COSMIC REVULSION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LONGINIAN SUBLIME IN
THE WORKS OF H.P. LOVECRAFT

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ABSTRACT

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Conventionally, the sublime is the state of mind in which observers of art and culture, comprehend, for a fleeting moment, the incomprehensible. As our imagination cannot conceptualize infinity, or death, our capacity for reason must fill the gaps. This knowledge, that our reasoning mind can understand concepts which our imagination is incapable of grasping, is the sublime. The works of H. P. Lovecraft, in all their cosmic, super-sensible horror, demonstrate for the narrators or characters the nature of the sublime, through terror and revulsion. To explicate examples of the sublime experience in Lovecraft’s works, I will read “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Outsider,” and “The Music of Erich Vann,” with the aim to understand the sublime further, and tie it to revulsion and horror.

Lovecraft’s enjoyed a revival recently, with his short stories inspiring new movies, comic books, video games, and books. As such there is a demand for Lovecraft, and criticism and essays on his works are a part of that revival that I wish to partake in.
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INTRODUCTION

Longinus’ treatise *On the Sublime*, while quoted less often than Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* or Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, still holds significance for any critic studying the sublime in literature. In particular, studying the Romantics lends itself to a thorough analysis of *On the Sublime* as Longinus’ notion of the sublime is such that it fits well with many Romantic era notions of sublimity. “Sublimity,” writes Longinus, “produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind and exhibits the orator’s power at a single blow . . . Real sublimity contains much food for reflection, is difficult or rather impossible to resist, and makes a strong ineffaceable impression on the memory” (137-38). This notion of sublimity as “food for reflection,” “impossible to resist,” and as making “ineffaceable impression[s] on the memory” are found in writings on the sublime from the Romantic period, many going so far as to invoke Longinus to demonstrate the “proper” way to induce the sublime in the reader (Kearney). Longinus’ *On the Sublime* has been translated several different ways, and when he discusses the actual experience of the sublime, sometimes the sublime is a storm, a bolt of lightning, but most translations agree that Longinus is inferring that at that point in the text, the sublime is being described as a moment. I have selected *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Second Edition*’s translation of Longinus’ treatise as my authoritative version of the text, and this version offers no other words from Longinus on how often and how long the sublime occurs.
The Romantics saw the sublime as a momentary experience as well. Early Romantics wrote of the sublime in terms of its unsustainability, but not in terms of a lack of reward. The sublime experience is a singular event from which we gain something. Later Romantics would see an irony in the sublime moment. Sublimity, in being momentary, cannot help but bring to mind a sense of loss, and thus death—the irony being that in seeing something so transcendent that is inevitably gone, those who have experienced the sublime moment also must think of the loss of that transcendence. This irony carried through to the Modernists, and notably the works of H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) employ many themes of permanent loss: loss of the mind, of life, of naivety. His stories also tend to culminate in a final, horror-striking moment from which the characters never fully recover mentally, a moment which indeed tears up the narrative like a whirlwind. In the shorter works of H. P. Lovecraft, I have traced evidence of representations of the Longinian sublime experience occurring in the characters, as a result of a horrific and strange experience. H.P. Lovecraft was a man influenced, like many early twentieth century American and European authors, by the Romantics, and this is demonstrated best in the sublime experiences of his characters. There is disagreement in the sphere of Longinian criticism about whether this is a series of moments or a single moment, but as my analysis of Lovecraft’s works is that of the sublime experiences of characters, a distinction between “momentary” and “not momentary” is largely irrelevant: it happens only once for the character.

While Longinus presents several suggestions on achieving sublimity in literature, he is principally trying to explain how to express “grandeur, magnificence, and urgency”
in one’s writing. Longinus argues that “grandeur, magnificence, and urgency” are qualities for making a lasting impression on a reader’s memory, which is essential to the sublime experience (143). Postmodernism asserts, however, that sublimity is no longer an experience that great literature is capable of instilling in the reader or author. Regardless of whether or not this is the case, I do not intend to make the claim that Lovecraft’s literature inspires the sublime for the readers’ benefit. Rather, Lovecraft’s characters experience the Longinian sublime, and thus represent that experience for the reader through various means. In articulating this experience through the characters, Lovecraft recreates the sublime experience, preserving the quality and magnitude of that experience in print, as authors have done with countless other uniquely human experiences. Though Lovecraft does not directly reference the sublime in any of his criticism or works, the Longinian sublime, I argue, is present and often essential in his stories, particularly at the climactic endings to some of his shorter works.

In his explanation of how to “[make] our writing sublime” through a greatness of thought, Longinus explores several methods. In this project, I will discuss those five methods I feel are necessary and sufficient for representing the Longinian Sublime: Transport, Memory, Amplification, Visualization, and breakdowns in language. The presence of Transport and Memory is sufficient, while the presence of Amplification, Visualization, and a breakdown in language is necessary for the Longinian sublime. In Lovecraft’s fiction, these techniques are usually articulated through narrators who are actual characters in the stories themselves; the stories I will be discussing, in particular,
are all first-person limited narrators, not the third-person omniscient variety, and this is a common trope in much of Lovecraft.

Among those literary techniques present in Lovecraft, memory and the complex notion of transport, as stated above, are two techniques that Longinus considers to be the prime indicators of a sublime experience (“Longinus” 137-38). The characters experiencing the sublime in Lovecraft’s works notably have poor memories and deteriorated physical conditions. However, their memory of their sublime experience is crisp, concrete. Despite the utter breakdown in the language during the sublime experience, the reader has very little left to the imagination, except that final moment, and everything leading up to the simulated sublime experience is described in ample detail. So, despite the character’s own admitted poor memory, he or she is perfectly capable of remembering the sublime experience precisely because a sublime experience is meant to leave a lasting impression. The fact that memory plays such a large role in several of Lovecraft’s works, notably those I’ll be discussing later, cannot be ignored. Obviously memory is essential for the structure of the story. Without memory, the narrators would have nothing to say to their fictional audience.

Transport is tangentially related to memory and is thus the second half of those themes or literary techniques sufficient enough to indicate a representative sublime experience in characters. Transport occurs when a character is either physically, emotionally, or mentally incapable of returning to the space or moment in which their Longinian sublime experience occurred. In writing his treatise, *On the Sublime*, Longinus explained that
The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer. (I)

Transport is the “irresistible” sensation induced by powerful imagery, which carries one’s “soul” away from the actual physicality of the moment. However, there is a second layer of meaning implied by the notion of transport: that of travel. Longinus’ choice of word is very significant, because to be transported is to actually physically move somewhere else. Because the Longinian sublime occurs in a moment, a “flashing . . . like a thunderbolt” or in the above translation, a “whirlwind,” the sublime is not an extended experience, but a momentary swelling of intense emotion forever ingrained in the memory (I; “Longinus” 138).

The significance of the Longinian sublime’s ephemerality is that in order for a representation of the Longinian sublime to be accurate, once characters are transported, they should not be able to return to that exact moment, because if they were able to return to that physical location or mental state, they could learn more about that experience. For instance, in the stories I will be discussing later, not a single character is capable, either physically or mentally, of returning to the location or moment of his or her Longinian sublime experience. Characters go insane, become trapped in their own minds, are arrested, or even killed, thus preventing them from ever reclaiming that experience, from
exploring further what occurred and thus learning something more. This is precisely the reason why memory and transport are sufficient: memory cannot be erased, and is the primary indicator of the sublime, according to Longinus; and transport is likewise unavoidable, and experienced, like memory, directly by the characters.

Amplification, visualization, and the breakdown in language are not experiences—they are methods of description. According to Longinus, as a method of increasing tension and describing scenes, Amplification is found when the facts or issues at stake allow many starts and pauses in each section. You wheel up one impressive unit after another to give a series of increasing importance . . . [amplification] may be produced by commonplaces, by exaggeration or intensification of facts or arguments, or by a build-up of action or emotion . . . amplification is an aggregation of all the details and topics which constitute a situation, strengthening the argument by dwelling on it. (141-2)

Amplification is the art of intensifying repetition of images or themes, in order to create rising tension—the key is the intensification. Lovecraft, like many horror authors, employs repetition within individual stories, as well as across his works; he has ideas and images he continues to revisit in each work, such as the concepts of memory, of death and the afterlife, and of age, to name just a few. However, in order for these themes or images to be considered amplified, they must be brought into the story in increasingly concentrated ways. Lovecraft utilizes this method in several of his shorter works. For instance, in “Cool Air” (1928), an old man keeps himself alive through successive
decreases in temperature. The narrator of the story is confronted, daily, with colder and
colder temperatures, which are associated in the story with death, decay and fear. There is
a scene in which the cold culminates in broken pipes and a steady slipping toward true
death, but the cold is still a focal point, focused on so much so that the narrator spends
much of the end of the story searching for ice cubes. Amplification is utilized in several
of the works I’ll be discussing later.

