonstrations induce horror and madness in those who witness them, and Nyarlathotep's followers are led to a catastrophic fate. Nyarlathotep is described as having a thousand other forms, many of which are monstrous and terrifying. In "Nyarlathotep", a short story written by H.P. Lovecraft, 1920, he is described as "swarthy, slender, and sinister", and he brings with him strange instruments and gives exhibitions of power that leave his audiences speechless. Wherever he goes, rest vanishes, and nightmares become a public problem. The story is often interpreted as a commentary on the fear and confusion that comes with the rapid advancement of science and technology, as well as a critique of the human tendency to revere figures of power even when those figures bring destruction and chaos. H. P. Lovecraft. *Nyarlathotep*.

¹⁵Worth reading is "The Call of Cthulhu", one of Lovecraft's most famous stories which introduces the character of Cthulhu, a massive entity worshipped by cultists. Cthulhu is described as a mix of a giant human, an octopus, and a dragon, and is depicted as being hundreds of meters tall. The story is presented as a series of documents and testimonies collected by the protagonist, and it suggests that Cthulhu, currently in a form of stasis in the underwater city of R'lyeh, will rise again, leading to widespread madness and destruction. H. P. Lovecraft. *The Call of Cthulhu*.

In Pickman's studio, Thurber is both fascinated and horrified by the artist's latest works, which are even more graphic and unsettling than his public offerings. Each painting depicts a monstrous creature in an eerily real urban or subterranean setting. Pickman then takes Thurber to his other studio, located in an even older, run-down part of the city. This studio houses Pickman's most horrifying works, which depict the creatures engaging in various acts of savagery.¹⁶

As they delve deeper into the studio, Thurber hears a strange noise, but Pickman dismisses it as rats. At the end of the visit, Pickman shows Thurber a particularly horrifying painting of a monstrous creature eating a victim. Thurber is so disturbed by this painting that he leaves in haste, forgetting his walking stick.

The next day, Thurber sends a servant to retrieve his stick and the servant returns with a photograph that fell out of the stick's hollow handle. The photograph, intended as a reference for one of Pickman's paintings, reveals a real-life version of the monstrous creatures, proving that Pickman's models were real.

The primary theme of "Pickman's Model" is the horror of the unknown. Pickman's disturbingly realistic paintings of monstrous creatures unsettle Thurber, yet also fascinate him. These creatures, depicted in urban and underground settings, suggest an unseen reality that coexists with the mundane world, causing fear and dread. As Thurber delves deeper into Pickman's world, the line between fiction and reality becomes increasingly blurred, leading to the shocking revelation that Pickman's models are real ghoulish creatures living in the underbelly of the city.

Another important theme in the story is the power of art to invoke and embody horror. Pickman's art is a conduit for bringing the horrifying unknown into the realm of the known. His paintings are so vivid and realistic that they not only disturb viewers but also lead them to question their understanding of reality.

The story also explores the theme of obsession. Thurber's curiosity about Pickman's artwork turns into an obsession that ultimately leads him to a horrifying truth. This obsession drives the narrative and serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of delving too deeply into the unknown.

Finally, "Pickman's Model" touches on the theme of alienation. Pickman, because of his eccentricity and disturbing artwork, is ostracized from the mainstream art community. His alienation highlights the societal fear of the unknown and different.

In Guillermo del Toro's adaptation of "Pickman's Model" for his TV series "Cabinet of Curiosities", there are noticeable deviations from Lovecraft's original tale, which bring new dimensions and depth to the story.

Initially, the adaptation recasts Thurber, originally merely an observer and admirer of Pickman's work in Lovecraft's story, into a talented young artist himself. This shift is significant as it creates an intimate connection between Thurber and Pickman, allowing Thurber to be captivated not just by the horror in Pickman's art, but by its artistic merit as well. Moreover, Thurber's transformation into an artist allows for a more profound exploration of the power of art, as he begins to experience nightmarish visions akin to those depicted in Pickman's work.¹⁷

The timeline of the story is also expanded in the adaptation. The narrative begins in 1909 and then leaps forward to 1926, during which Thurber gets married and has a child. This expansion of the story's timeline introduces new characters and relationships, particularly Thurber's family, who become tragically entangled in the story's climactic horror.¹⁸

One of the most compelling additions to the story in del Toro's version is the backstory of Lavinia, an ancestor of Pickman who was executed for witchcraft. Lavinia's history of a ritualistic feast of her husband's flesh resonates ominously throughout the story and is gruesomely mirrored in the fate that befalls Thurber's family. This element of a generational curse and ritualistic sacrifice, absent in Lovecraft's original tale, adds a disturbing layer of horror and complexity to Pickman's paintings, transforming them into vehicles of this curse.¹⁹

Furthermore, the adaptation introduces a potentially Lovecraftian deity, suggested to be Yog-Sothoth.