Another common Longinian technique found in Lovecraft is that of Visualization,
or Phantasia (140, 143). Visualization is not to be confused with descriptive language.
Rather, Visualization represents “the situation in which enthusiasm and emotion make the
speaker see what he is saying and bring it visually before his audience.” This does not
mean that characters describe an action they are witnessing, and then the reader visualizes
the action. Rather, characters explain what they are imagining, and the reader can then
Visualize that imagined scene, “see what [the characters] imagined” (143). Longinus uses
two examples of Visualization from Euripedes’ Orestes: “Mother, I beg you, do not drive
them at me,/the women with the blood in their eyes and the snakes—/they are here, they
are here, jumping right up to me” and from Iphigenia in Tauris: “O! O! She’ll kill me.
Where shall I escape?” “The poet himself,” writes Longinus, “saw the [Furies], and has
as good as made his audience see what he imagined” (“Longinus” 143). Longinus’ use of
a kind of horror imagery rendering the character rambling or having difficulty speaking,
as Orestes is, is especially interesting in regards to Lovecraft’s works. Many of his
characters, in the climax of the pieces, are rendered momentarily incapable of coherency;
this is the breakdown in language necessary for the Longinian sublime experience. We
can determine what the character is seeing, however, through the strong emotional upheaval present on the page. For instance, in the final scenes of “The Outsider,” the narrator places his hand on a mirror. However, he does not tell the reader this—instead the narrative dissolves into a confused mess of fear and loathing as the narrator runs from his own reflection, which the reader is, again, unaware of. Despite never being made aware of the mirror’s presence in the story, though, one can visualize what the character is seeing—some horrifying monster—without the narrator directly stating what he is seeing.

As mentioned above, breakdown in language is necessary for the Longinian sublime because it is a textual representation of the intensity of the sublime experience for the character. The characters experiencing the sublime are often incapable of articulate speech at the end of his stories, and thus are reduced to babbling which is often incoherent when compared with their language at the start of the story. This language breakdown is meant to demonstrate that the character is failing to fully comprehend either visually or mentally what he or she is seeing, and thus the character cannot adequately describe the sights or emotions of that sublime moment. The breakdown often appears in the form of a long stream of adjectives or nouns meant to be related to what characters are seeing, longer sentences with unclear purposes, or vague descriptions usually demarcated from other descriptions by the words “could not imagine” or “could not describe,” or something similar. All of these markers convey that the narrator cannot actually understand what he or she is seeing or feeling.
Great works exhibit the above qualities, asserts Longinus, and great works have the potential to induce sublimity in the reader or author. Lovecraft, writing in the twentieth century, is a relatively new author, and only time will tell whether his works will have a lasting effect on culture. Still, representations of a sublime experience through his characters are evident in his writing. There are others who feel that Lovecraft’s works produce for the reader, not for the characters in the work, the Kantian or Burkean sublime, and they have written dissertations and essays arguing so. My goal is not to discredit the research of others, nor to directly contradict the conclusions of other scholars. My intention is to look not at the experiences of the writer or the reader of Lovecraft’s works, but rather at the experiences of the characters’. Many of Lovecraft’s shorter works culminate in a *representation* of the Longinian sublime experience. The narrator or protagonist of the piece demonstrates a sublime experience as he or she attempts to describe for the audience an experience beyond fear or awe, further than pain or emotional agony; it is a sublime experience both indescribable and unrepeatable. The Longinian sublime is more useful in explicating this representation of the sublime through narration and characterization, than either the Kantian or Burkean sublime.

However, John Opel argues in his dissertation, “Transformations in the Sublime,” that the Kantian sublime is more present in Lovecraft than other forms of the sublime. Writes Opel: “[i]n Kant, the human consciousness is seen as divided into pure and practical reason, with the faculty of judgment mediating between the two” (9). He continues:
The real horror in Lovecraft is one that undermines the assumptions of freedom and pure reason. If the world as we represent it to ourselves is somehow less than what it is—if representations, language, art, etc., are a way of escaping the truth of our senses—the return of that external world might disrupt our pure reason, limit our freedom, and undermine the beliefs that organized our faculties in the first place. (10)

The assumption here is that the intrusion of reality into the transcendent imagination of the reader or writer awakens him or her to the knowledge that they are more limited. Opel, using Lovecraft’s “The Rats in the Walls” (1924) as an example, approaches the sublime experience from an angle of racially-based hatred on the part of both Lovecraft and the main character of “The Rats in the Walls.” The tale is one of a man who steadily grows mad at the sound of rats in the walls, chewing, moving, and breeding. Upon the revelation that they are not rats at all, but mutated humans, the narrator eventually kills and eats a comrade. After realizing that his family is not what he originally suspected, that he is a direct descendant of these subterranean cannibalistic mutants, the main character goes mad (8-10). But Opel is not talking about a character experiencing the sublime. On the contrary, Opel’s Kantian sublime experience is meant to occur in the author or reader of the work.

Opel acknowledges the limitations of his argument, allowing that the sublime is flexible and always evolving, and is of a higher “mode” and therefore cannot be applied to every tale (5-6). His overarching argument is that “the sublime, as a philosophical problem or condition, helps mark important literary considerations of American
experience: race and citizenship, the myth of the self-made man, the truth of suffering during the Great Depression, and the ethical disposition of the racially oppressed” (4). In other words, the reader or writer, through the process of reading a creative work is confronted with the discrepancies between the “American experience” and his or her actual experience. Literature cannot adequately describe these experiences. The writer or reader’s worldview is shattered, and the reader experiences the sublime as a result of a failed faculty of understanding due to the knowledge that language has failed to convey one’s experience.

Since his definition of the sublime and his application of Kant’s theory of the sublime are so narrow, and because he is not talking about sublime representations through character experiences, it might seem strange to even address Opel’s argument. However, there are few authors addressing character, and I want to make an important distinction between the Kantian and Longinian sublime that I think is well-illustrated in Opel’s dissertation. The Kantian sublime dictates that the sublime experience affords an increased understanding; it “expands our cognition” and must “invite profound investigations” (“Kant” 423). In Opel’s dissertation, he explicates this by pointing out the way the main character of “The Rats in the Walls” learns all there is to know about his family history (8-10). Opel’s choice of story is significant because in many of Lovecraft’s works the main characters or narrators never come to understand anything about the motivations, the nature, or the origins of any of the weird and fantastical creatures and beings with which they come into contact, and yet the main character of “The Rats in the Walls” seemingly learns all there is to know about his family’s history. However, one
must argue that it is nigh impossible to really fully understand or comprehend an evil so outside the human norm, as the evil of “The Rats in the Walls.” While the reader or author might understand, might discover new information, the character is left in the dark.

Other critics, unlike Opel, have utilized representations of the sublime through character reactions as a means of accessing the sublime in Lovecraft. In his article “H. P. Lovecraft and the Semiotic Kantian Sublime,” Bradley Will articulates the Kantian sublime as “the “soul-shattering” sense of awe and wonder one experiences upon encountering a phenomenon which truly exceeds the grasp of understanding . . . The phenomenal object “excites the feeling of the sublime” because it disrupts reflective judgment” (7-9). Will uses “The Colour Out of Space” (1927) as an example of the Kantian sublime in Lovecraft, and again he may be correct. However, Will’s point that the “faculty of reason must generate an abstract idea of the ungraspable object” is where I take issue: I see no faculty of reason in the way the characters in Lovecraft’s works react to the phenomenon with which they are confronted (11). In my discussions of the short works I have selected, I will go into more detail, but in summation: not a single character is able to garner any new, useful information about their experience. Sufficient for the Kantian sublime is this new knowledge or understanding that reveals something more about the world to the person experiencing the phenomenon (“Kant” 423). In many of Lovecraft’s tales, there is new information presented to the characters, but it is precisely this new information which causes the character to experience the Longinian sublime.
Upon looking back on their experience, characters do not grow or learn anything, and they are incapable of doing so due to physical or emotional barriers.

Further, in Will’s article, he is looking at the “semiotic” Kantian sublime. He supports his main idea—the semiotic Kantian sublime in Lovecraft—through the use of Thomas Weiskel’s *The Romantic Sublime*, and not through Kant. Writes Will:

> [w]here in Kant’s model the sublime experience is a result of a failure of the faculty of understanding, in Weiskel’s model the sublime experience is a result of the failure of the semiotic system . . . In “The Colour Out of Space” a group of scientists encounter an object (signifier), and they connect this object with their cognitive conception of a meteorite (signified). The second phase . . . is characterized by an excess on the part of the signifier. (13)

Will goes on to summarize the scientists’ experience in “The Colour Out of Space”—ultimately, their signified does not match up with the limitless signifier. In other words, the Color is not a meteorite, and the scientists ultimately fail in every attempt to identify the Color through normal human scientific methods and testing. Weiskel’s model has a third phase, wherein “the observer becomes aware of the sublime” (14).

Will makes a compelling argument for the Kantian sublime in Lovecraft, with the added analytic perspective of Weiskel’s model. However, “The Colour Out of Space,” I would argue, is unique in that the characters in the piece are actually attempting to discover something strange, and simultaneously the reader is being confronted with this knowledge. In other of Lovecraft’s works, this is not the case: either the main character
or narrator accidentally stumbles upon and is horrified into flight by the Unknown or Strange, or the reader is not directly privy to the character’s experience. Furthermore, as mentioned above, in “The Colour Out of Space,” despite endless experimentation, the scientists cannot discern any concrete information about the Color, implying that all they have gained from that experience is the memory of the Color, the inability to continue experimenting further, and no new information about their universe, other than the fact that there are things beyond human measurement.

In addition to the Kantian, the Burkean sublime has similarly been attributed to Lovecraft. The mere fact that there are multiple interpretations of the sublime in Lovecraft is promising, as it opens up his works to further inquiry. However, those who see the Burkean sublime in Lovecraft have an extremely strong case for two reasons: first, much of Lovecraft’s own reflective writing, as well as the text in his stories, parallel Edmund Burke’s writings on the sublime; and second, Burke’s notion of unpleasant experiences as sublime is in line with much of horror in general (Nelson 2-3).

In Kristjón Halldórsson’s thesis, “H.P. Lovecraft. The Enlightenment and Connection to the World of Cosmicism,” he asserts that the powerful feeling terror induces is what creates a sublime experience for readers of Lovecraft’s work (17). In exploring the sublime experience in readers, not characters, Halldórsson asserts that “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936) “is a grand story like most of [Lovecraft’s] tales, attempt [sic] to humble the reader by making him awestruck” (25). He focuses on Burke’s idea of the “obscure,” that it is what is not seen that is so terrifying, and that our imagination takes up the work of horrifying us when we are not directly confronted with
whatever frightens or harms us (18). The issue that I take with this reading of Lovecraft, however, is that the stories that Halldórsson uses as his examples are “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), “The Colour Out of Space,” and “At the Mountains of Madness.” In each one of these stories, the only thing left to one’s imagination is the motivations of the monsters and mad things the character is confronted with. Every aspect of the creature or phenomenon is described in great detail, as is the case with many Gothic stories. “The Colour Out of Space” is particularly damning because the actual object the scientists in the piece are forced to confront is clearly examined, as previously mentioned, and described. What is not revealed in many of Lovecraft’s stories has very little to do with what is seen or unseen, but rather what is known or unknown on an intellectual level.

Dale Nelson’s article, “Lovecraft and the Burkean Sublime,” similarly attributes the Burkean sublime to Lovecraft’s shorter works. Nelson’s primary focus is on the likelihood of Lovecraft having read Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. However, Nelson himself admits that Lovecraft never made any allusions to Burke directly in his academic writings. Nelson’s argument is that Lovecraft was directly inspired by the Burkean sublime, that Lovecraft utilized *Philosophical Enquiry* “as a checklist of ideas or possibilities for his stories” (2). This argument is wrapped up in the fact that Burke and Lovecraft are “attracted to objects and situations which . . . arouse awe and terror” and they both “promote the dignity of an art which aspires to produce upon the reader or viewer the aesthetic equivalent of the hush, the awe, the trembling that are appropriate responses to the sublime” (2). Again, however, Nelson admits that this evidence, too, has contradictions. Burke’s idea of what
inspires “awe and terror” includes all of those things which can cause fear, including blood and gore. However, Lovecraft found an overabundance of gore distasteful, and did not include much in his writing (Nelson 2). And, like Opel and Halldórsson, Nelson is not arguing for representations of the sublime through characters’ described experiences, but rather that Lovecraft’s stories demonstrate merely examples of sublimity-inducing imagery; in other words, the reader is meant to have a sublime experience, not the character.

Still, Nelson demonstrates parallels between Lovecraft and Burke’s own language which are difficult to ignore, citing several examples where they write, almost word for word, about the tropes of horror, or what is sufficient for a sublime experience (2-3). For instance, Nelson writes that “Burke and Lovecraft are attracted to objects and situations which—“at certain distances” [Footnote: Burke]—arouse awe and terror” but they are not so much interested in raw gore or gross-out horror (2). Both Burke and Lovecraft, notes Nelson, write similarly about pain: “Lovecraft says that ‘we remember pain and the menace of death more vividly than pleasure’ . . . and Burke [says] that ‘the idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure’” (2). But where I feel Nelson’s argument becomes problematic is his discussion of the Burkean sources of the sublime implemented by Lovecraft, namely sound (4). Nelson writes extensively on the many instances of loud noises or strange sounds in Lovecraft’s fiction, which supposedly induce a sublime experience simply through their loudness (4-5). But there is a particular story that directly contradicts this claim: “The Music of Erich Zann” (1922). Again, I will go more into this piece later, but suffice it to say the unnamed
narrator of the piece spends the entirety of the story listening to strange, unearthly, impossible noises, and yet it is not this that induces the sublime experience in him: it’s the sight of the limitless blackness outside Zann’s window. And while both Kant and Burke discuss hugeness and vastness as sources of the sublime experience, for Kant these are, again, predicated on the expansion of knowledge, and for Burke, the vastness must be at a distance, or visually disorienting or obscured (Nelson 3).

The Burkean and the Kantian sublime could be induced in Lovecraft’s fiction, but I am hesitant to ascribe either of them to the larger body of his work. Longinus complicates my own argument with his denigration of horror as “‘puerility’, rather than sublimity” (Gentile 16). However, Kant never mentions horror in his On Sublimity, only mentioning natural disasters, which are hardly the same as monsters and cosmic horrors. I’d further argue that while Longinus may have stated that he did not allow for horror in the sublime, he discussed it without even noticing, perhaps. In On the Sublime, Longinus uses proto-Gothic examples from Euripides’ poetry to articulate Visualization, as I mentioned earlier; the quotes are in regards to the character of Orestes seeing the Furies and becoming maddened and terrified by their appearance before him. There is very little that is more Gothic than an agonizing descent into madness.
THE STORIES

To reiterate, Longinus’ primary definition of the sublime experience is that it is one that is memorable, but unable to be repeated. In representing the sublime, then, what is sufficient is essentially that the experience leaves an imprint on the memory, and that the character is incapable of repeating that experience. This does not merely mean that the character reflects back on the experience as one might upon a fond memory, but that they are forever changed by the experience. Longinus’ metaphor is that of “transport,” of being taken to somewhere strange or new, but then returned to a semblance of safety. And thus the significance of memory is truly hit upon: characters only have their memory of their experience, and can no longer return to the moment, the location of the experience, and thus cannot repeat that experience.