This entity, depicted in various forms in the episode, adds a supernatural dimension to the unfolding horror, underlining the Lovecraftian themes of cosmic horror and the terror of the unknowable.²⁰

¹⁶H. P. Lovecraft. *Omnibus 3: The Haunter of the Dark and Other Tales*, pp. pp. 44-60.

¹⁷Guillermo del Toro's *Cabinet of Curiosities*.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Guillermo del Toro's *Cabinet of Curiosities*.

²⁰Yog-Sothoth is a cosmic entity in the fiction of Lovecraft. The entity first appeared in Lovecraft's novella "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" (written in 1927, and first published in 1941). However, it was in the short story "The Dunwich Horror" (1929) that Yog-Sothoth was given a more prominent role and a more detailed description. Yog-Sothoth is described as an omnipresent, all-knowing entity existing outside the confines of time and space, often depicted as a conglomeration of glowing spheres. Lovecraft himself described Yog-Sothoth as "the key and guardian of the gate... past, present, future, all are one in Yog-Sothoth." The entity is often associated with the idea of forbidden knowledge and is invoked in various rites and incantations within

Del Toro's adaptation of "Pickman's Model" retains the core of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, while expanding and deepening the story with new characters, themes, and plot developments. This adaptation showcases how a creative reinterpretation of an 'old story' can evoke 'new horrors' and offer fresh insights into the narrative.

The changes made in the adaptation of "Pickman's Model" for "Cabinet of Curiosities" seem to be influenced by a combination of factors, including the change of medium, audience expectations, and del Toro's unique artistic vision.

The change of medium from text to screen is a significant factor. Television, as a visual medium, relies heavily on visual storytelling and requires a narrative that can be portrayed effectively on screen.²¹ For instance, the transformation of Thurber into an artist and the addition of a visual layer of nightmarish visions he experiences provide opportunities for striking visual sequences. Similarly, the generational curse and the rituals associated with it, though not present in the original text, add a visually dramatic element that heightens the horror and tension on screen.

Audience expectations also play a role in shaping the adaptation. Contemporary audiences often seek stories with complex characters, depth, and backstory.²² The expansion of the timeline and the development of characters like Thurber and his family, as well as the backstory of Lavinia, provide the complexity and depth that cater to these expectations. Furthermore, the gruesome fate of Thurber's family introduces a shock factor that aligns with the modern horror genre's penchant for intense, often violent, moments of horror.

Lastly, del Toro's own artistic vision and style have undeniably shaped the adaptation. Known for his penchant for gothic horror and intricate storytelling, del Toro expands upon Lovecraft's story in ways that align with his own storytelling sensibilities. The inclusion of elements like a witchcraft backstory, ritualistic sacrifices, and the invocation of a Lovecraftian deity, reflect del Toro's predilection for blending supernatural horror with rich, detailed narratives.²³

Overall, the changes in the adaptation of "Pickman's Model" are reflective of the transition from a written story to a visual medium, the expectations of modern audiences, and the creative vision of the adapter. These changes, while introducing new elements and themes, still retain and emphasize the essence of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, thereby creating a fresh interpretation of the original story.

Analysis of "The Dreams in the Witch-House" "The Dreams in the Witch-House" is a richly layered narrative that centers on Walter Gilman, a student at Miskatonic University, who moves into a room in a boarding house that is reputed to be cursed. This house, known as the "Witch House," was once the home of Keziah Mason, a woman accused of witchcraft in the 17th century who mysteriously vanished from her jail cell before she could be tried.²⁴ The room that Gilman rents is the very room in which Mason lived, and where she allegedly practiced her dark arts.