There are other means of creating a sublime experience for a reader, according to Longinus, and I focus on two here: Visualization and Amplification. As mentioned before, these are literary techniques, utilized to induce sublimity in the reader. Visualization is often accompanied or preceded by a breakdown in language—description fails the character or narrator, and thus the narration is noticeably different than earlier in the piece. Amplification, on the other hand, is a kind of exaggeration of prose, or a repetition or aggregation of ideas or images, meant to increase tension or build up to action. In Lovecraft’s fiction, Amplification and Visualization merely convey for the reader the character’s sublime experience—a representation, characterizing a moment or a person further for the means of telling a story.
In “The Outsider” (1926), “The Music of Erich Zann,” and “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (1920) I have found the theme or instance of memory, and in all three I have also found visualization, as well as amplification. There are other Lovecraft pieces which only demonstrate the theme of memory, but for now we will be looking at those pieces which demonstrate all three techniques which contribute to the sublime experience, as they are represented in the narrators’ descriptions and dialogue.

The first of my three selections, “The Outsider,” opens with the narrator lamenting that he cannot remember much of his early life, save “lone hours in vast and dismal chambers with brown hangings and maddening rows of antique books . . . twilight groves of grotesque, gigantic, and vine-encumbered trees that silently wave twisted branches far aloft”; already the images in the story are disjointed, with libraries next to trees—from dead trees in book pages to living trees. He knows “not where [he] was born, save the castle was infinitely old and infinitely horrible; full of dark passages and having high ceilings where the eye seemed to only find cobwebs and shadows” (8). The narrator’s lack of early memories disconnects him from his fellow man, putting him in a place of isolation both physical—in his castle—and metaphysical, in his lack of memory and human connection.

The castle, too, is disconnected from other humans, evidenced in the castle’s disrepair. It is composed of “stones in . . . crumbling corridors [which] seemed always hideously damp, and there was an accursed smell everywhere, as of the piled-up corpses of dead generations.” The narrator lives in a dying castle filled with the instinctual sensory imprints—only scents of death and evidence of decay—of possible relations. “I
must have lived years in this place,” he laments, “but I cannot measure the time. Beings must have cared for my needs, yet I cannot recall any person except myself; or anything alive but the noiseless rats and bats and spiders” (8). He is a Quasimodo character, trapped in a dark castle, hidden away from the world.

As a result of his near-total isolation from other humans, the narrator does not view the world the way the average person would:

I think that whoever nursed me must have been shockingly aged, since my first conception of a living person was that of something mockingly like myself, yet distorted, shriveled, and decaying like the castle. To me there was nothing grotesque in the bones and skeletons that strowed some of the stone crypts deep down among the foundations (8-9).

As a result of this, he “fantastically associated these things with every-day events, and thought them more natural than the colored pictures of living beings which I found in many of the mouldy books” (8-9). The narrator’s conception of humans is far outside the status quo. He does not view people the way the average person would; therefore, he is at a different baseline than we would be for judging human “normalcy.” This is the beginning of the amplification for this piece—the idea of his idea of what is “normal” for a human being’s appearance builds a tension in the story, which makes the ending of “The Outsider” even more chilling and significant: when he sees himself in the mirror at the end of the piece, the narrator is going through additional layers of cognitive dissonance which he must reconcile.
But in order to understand this ending, we must continue to establish the narrator’s mental state in the earlier parts of the story. At the beginning of the piece he is extremely articulate, describing his surroundings with extensive detail. He is hyper-aware of his physical and mental health, acknowledging that he “had never thought to try to speak aloud. My aspect was a matter equally unthought of, for there were no mirrors in the castle, and I merely regarded myself by instinct as akin to the youthful figures I saw drawn and painted in the books” (9). He understands himself and his own motivations based on the descriptions he gives and the attributes of his own perception of his mind and body. In other words, he is not mentally unsound, despite his poor memory, nor is there evidence of his being an unreliable narrator.

The narrator, so intent in his descriptions, allows us a brief foreshadowing of what is to come. In describing a foray into the wilderness around his subterranean home, he admits that he “ran frantically back lest I lose my way in a labyrinth of nighted silence” (9, emphasis mine). Daedalus built the labyrinth for King Minos, to house the Minotaur, his son and a monster—a being akin to the monstrous narrator of “The Outsider.” The theme of a normal and abnormal dichotomy are amplified throughout the piece, first through foreshadowing and later through the blatant description of the narrator as abnormal even to himself, finally. The narrator is trapped in his very own labyrinth by an unknown, unnamed, invisible group of beings to foreshadow the true nature of his entrapment. The Minotaur, too, is trapped in a place in which he has no conception of what is “normal”—he doesn’t understand that he’s not “normal.” As far as the Minotaur is concerned, he is what is normal, and the strange people invading his labyrinth are the
grotesque, misshapen enemy—really, his violence is even more understandable based on this interpretation, and his death even more tragic. But the narrator does not have this luxury of self-deceit. He does not perish before he can come to terms with the true, tragic level of his isolation and othering.

But again, this is at the end of the story, and we are still moving through the narrator’s castle prison. As he becomes “frantic” for freedom, the narrator’s tale becomes a journey up the ruined and crumbling, stair-less towers of his underground castle—a mausoleum, brimming with the dead. “Ghastly and terrible was that dead, stairless cylinder of rock . . . But more ghastly and terrible still was the slowness of my progress” (9); and yet, it is the darkness that is more terrible. The darkness surrounding the narrator forces him into “an infinity of awesome, sightless crawling” (10). He is forced into a kind of sensory deprivation—which is in stark contrast to the observable ruin of his previous environment—with only touch, scent and sense of time to guide him. The darkness is what scares him, not the length of the climb; the darkness is infinite, forcing him to examine each minute, and damaging his ability to understand the passage of time. No changing shadows, no candles burning down; nothing that might indicate that time has passed.

The scene is very similar to another short horror tale from Japan, called “The Enigma of Amigara Fault.” Published in comic book form in 2004, the story follows the main characters, Owaki and Yoshida, as they travel to the newly-formed Amigara [Empty Shell] Fault. The fault’s formation revealed thousands of human-shaped holes in the rock, each one corresponding perfectly to the shape of a living person. Several people enter the
holes they claim are “made for them” (Itō 192). Interspersed with people entering the holes, Owaki has two nightmares, one involving a character trapped in his hole and screaming for help, and the other involving himself, as a criminal in prehistoric times forced to enter a hole just his shape which stretches his body while he remains inexplicably alive, in horrible agony. When he awakens in a panic from this second nightmare, he finds that his female friend, Yoshida, has entered her hole. In a fit of depression, Owaki enters his own hole. Several months later, scientists find the other side of the fault, which also is carved with thousands of holes. These, however, have barely-recognizable human shapes, appearing more as worms. And more horrifically, someone—something—is coming out, somehow still alive despite being deformed beyond all recognition into a twisted, disgusting monster (205). “The Enigma of Amigara Fault” is told through third-person only in that it is a visual novel: there is only one main character on which the story focuses, and we are privy only to his thoughts, and we see the story only through his perspective.

This story bears a surprising resemblance to what occurs for the narrator in “The Outsider.” He climbs up a dark tower, unable to see himself or his surroundings, much like the characters in “The Enigma of Amigara Fault” shuffling through their holes. He undergoes the painful experience of the long climb, and eventually is forced to confront his “changed” body—changed in that his perception of his own “normalcy” is totally shattered when he encounters the rejection of his fellow man. “The Enigma of Amigara Fault” is useful here because it provides evidence of this kind of horror—becoming something other than human—even in modern horror. The fear of the “other,” the
“unknown” is fresh and painful in the minds of humans from many cultures, and in particular “The Outsider” and “The Enigma of Amigara Fault” articulate this in the changing nature of the human form; at the beginning of “The Outsider,” the reader is given minimal clues that the narrator is abnormal.

The changing notion of his own humanity is amplified throughout “The Outsider,” culminating in that final sublime experience from which he cannot turn back. This is made evident when the narrator reaches what he believes to be the topmost floor of a tall tower, reaching toward the sky. He finds a trap-door in the ceiling, and upon exiting tries “to prevent the heavy slab from falling back into place; but failed in the latter attempt. As I lay exhausted on the stone floor I heard the eerie echoes of its fall, but hoped when necessary to pry it open again” (10). But he will never find it “necessary to pry it open” because in his experience of the sublime, he is forever and irreversibly changed. Much like the characters in “The Enigma of Amigara Fault,” when the narrator achieves his sublime understanding of his own grotesqueness, he is unable to return to his former shape. How could he ever return to the dark passages he once called home, knowing that the shape he always assumed himself to have was so far beyond his expectations of himself? He cannot turn back, and the echoes of the stone slab—no doubt meant as a deterrent to keep him in the mausoleum he called home—are a haunting reminder of his inability to turn back. This is the Longinian idea of transport: the characters are brought into a situation which affects their memories and sometime their bodies, and when a character leaves that mental or physical space in which the sublime occurred, he or she is unable to return, to discover more about the experience. Characters
in Lovecraft’s works have a memorable experience from which they learn nothing, and the narrator of “The Outsider,” despite learning his true face in relation to his fellow, yet alienated, humans is left with no real further understanding of why he exists, or how, or even where.

It is when the narrator realizes that he has been underground all this time that the sublime experience begins to manifest itself in the sudden breakdown of the narrator’s dialogue—this is the true moment, the instant in which the sublime experience is represented by the character. Before, we are treated to straightforward descriptions of the environment. Now, however, as the narrator gazes upon the ground, he is treated to the “[most] daemoniacal of all shocks . . . that of the abysmally unexpected and grotesquely unbelievable” (11). He spends almost the entirety of a paragraph explaining just his shock—attempting to visualize it for us—not getting to the fact that he is looking at the ground beneath his feet until the last sentence.

But this is only the beginning for our narrator, only one of several experiences to shake his worldview to the core. He is confused, bewildered, and “neither knew nor cared whether my experience was insanity, dreaming, or magic; but was determined to gaze on brilliance and gaiety at any cost.” He seeks light, has, indeed, a “frantic craving” for it. This drive pushes him forward, despite being “[half] unconscious” and “stunned and chaotic” (11). Here his mental state has started to deteriorate. His sense of what is “right” or “correct” has been turned upside-down—quite literally, as he has been not above ground all this time, but rather below it. He even begins to become “conscious of a kind of fearsome latent memory” of which we are not made totally aware—perhaps because
he does not fully understand it (11). He travels through the wilderness, alternately stumbling, climbing, swimming and wandering, regaining some sense of composure after his chaotic ramblings of the preceding passage. The sentences are shortened, the syntax more controlled.

However, this mild peace is short-lived. When the narrator stumbles upon a party in a “venerable ivied castle,” he watches the “oddly-dressed” people inside “making merry, and speaking brightly to one another. I had never . . . heard human speech before; and could guess only vaguely what was said. Some of the faces seemed to hold expressions that brought up incredibly remote recollections; others were utterly alien” (11-12). The key words in this passage are really the contrasting “human” and “alien” coupled with the juxtaposition of the narrator’s anxiousness and the party’s gay excitement. The narrator describes the people in the party as both “human” and “alien,” implying that, for him, these are the same thing—unconsciously, of course, as his memories of, perhaps, how different he is are only just starting to surface. As well, the anxiousness the narrator feels is made evident by his hesitation; he watches rather than immediately joins and is made somewhat sinister when contrasted with the “gaiety” of the party. These two features of this passage make the suspense, the amplification, the build-up to the final sublime experience, all the more tense. The narrator is like a string pulled taut, ready to snap.

And snap the narrator does, finally. He steps into the gay party, and immediately the party transforms into a mass of brightly-dressed, shrieking, horrified people, all running in separate directions from the narrator—who is ignorant as to the source of the
terror. Again, he is left alone as the people flee, listening to the “vanishing echoes” of their flight. As he moves toward what he believes to be a figure in another room, he lets out

the first and last sound I ever uttered—a ghastly ululation that revolted me almost as poignantly as its noxious cause—I beheld in full, frightful vividness the inconceivable, indescribable, and unmentionable monstrosity which had by its simple appearance changed a merry company into a herd of delirious fugitives (12).

He is shocked, horrified by his own reflection, though he does not yet know it. And in a classic breakdown of language he “cannot even hint what it was like, for it was a compound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable” (13). He cannot actually describe himself, though he is perfectly capable of describing darkness. He uses adjectives—“inconceivable,” “indescribable,” “unmentionable,” “unclean,” “uncanny,” etc.—which are understood as negative or at the very least, awe-inducing. It is as if the narrator is meant to be seen as horrific by anyone who has the capacity to feel fear of the other. The language here is unable to convey what he sees. There are no words to explain his limbs, proportions, eyes, nose, fingers, hair; we are provided with no details whatsoever, contrasting sharply with the incredibly detailed descriptions of stone and death from earlier in the piece.

As he is broken down, his mental state deteriorates. As he views himself in the mirror, he feels “[crash] down upon my mind a single and fleeting avalanche of soul-annihilating memory” that changes him forever (13). But, as though this may have
happened before, he suddenly forgets what he has seen, and instead takes his place among other outsiders:

Now I ride with the mocking and friendly ghouls on the night-wind, and play by day amongst the catacombs of Nephren-Ka in the sealed and unknown valley of Hadoth by the Nile. I know that light is not for me, save that of the moon over the rock tombs of Neb, nor any gaiety save the unnamed feasts of Nitokris beneath the Great Pyramid; yet in my new wildness and freedom I almost welcome the bitterness of alienage (14).

These could be either the musings of a man driven mad by his own appearance—we are given no clues as to how he achieves all of these travels, save that he doesn’t return to the mausoleum he so hated—or the narrator’s true journey. We are given no clues as to what any of these names are meant to pertain to. Are these places made-up, or are they merely, according to his idea of normalcy, where the outsiders go? Again, we are left with vague descriptions, just the names of alien places, some named, some “unnamed,” similar to his attempt at describing himself.

Perhaps, as he recognizes that what is “normal” for him is not normal for others, he has found normalcy. He knows the “light is not for” him, and so he shuns the light, save the moon. He knows that “gaiety” is not for him, and so he only enjoys strange feasts in strange lands (14). In his attempt to rationalize the cognitive dissonances of firstly his understanding that what is normal for him is not normal for everyone else, and secondly that as a result of this he is in fact abnormal, an outsider, has the narrator truly snapped? Regardless of whether or not he is now insane, the narrator can no longer return
to that moment of the sublime, and yet at the same time it has left an imprint on his memory (14).

Of “The Outsider,” critic and Lovecraft scholar Donald Burleson says “it remains one of [Lovecraft’s] most enigmatic and complexly interpretable tales” (Burleson “Critical Study” 53). “The Outsider” is a fantastic starting place for several reasons: it’s an early work of Lovecraft’s, and establishes the narrative arcs and literary techniques which are indicative of his work. “The Outsider” is also complex and mysterious, with even less description of the supersensible than some of his other pieces. As well, the narrator is a highly sympathetic character, and his sublime experience is strongly conveyed and strongly felt, and thus forms a strong basis for characters or narrators experiencing the sublime in other Lovecraftian pieces. The sublime in “The Outsider” is almost hyperbolic, with italics to emphasize the climactic moment: “I stretched out my fingers to the abomination within that great gilded frame; stretched out my fingers and touch a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass” (Lovecraft 6).

Much like “The Outsider,” “The Music of Erich Zann” (hereafter referred to as “Zann”) progresses from a highly descriptive, organized story into a strange, deranged ramble. The story is particularly significant in that it has such a clear division between the language at the beginning and the language at the end. It is a tale of horror about the music of an old man and its power over cosmic forces beyond human control or comprehension.

“Zann” begins with the narrator informing the reader that while he has “examined maps of the city with the greatest care” he has “never again found the Rue d’Auseil,”
which immediately removes any chance that the narrator has of repeating the sublime experience he has by the end of the story (15). The Rue d’Auseil is a street, presumably somewhere in metropolitan France, which spans an unnamed river. The street changes the narrator forever in that it leaves on his memory an significant moment which he cannot ignore. However, much like the narrator of “The Outsider,” the narrator of “Zann” cannot return to the Rue d’Auseil, the place where he had his sublime experience. He is momentarily transported in his sublime experience, and then brought back to reality, and forever blocked from returning, from gaining more knowledge from the experience as is indicative of the Longinian sublime.