Gilman is not an average student; he is deeply engrossed in highly advanced studies of mathematics and folklore. He is particularly interested in non-Euclidean calculus and quantum physics, fields of study that Lovecraft suggests can open gateways to other dimensions and times. Gilman's interest in the Witch House

Lovecraft's stories. It's seen as a gate or key, able to allow those who invoke it to travel through time and space, but often with dire consequences. One of the more terrifying aspects of Yog-Sothoth is the concept that it embodies the universe in its entirety; to understand or perceive Yog-Sothoth in full is to invite madness, as a human mind is not capable of comprehending such an infinite concept. This is a common theme in Lovecraft's work, where knowledge or understanding often leads to despair or insanity. H. P. Lovecraft. *The Dunwich Horror*. Robert M. Price. *The Cthulhu Cycle: Thirteen Tentacles of Terror*. Price has edited several collections of Lovecraft's work and written about the Cthulhu Mythos.

²¹Kristin Thompson. *Storytelling in Film and Television*.

²²Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Adaptation*.

²³Guillermo del Toro and Marc Zicree. *Guillermo del Toro Cabinet of Curiosities: My Notebooks, Collections, and Other Obsessions*.

²⁴"MASON, KEZIAH. Supposed witch from Arkham, Massachusetts, apprehended during the witch-scare of 1692. Keziah Mason confessed freely to her crimes, saying that the Devil had given her the secret name of Nahab and taken her to secret rites at various isolated locations. To aid her mischievous deeds, he had given her a familiar named Brown Jenkin. She had also discovered certain combinations of lines and angles allowing travel through the dimensions. After she gave the names of her fellow coven members, the judges condemned Keziah to death - an unusual sentence, since most witch-trial participants who confessed were not killed. Shortly thereafter, she escaped from her cell, leaving nothing behind but a mysterious drawing upon the wall of her prison. When the judges went to arrest her co-conspirators, they found them gone and the same markings in their homes. Rumors of long-standing in Arkham maintain that the ghost of the witch and her familiar are seen occasionally." Daniel Harms. *The Cthulhu Mythos Encyclopedia: A Guide to H. P. Lovecraft's Universe*, p. 177.

stems from these studies, as he believes the house might provide insights into these esoteric fields of knowledge.²⁵

Lovecraft uses Gilman's dreams as a mechanism to blur the boundaries of reality. These dreams, which become progressively more disturbing, serve to connect the rational world of science and mathematics with the irrational world of ancient, malevolent forces. In his dreams, Gilman meets Mason and her monstrous familiar, Brown Jenkin, a rat-like creature with a human face. These encounters become increasingly terrifying, revealing horrific scenes of witchcraft, and suggesting the existence of multi-dimensional realities.

As Gilman becomes more entwined in these nightmares, he is drawn into a plot to sacrifice a child on Walpurgis Night. Despite his attempts to prevent the sacrifice, he awakens to find evidence that the events from his dreams have materialized in the physical world, suggesting a terrifying link between the realms of dream and reality.²⁶

In "The Dreams in the Witch-House," Lovecraft explores themes of forbidden knowledge, the insignificance of humanity in the face of the cosmos, and the intersection of science and the supernatural. This tale is a quintessential example of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, presenting a universe that is not only indifferent to human beings but is also home to ancient, malign entities that exist beyond the scope of human understanding. The story serves as a grim reminder of the potential dangers of delving too deeply into the unknown, suggesting that there are realms of knowledge that humanity is perhaps not meant to explore.

In Guillermo del Toro's adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's "The Dreams in the Witch House" for "Cabinet of Curiosities", several significant narrative and thematic alterations are made, creating a distinct interpretation of the original text.

The protagonist, originally an academic named Walter Gilman, is reimagined as Walt, a man gripped by the grief of losing his twin sister, Epperley, and thus obsessively seeks proof of the afterlife. This shift foregrounds a personal, emotionally charged narrative, diverging from Lovecraft's focus on intellectual curiosity and mathematical abstraction. Walt's journey is propelled by a substance known as "liquid gold," a contrivance absent from Lovecraft's narrative, which facilitates his communion with the liminal realm of the deceased, further emphasizing the narrative's emotional stakes.²⁷

One of the most significant changes lies in the representation of Keziah Mason and her familiar, Brown Jenkins. The former is more directly sinister, initiating a ritual to return to the physical world using Walt's life force. The latter undergoes a dramatic transformation from a rat with a human face to a rat-human hybrid capable of possessing a human host, thus introducing an element of body horror that is more characteristic of del Toro's oeuvre than Lovecraft's.

These alterations serve to contemporize the story, incorporating themes of substance abuse and personal loss, and a reimagining of the supernatural elements in a way that appeals to modern sensibilities. The narrative's emphasis shifts from an exploration of cosmic horror and the terror of the unknown to a more intimate exploration of personal loss and the terror of losing oneself.

The adaptation thus demonstrates a reinterpretation of Lovecraft's work, retaining elements of cosmic horror and the unknowable, but also infusing the narrative with personal, emotional horror and contemporary societal concerns. While some may argue that this represents a departure from the essence of Lovecraft's work, it also testifies to the versatility and enduring relevance of his themes in contemporary horror storytelling.

The adaptation of "The Dreams in the Witch-House" for "Cabinet of Curiosities" necessitated several transformations due to the distinct characteristics of the screen medium, the evolving tastes of modern audiences, and the artistic imprint of Guillermo del Toro.

The transition from literature to screen inevitably requires a different approach to storytelling.²⁸ Lovecraft's original stories often hinge on the power of suggestion, using intricate, atmospheric descriptions to foster a sense of dread and terror. In contrast, television and film are inherently visual mediums, where horror must be explicitly depicted. This difference is exemplified in the adaptation's incorporation of the "liquid gold" substance, which provides a visually compelling mechanism to transport Walt between dimensions. Similarly, the grotesque metamorphosis of Jenkins Brown into a rat-human hybrid serves to visually amplify the horror of his transformation, an element that is more subtly implied in the original text.

Adjustments made for contemporary audiences also account for some of the changes. Modern audiences often seek narratives that blend horror with personal, emotional stories, which is reflected in the revamped plotline centered on Walt's grief and his quest to reunite with his deceased sister. Furthermore, the taste for explicit horror among many viewers may have influenced the decision to visually depict the more horrific

²⁵H. P. Lovecraft. *Omnibus 1: At the Mountains of Madness*, pp. 303-350.

²⁶H. P. Lovecraft. *Omnibus 1: At the Mountains of Madness*, pp. 303-350.

²⁷Guillermo del Toro's *Cabinet of Curiosities*.

²⁸John Desmond and Peter Hawkes. *Adaptation: Studying Film and Literature*.

elements of the story, such as the gruesome transformation of Jenkins Brown and the overtly sinister actions of Keziah Mason.

Lastly, the artistic vision and stylistic tendencies of Guillermo del Toro significantly shaped the adaptation. Del Toro's works frequently explore themes of monstrosity and blur the boundaries between horror and fantasy. His distinctive style is evident in the adaptation's portrayal of Jenkins Brown as a more monstrous figure and the elaboration of Keziah Mason's magical capabilities, both of which serve to heighten the fantastical elements of the story.

In essence, "The Dreams in the Witch House" episode of "Cabinet of Curiosities" serves to align the narrative with the expectations of the screen medium, cater to the preferences of modern audiences, and reflect Guillermo del Toro's unique artistic vision. The end result is a modern reinterpretation of Lovecraft's story that retains the core themes of the original while offering a visually compelling, emotionally resonant, and uniquely stylized cinematic experience.

Comparative Analysis

Both "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch House" adaptations share the inherent Lovecraftian theme of forbidden knowledge that both fascinates and horrifies. Guillermo del Toro's adaptations of Lovecraft's stories in "Cabinet of Curiosities" represent a fascinating study of the transformation of cosmic horror from the early 20th century to the present day.

In "Pickman's Model," the Lovecraftian elements of cosmic horror are preserved in the monstrous entities depicted in Pickman's art and the revelation of a horrific reality that drives those who witness it to madness. The inclusion of a Lovecraftian deity suggested through the chants also serves to solidify the connection to cosmic horror. Yet, the adaptation also takes a distinctly modern approach. It expands upon the personal experience of Thurber, emphasizing his psychological descent into madness and paranoia as he becomes progressively more entangled in Pickman's horrifying world. This narrative focuses on the psychological toll of encountering the unknown and aligns with contemporary horror's emphasis on psychological and emotional terror, offering a fresh perspective on Lovecraft's cosmic horror.