The description the narrator gives of the street is incredibly detailed, and he questions nothing about the description despite its strangeness:

   I have never seen another street as narrow and steep as the Rue d’Auseil. It was almost a cliff . . . Its paving was irregular, sometimes stone slabs, sometimes cobblestones, sometimes bare earth . . . The houses were tall, peaked-roof, incredibly old, and crazily leaning backward, forward, and sidewise. Occasionally an opposite pair . . . almost met across the street like an arch . . . There were a few overhead bridges from house to house across the street. (15-6)

The detailed description is reminiscent of “The Outsider,” with its extensive prose about the castle in which the monster of the tale dwells. The steepness and narrowness of the street is also similar to the narrow, dark places of “The Outsider,” suggesting that the Rue d’Auseil is almost tomblike itself. This comparison foreshadows the climax of the tale,
and is amplified by the continued references to the descriptions of the place, and the overall feel of the place resulting from those descriptions. The archways of the buildings, too, suggest a sepulcher, a ceremonial place to keep the dead, or at the very least a walkway with some darker purpose; buildings looming in from above do not present friendly imagery. And the strange, wild angles at which the other buildings lean only add to the fantastical and disturbing nature of the Rue d’Auseil. But the narrator does not seem afraid in the slightest: he is calm, composed and collected, though he admits that his “memory is broken . . . for my health, physical and mental, was gravely disturbed throughout the period of my residence in the Rue d’Auseil” (15).

Perhaps the most telling part of this description of the Rue d’Auseil, however, is the simple mention that the street was like “a cliff” (15). Through this metaphor the narrator visualizes for the reader a cliff, an edge, a precipice—all of these are clear metaphors for the unknown. Humanity stands on a precipice when it is moving toward an unknown discovery, be it horrible or wonderful. The Rue d’Auseil is a cliff face, at the bottom of which is a strange discovery too terrible to imagine. The narrator, therefore, appears not to be attempting to imagine anything at all, and merely tells his audience what he sees of the street, the surface of things, rather than everything beneath the surface of the Rue d’Auseil. Or rather, everything above it.

For in the “tallest [building] of them all” the narrator dwelled, on the fifth floor, and in the “peaked garret overhead” lived a German viol player and composer, Erich Zann (16). Significant as well is the fact that Zann is mute, and that he is apparently a musical genius according to the narrator. The evidence for the composer’s genius is the
music that the narrator hears in his room, coming from Zann’s garret. “I was haunted by the weirdness of his music,” writes the narrator. “Knowing little of the art myself, I was yet certain that none of his harmonies had any relation to music I had heard before; and concluded he was a composer of highly original genius” (16). The music keeps the narrator awake, but he isn’t angry with Zann for this, and is instead drawn to the strange, eclectic music that is never adequately described in the story.

At this point, still early in the tale as it is, the descriptions of people, places, and objects have not begun to degrade. The building in which the narrator stays is, granted, not described in as great detail as Zann’s room in particular. There is no other evidence, however, that the narrator is losing his ability to explain or describe his surroundings. His description of Zann is particularly exacting: “He was a small, lean, bent person, with shabby clothes, blue eyes, grotesque, satyr-like face, and nearly bald head” (16). And as with all the people in the Rue d’Auseil, excluding the narrator, Zann is aged, decrepit. It is almost as if everything on the street is slowly but surely decomposing, everything leaning this way and that, toppling slowly toward the street, or heading inexorably toward death.

The narrator becomes increasingly entranced by Zann’s music, and eventually decides to request a private performance. Though he agrees to play, Zann seems nervous about having someone in his room, and wants the narrator to move his own apartment to the third floor so that no one can hear Zann playing anymore. Zann’s room is as wild and crazy as the rest of the street: “Its size was very great, and seemed the greater because of its extraordinary bareness and neglect” (17). The room is sparsely furnished, and because
it is on the top floor of the tallest building of the Rue d’Auseil, is the only room in the building able to look out over “the terminating wall at the declivity and panorama beyond,” the scenery of France; but the curtains over the window are kept shut throughout the story, until the end, when the narrator finally attempts to touch them. We know only that the view of France is available from only Zann’s room because the narrator tells us so (16). However, Zann does not notice the potential beauty of his room, and the narrator muses that the old mute composer’s “world of beauty lay in some far cosmos of the imagination” (17). This, too, is more foreshadowing for the climactic end.

Once seated and ready to play, Zann appears bored as his viol produces more traditional music for the narrator at first. Frustrated, the narrator attempts to “awaken my host’s weirder mood by whistling a few of the strains to which I had listened the night before” in the hope that Zann might play some of his “original genius” (16, 17). However, Zann becomes agitated, and

his face grew suddenly distorted with an expression wholly beyond analysis, and his long, cold, bony right hand reached out to stop my mouth and silence the crude imitation. As he did this he further demonstrated his eccentricity by casting a startled glance toward the lone curtained window, as if fearful of some intruder—a glance doubly absurd, since the garret stood high and inaccessible . . . this window being the only point . . . from which one could see over the wall at the summit (17-18, emphasis mine), which is another of those words similar to precipice and cliff that summon to mind the human experience of the unknown. Only in Zann’s room can one access the unknown
view of the city below, but he will not allow anyone to gaze out of the window, and his room remains securely locked when he is away, as the narrator finds out when his newfound “fascination” with even Zann’s room takes hold of him and he tries to enter the room when Zann is at work (19). Furthermore, the fact that Zann’s expression is “wholly beyond analysis” is significant because the narrator cannot even glean new information about the experience because Zann refuses to speak, and his expression offers to further elucidation.

Eventually the narrator is cut off from Zann in the sense that the old man plays only very occasionally for him, despite the narrator having “departed as a friend” after the whistling incident (19). In his hunger for more of Zann’s strange music, the narrator steals out of his new third-story apartment at night to crouch near Zann’s door and listen to the old man play: “There in the narrow hall, outside the bolted door with the covered keyhole, I often hear sounds which filled me with an indefinable dread—the dread of vague wonder and brooding mystery” (19). Yet despite the dread which the sounds of Zann’s strange music instill in the narrator, he insists that the sounds are not “hideous,” but that “they held vibrations suggesting nothing on this globe of earth, and that at certain intervals they assumed a symphonic quality which I could hardly conceive as produced by one player” (19). This is again foreshadowing, for by the end of the tale we learn that there is not just one player. For now, however, the reader is left wondering what the music of Erich Zann could possibly sound like, and yet the narrator seems incapable of describing the music, despite being able to describe many other things in the story quite well. The music, it would seem, is beyond the narrator’s comprehension.
Finally the language breakdown indicative of a sublime experience in Lovecraftian fiction begins to swell when, one night, the narrator hears at Zann’s door “a chaotic babel of sound; a pandemonium which would have led me to doubt my own shaking sanity had there not come from behind that barred portal a piteous proof that the horror was real—the awful, inarticulate cry which only a mute can utter” (20). Lovecraft’s use of the words “babel,” “sound” is significant, because both are nondescript and able to be applied to a great many different kinds of noises. “[B]abel” conjures up Milton’s vision of hell. “Inarticulate,” literally means to be unclear. This, coupled with words like “chaotic” and “pandemonium,” and the utter lack of exacting description of the sound of the music (loud, tinny, deep, smooth, cacophonous, harmonious, etc) is the first indication that the narrator is coming close to something his imagination cannot grasp.

Eventually Zann falls to the floor inside the room, and several agonizing moments later he manages to let the narrator inside. He writes on a piece of paper, his only way to communicate, that he wants to explain to the narrator what is happening to him. And then he begins to write a long and arduous tale that the narrator never has a chance to read, because from the still-curtained window he “half fancied I heard a sound . . . though it was not a horrible sound, but rather an exquisitely low and indefinitely distant musical note, suggesting a player in one of the neighbouring houses, or in some abode beyond the lofty wall over which I had never been able to look” (20). Zann is terrified of this indescribable note, and immediately discards his writing in favor of his viol, on which he “commenced to rend the night with the wildest playing I had ever heard from his bow
save when listening at the barred door. It would be useless to describe the playing of Erich Zann on that dreadful night. It was more horrible than anything I had overheard, because I could now see the expression on his face . . . stark fear” (20-1).