Similarly, "The Dreams in the Witch House" maintains the cosmic horror framework through the notion of an alternate dimension that is both terrifying and beyond human comprehension. The character of Keziah Mason, the witch who navigates this otherworldly realm, serves as a Lovecraftian figure that embodies the mysteries and horrors of the universe. However, the adaptation also introduces a modern twist by exploring the personal journey of Walt in his quest to reunite with his deceased sister. His grief and desperation become central to the narrative, lending an emotional depth that is often absent in Lovecraft's original works. By intertwining the cosmic horror elements with this poignant human story, the adaptation creates a more nuanced portrayal of cosmic horror that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Both adaptations demonstrate a careful balance of preserving Lovecraft's original cosmic horror themes while also incorporating modern narrative techniques and perspectives. The focus on personal trauma and emotional experiences in these adaptations reflects a broader trend in contemporary horror that places significant emphasis on the psychological and emotional aspects of horror. In doing so, they demonstrate that Lovecraft's cosmic horror, despite its roots in early 20th-century literature, remains a highly adaptable and relevant subgenre that continues to captivate and terrify audiences in the present day.

However, this approach to adapting Lovecraft's stories can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these reinterpretations bring new dimensions to the original narratives, making them more relatable and emotionally resonant for contemporary audiences. The added layers of complexity, such as the focus on personal trauma and the deepening of character backstories, enhance the psychological depth of the stories and provide a fresh take on Lovecraft's cosmic horror.

On the other hand, these modifications can also be seen as deviating from Lovecraft's original vision. Lovecraft's works are characterized by their impersonal approach to horror, wherein the terror arises not from personal traumas or individual misfortunes but from the existential dread of confronting a vast, uncaring universe filled with alien entities and incomprehensible truths.²⁹ In introducing personal and psychological elements to the narrative, the adaptations risk diluting the distinct cosmic horror at the heart of Lovecraft's works.

Moreover, the tangible manifestations of the horrifying entities in the adaptations, such as the physical appearance of the creature in "Pickman's Model," contrast with Lovecraft's more subtle approach. In Lovecraft's stories, the horror often lies in what is suggested or implied rather than explicitly shown. The overt depiction of these entities may detract from the sense of mystery and unknowability that is integral to Lovecraft's brand of cosmic horror.

²⁹Donald R. Burleson. *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe*.

Thus, while del Toro's adaptations succeed in innovating and modernizing Lovecraft's stories, they also tread a delicate line between enhancing the narratives for contemporary audiences and preserving the essence of Lovecraft's cosmic horror. This dynamic illustrates the inherent challenges and complexities of adapting classic literary works for modern mediums and audiences. The adaptations serve as a testament to the enduring appeal of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, even as they underscore the transformative potential of the adaptation process. Through these adaptations, del Toro has managed to create 'new horrors' from 'old stories,' demonstrating the power of reinterpretation in keeping classic horror narratives alive and relevant in the contemporary era.

Conclusion

In delving deeper into the adaptations of H.P. Lovecraft's stories in "Cabinet of Curiosities," it becomes evident that these stories are not only faithful to the core elements of Lovecraft's work but also innovative in their presentation of cosmic horror.

At the heart of these adaptations lie the fundamental tenets of Lovecraft's cosmic horror - the existence of ancient, otherworldly entities and the revelation of a reality that is terrifyingly beyond human understanding. These elements are meticulously preserved in both "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch House." The adaptations depict a reality that is teeming with monstrous entities and governed by incomprehensible forces, thereby staying true to Lovecraft's cosmic horror.

However, what makes these adaptations particularly noteworthy is their infusion of new narrative elements that provide a more contemporary take on Lovecraft's stories. In "Pickman's Model," the introduction of Thurber's backstory and the emphasis on his psychological descent into madness provide a deeper exploration of the psychological terror inherent in Lovecraft's cosmic horror. Similarly, in "The Dreams in the Witch House," Walt's quest to reunite with his deceased sister provides an emotionally poignant narrative that connects with modern audiences. The adaptations thus manage to strike a balance between preserving Lovecraft's cosmic horror and introducing narrative elements that resonate with contemporary sensibilities.

This successful blend of Lovecraftian cosmic horror with new narrative elements offers a nuanced and modern portrayal of cosmic horror. By presenting characters with complex emotional and psychological journeys, the adaptations invite audiences to engage with the horror on a more personal level. This is a marked departure from the detached, impersonal nature of Lovecraft's original stories, and it represents a significant contribution to the evolution of cosmic horror.