And here is where the narrative begins to truly break apart. The narrator admits that he is incapable of describing the music, again, though he knows it to be the work of a different composer. But after that, we are treated only to wild, disjointed descriptions of what is occurring. The narrator begins comparing Zann’s posture to “a monkey” and hears his music as suddenly demoniacal, for “[i]n his frenzied strains I could almost see shadowy satyrs and Bacchanals dancing and whirling insanely through seething abysses of clouds and smoke and lightning” (21). Zann and the narrator are met with a “shriller, steadier note that was not from [Zann’s] viol; a calm, deliberate, purposeful, mocking note from far away in the west” out of the window, and thus the climax of the tale takes off on a spiral toward oblivion (21). The curtained window bursts inward, and the papers—the written word, the only thing that could have made sense of Zann’s music—are carried away on an evil wind. The narrator can glimpse for the first time the city beyond the window, but this is not what he sees: “It was very dark, but the city’s lights always burned . . . Yet when I looked from that highest of all gable windows . . . I saw no city spread below . . . but only the blackness of space illimitable; unimagined space alive with motion and music, and having no semblance to anything on earth” (22). The entire room is swallowed in blackness as the candles go out, and the narrator touches Zann: “When my hand touched his ear I shuddered, though I knew not why—knew not why till I felt of the still face; the ice-cold, stiffened, unbreathing face whose glassy eyes bulged
uselessly into the void” (22). Zann’s death spurs the narrator out into the corridor and away from the Rue d’Auseil.

Here the sublime experience is translated for the reader in two ways: first, in the narrator’s inability to describe what he sees, and secondly in the loss of Zann’s writing out the window. The narrator is faced with the deepest unknown: the blackness not just of space, which is strange in and of itself, but of an alien space, filled with alien sound. He cannot possibly imagine what he is experiencing, and thus must rationalize his experience into the only words he can muster, and those are vague at best. In many places in the climax, the narrator does not “know” something, or cannot “explain” or describe something for the audience, as if he has not the words to describe the inhuman. The realization of the inability for language to explain one’s experience is a classic sublime experience, which the narrator attempts to reveal for us.

The core plot of “Zann” is a young man explaining to whoever is listening a strange experience he had, whether to make sense of it or simply to share it. This is the essential plot of many of Lovecraft’s works, which read like statements to police, interested academic parties, or merely friends or family, suggesting that the narrators or protagonists of the piece are attempting to share or are forced to share their experiences, but that they did not necessarily volunteer them, perhaps indicating they have no desire to re-experience them. “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (hereafter referred to as “Statement”) is one of the former: a story of a young man trying to explain to the authorities a strange and fairly unexplainable experience he had. The narrator of the tale is Randolph Carter, and he and his acquaintance, Harley Warren, suffered through a
harrowing experience late at night in a cemetery outside of Big Cypress Swamp.

Similarly to both “The Outsider” and “The Music of Erich Zann,” “Statement” begins with an almost exaggerated amount of detail about Carter’s surroundings and the happenings in the story, only to have that detail begin to degrade as the story progresses toward the inevitable sublime experience.

At the beginning of the tale, Carter is informing the audience—presumably police or authorities of some kind, as he calls the conversation an “interrogation”—that he has told them “[e]verything that I can remember . . . if anything remains vague, it is only because of the dark cloud which has come over my mind” (1). Carter says “can remember,” implying that there are things which he should be able to remember but is incapable of doing so. Much like the narrators in both “The Outsider” and “The Music of Erich Zann,” Carter, the narrator of “Statement,” admits that his “memory is uncertain and indistinct” (1). He describes, however, in grand detail not only what led him and his acquaintance to the cemetery that night, but also what they took with them, and much of what transpires up until the climax of the piece. However, Carter has trouble with those details that are specific to the strange or disturbing nature of the event that brought him into the police interrogation room where he is presumed to be sitting.

The reason for Carter’s detainment in the interrogation room is simple: he and Harley Warren went to a cemetery in the Big Cypress Swamp, but only Carter returned. “And why Harley Warren did not return,” asserts Carter, “he or his shade—or some nameless thing I cannot describe—alone can tell” (1). Interesting in this statement is that a shade, a ghost, is what Carter implicitly deems as normal—or rather, within the realm
of human description. There is something beyond a ghost that Carter suspects Warren has become, and this thing is impossible to describe. This is the first hint that later, a telling language breakdown will occur, signaling a sublime experience as a result of an encounter with something beyond the realm of human experience.

Carter does not explicitly state why he and Warren were in the cemetery, insisting that “the weird studies of Harley Warren were well known to me, and to some extent shared by me [but] I have no clear idea of our object on that night” (1-2). The reason for this inability to understand Warren’s work is very significant because it has everything to do with a language barrier. Carter tells the audience that Warren had many books on his studies, and that Carter “read all that are written in the languages of which I am master; but these are few as compared with those in languages I cannot understand” (2). In other words, language fails Carter. Because much of the research of Warren’s mysterious studies is written in languages beyond Carter’s realm of knowledge, he cannot grasp the true nature of Warren’s research. One book in particular exemplifies the literal failure of language to convey to Carter Warren’s true aims: “the book which he carried in his pocket out of the world—was written in characters whose like I never saw elsewhere” (2). A book whose words are not even in a human alphabet is intensely significant: the inhuman is consequently inexplicable for Carter. He cannot imagine the inhuman.

Carter can only assure his interrogators that Warren’s were “terrible studies, which I pursued more through reluctant fascination than through actual inclination . . . he talked so incessantly of his theory, why certain corpses never decay, but rest firm and fat in their tombs for a thousand years” (2, emphasis in original). This horrific curiosity is a
theme in several of Lovecraft’s other works, and particularly in “The Outsider” and “The Music of Erich Zann.” Neither of the narrators in these tales can determine their exact desire for forbidden knowledge and terrifying experiences, and neither can Carter. Language fails these narrators at every turn, but most particularly in explaining the inhuman, unearthly, cosmic horrors they are led by some strange impulse to confront.

And confront this horror Carter does. He describes the journey to the cemetery, the smells and sights. His memory is vivid, and there are at least two or three adjectives for every noun: “antique slabs, urns, cenotaphs, and mausolean facades” are “all crumbling, moss-grown, and moisture-stained, and partly concealed by the gross luxuriance of the unhealthy vegetation”; the cemetery is in a “deep, damp hollow, overgrown with rank grass, moss, and curious creeping weeds, and filled with a vague stench which my idle fancy associated absurdly with the rotting stone” (2, 3). This level of detail—the twist of every wrist, the prising of every stone, the gleam of every piece of equipment—is common in Gothic horror, in order to build tension. However, tales in which the narrator describes a sublime experience for the reader are interesting for their contrasting lack of or breakdown of detailed language in the climax of the story.

As “Statement” is so short, this contrast is even more evident. After a very descriptive portrayal of his physical surroundings, Carter watches Warren enter a deeper tomb inside a sepulchral structure. Utilizing a rudimentary telephone with wires attached, Warren assures Carter that he should stay topside, near the opening to the tomb, because of the narrator’s “frail nerves” (3). “I couldn’t drag a bundle of nerves like you down to probable death or madness . . . you can’t imagine what the thing is really like” (4)!
Warren specifically utilizes the word “imagine” instead of “believe” or “know” as well as “the thing” as opposed to a descriptive noun. This vagueness is also a kind of language breakdown in that not even Warren can explain the inhuman nature of his research to Carter. The word “thing” is repeated several more times to describe what the two men are after, and never is the thing actually described or explained.

As Warren descends alone into the tomb, the story remains with the narrator, Carter, as he has no idea what Warren encountered. Carter relays more about his surroundings, in somewhat superfluous detail, no doubt, in the eyes of his interrogators, and then finally he hears Warren on the other end of the phone:

Apprehensive as I was, I was nevertheless unprepared for the words which came up from that uncanny vault in accents more alarmed and quivering than any I had heard from Harley Warren. He who had so calmly left me a little while previously, now called from below in a shaky whisper more portentous than the loudest shriek: ‘God! If you could see what I’m seeing!’ I could not answer. Speechless, I could only wait. (5)

Already Carter’s voice, his language, begins to fail him. And Warren himself is having similar difficulties. He wishes that Carter could “see” what he’s seeing, because he cannot describe it, it is so “terrible—monstrous—unbelievable” (5).