In conclusion, the adaptations of H.P. Lovecraft's stories in "Cabinet of Curiosities" serve as a testament to the enduring appeal and adaptability of Lovecraft's cosmic horror. By staying true to the elements of Lovecraft's work while introducing new narrative elements, these adaptations have successfully brought Lovecraft's cosmic horror into the 21st century. This reinterpretation of Lovecraft's work not only honors the original stories but also expands the scope of cosmic horror, providing new avenues for the exploration and appreciation of this intriguing genre.

To further unpack the analysis, it's worth highlighting the key characteristics of Guillermo del Toro's adaptations of Lovecraft's stories "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch-House" in "Cabinet of Curiosities." These adaptations exhibit a deep respect for the source material, maintaining the elements of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, such as the presence of ancient, unfathomable entities, the insignificance of mankind in the grand scheme of the universe, and the terror-inducing revelation of realities that shatter human understanding. These elements underpin Lovecraft's unique brand of horror, and their preservation in the adaptations ensures a continuation of this tradition.

However, del Toro does not merely replicate Lovecraft's stories; he enriches them by introducing contemporary narrative elements that resonate with modern audiences. These elements include a more pronounced focus on character development, psychological complexity, and emotional engagement. For instance, in "Pickman's Model," the adaptation delves deeper into the protagonist's psyche, transforming him from a mere observer in the original story to a tragically afflicted character. Similarly, in "The Dreams in the Witch House," the adaptation introduces a compelling sibling relationship that adds emotional depth to the narrative.

These changes not only enhance the storytelling but also broaden the scope of cosmic horror. By presenting Lovecraft's uncanny entities and unsettling realities through deeply personal and emotional narratives, del Toro's adaptations make cosmic horror more relatable and visceral for contemporary audiences. This reflects a modern interpretation of cosmic horror, one that retains the genre's existential dread but also emphasizes the human experience within it.

Ultimately, Guillermo del Toro's adaptations in "Cabinet of Curiosities" demonstrate the enduring appeal and adaptability of Lovecraft's cosmic horror. They show that while cosmic horror was conceived in the early 20th century, it continues to be a relevant and impactful genre in the 21st century. Through thoughtful

reinterpretation, del Toro's adaptations uphold the spirit of Lovecraft's cosmic horror while pushing its boundaries, offering a rich and layered exploration of the genre's potential for contemporary storytelling.

Building upon the discussion and analysis of Guillermo del Toro's adaptations of H.P. Lovecraft's stories in "Cabinet of Curiosities," several areas of potential future research and discussion emerge. One such area includes the broader implications of these adaptations within the context of contemporary horror filmmaking. Del Toro's approach to preserving core elements of cosmic horror while introducing modern narrative techniques could be evaluated in comparison to other modern adaptations of classic horror literature. This could reveal insights into the evolving landscape of horror in film and television, and how this genre's tropes and conventions are being reinterpreted and reinvigorated for contemporary audiences.

Another intriguing avenue for future research is the psychological impact of these adaptations. Given the pronounced emphasis on character psychology in del Toro's adaptations, it would be worthwhile to explore how this focus influences audience engagement with and reception of cosmic horror. This could involve examining audience reactions to del Toro's adaptations or conducting empirical studies on the psychological effects of viewing these adaptations.

Furthermore, it could be illuminating to examine how these adaptations engage with and reflect upon societal and cultural anxieties of the 21st century. Lovecraft's cosmic horror often externalizes internal, psychological fears into monstrous, external realities. It would be intriguing to analyze how del Toro's adaptations might be seen as a reflection of contemporary societal fears and anxieties.

Finally, a more detailed study could be conducted on the specific ways in which del Toro's adaptations expand upon Lovecraft's mythos. For instance, the introduction of new characters, the expansion of narrative arcs, and the visual representation of Lovecraft's entities could be analyzed in depth to better understand how these adaptations contribute to and reinterpret Lovecraft's cosmic horror.

In conclusion, Guillermo del Toro's adaptations of H.P. Lovecraft's "Pickman's Model" and "The Dreams in the Witch-House" in "Cabinet of Curiosities" not only provide a rich ground for critical analysis but also open up numerous avenues for future research and discussion, underscoring the potential of these adaptations as a catalyst for further exploration in the field of horror studies.

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