Carter manages to ask what’s wrong, and Warren can only reply further on his inability to describe what he is confronting. He urges Carter to leave, and Carter considers this option because he knows that “below me, some peril beyond the radius of human imagination” awaits him (5). Again Carter uses that word,
“imagination/imagine”—specifically, imagination. The human imagination cannot comprehend the inhuman. And the inhuman eventually leads to Warren’s silence. Carter calls for him through the telephone, “stupefied” by his experience, and is answered by the thing that has been referred to so often in the story: “I do not try, gentlemen, to account for that thing—that voice—nor can I venture to describe it in detail, since the first words took away my consciousness and created a mental blank which reaches to the time of my awakening in the hospital” (6). And what caused this “blank,” this breakdown in the narrator’s, Carter’s, faculties? The voice which he “heard . . . and knew no more” after hearing it, “[h]eard it well up from the innermost depths of that damnable open sepulcher as I watched amorphous . . . shadows dance beneath an accursed waning moon. And this is what it said:/‘YOU FOOL, WARREN IS DEAD” (7)! While it is possible that the creature is simply toying with Carter, in the context of the story Lovecraft does not offer any alternative explanation, and Carter himself expresses no doubts about his experience, and we are not privy to the police’s thoughts—Carter is never interrupted or asked to explain himself further, implying that the police listening to him are satisfied with his, albeit insane, explanation of Warren’s whereabouts.

In telling Carter that Warren is dead the voice culminates Carter’s sublime experience and sends him into a fit. These are the last words of the story, as well, the voice saying that Warren is dead—Carter’s language breakdown is so complete, that it is not even his own words at the end of the story, but the monstrous thing which is the source of his horror. The voice is described as “deep; hollow; gelatinous; remote;
unearthly; inhuman; disembodied?”—indescribable, in other words, for all of these adjectives are appropriately phrased as questions (6).

Questions are a centerpiece of many of Lovecraft’s works, questions which only serve to emphasize the strangeness of his tales. The final piece selected from the body of Lovecraft’s works, “The Thing on the Doorstep,” (hereafter referred to as “The Thing”) is full of questions, many of which are answered, but there is a large, overarching question that carries through the entire tale: what truly happened to Edward Pickman Derby? Written in late August of 1933, “The Thing” tells the disturbing story of a young man, the aforementioned Derby, and his battle to save his soul from the clutches of an infinitely more ancient spirit than his. Narrated by “Daniel Upton,” Derby’s friend, the story takes place in the fictional New England town of Arkham, a place much-visited in Lovecraft’s work, and opens with a brief description of Derby and the town of Arkham itself, and then proceeds into the actual story, interspersed with updated descriptions of Derby as he goes through various disturbing changes.

The first line in the story is Daniel asserting to the reader/interviewer that “[i]t is true that I have sent six bullets through the head of my best friend, and yet I hope to shew by this statement that I am not his murderer” (Lovecraft 692). Much like in “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” then, the narrator is either arrested or under suspicion at the tale’s nascence, and therefore his reliability is immediately called into question. Is he lying to those reading his assertions, to escape justice? Furthermore, the narrator admits in the following paragraphs that he “[a]t first . . . shall be called a madman . . . [and] [e]ven now I ask myself whether I was misled—or whether I am not mad after all. I do
not know” (692), which adds further to the air of uncertainty in the story. As mentioned before, many of Lovecraft’s tales feature themes dealing with memory and sanity, and “The Thing” is no exception, pressing upon the reader the fact that the narrator could be a liar, or mad—or telling the truth, of course. If Daniel himself does not know if he has gone mad, or if he has been “misled,” then how are we to believe everything he’s put into words?

Daniel is never described, except as a man who eventually gets married and has a child. Lovecraft spends much more time describing Derby. The first description of Derby is of him as a young child of eight, who, due to “his private education and coddled seclusion . . . [suffers from] premature flowering” and indeed throughout the story Derby remains markedly young-looking for his age, making the changes he undergoes that much more drastic (692). He is painted as a soft, delicate child with “organic weaknesses” that cause his “doting parents . . . to keep him closely chained to their side” (692). The word “chained” implies imprisonment, a foreshadowing to the finale of the story, as well as a theme throughout it. Pertinent now, however, is the fact that Derby is a sickly person with a weak will that forces him to be dependent on others (692–3). Bodily and mental weakness is another common theme in Lovecraft’s works—for instance the narrator’s poor health in the “The Music of Erich Zann”—but in “The Thing” the weakness is a driving force in the story. If Derby were not weak, then his fate would have been very different. Thus, this weakness is compounded upon, amplified throughout the story through updates on Derby’s physicality, as well as his obsession with “daemonic” imagery (693).
For instance, “[as Derby] grew to years of manhood he retained a deceptive aspect of boyishness. Blond and blue-eyed, he had the fresh complexion of a child . . . His voice was soft and light, and his pampered, unexercised life gave him a juvenile chubbiness rather than the paunchiness of middle age” (693). Derby is young, innocent, and largely inexperienced, but as he ages, his earlier flirtations with the unknown, the macabre, and the dark become more and more pronounced. Though he was once “[a]lways a dweller on the surface of phantasy and strangeness” once in college Derby “[delves] deep into the actual runes and riddles left by a fabulous past” and he begins to read books filled with the cultish writings of ancient evils (684).

As the text progresses, Derby moves on from reading to more active pursuits when he meets his soon-to-be wife, Asenath, daughter of an Innsmouth scholar, Ephraim Whaite. Innsmouth is another oft-visited fictional place in Lovecraft’s work, and is the focus of many tales written by other authors influenced by him. Thought to be inhabited by creatures descended from an evil fish-like god, Dagon, Innsmouth is a strange, disquieting place reeking of fish and evil. Anyone from Innsmouth, in Lovecraft’s works, is considered to be suspicious or potentially dangerous simply due to their origins. And Asenath doesn’t disappoint those who suspect her of evil magic. She entraps the weak-minded Derby easily in her clutches, and begins at once to go to work on cutting everyone else out of his life (699). Asenath and Derby make an unlikely and contrasting

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1 Innsmouth has influenced or been mentioned in various stories, films, and other media. A few notable mentions are the works of Neil Gaiman, T. and P. Marsh, and S. M. Stirling, the 2008 horror film Cthulhu was set in a stylized version of Innsmouth, as well as the 2001 horror film Dagon.
couple, he still boyish and young-looking, and her prematurely aged and hardened in appearance (695). At once after marrying her, people begin to notice a “change in Edward Derby” (699). He becomes more serious and adult; at times he seems to be a different person, and would “now and then [be] . . . observed to wear an expression and to do things wholly incompatible with his usual flabby nature . . . the metamorphosis did not seem altogether pleasing” (699). What is happening to Derby is not explained until the final few pages of the story, but what appears to be transpiring is a kind of psychological shift, a change in identity.

Identity is a major part of the story, as mentioned above, and it is in the increasing focus on Derby’s identity that “The Thing” demonstrates amplification. In terms of the Longinian sublime, the amplification here serves the purpose of a lead-up to the climactic, sublime moment wherein the narrator both knows and does not know what has happened to his friend. This kind of known-unknown dichotomy, in which a character both knows something and yet refuses to know something, is evident in much of Lovecraft’s works, and indeed in nearly all the stories analyzed here. However, in “The Thing,” this known-unknown dichotomy takes center-stage through amplification. Derby’s changing personality is a known-unknown: the reader has likely guessed what is happening, but the narrator either does not know, or does not want to believe what he has seen to be possible, and yet he must know, as all the evidence points towards the conclusion to which the reader has, again, likely already come. In short, Derby is in denial about what is happening to him, because while there is no way that he cannot see what is happening, given the evidence in front of him, he yet refuses to believe it.
Perhaps the most telling evidence that Derby’s personality shift is a kind of amplification of that theme of identity comes three years into Derby’s marriage to Asenath: “. . . Edward began to hint openly to [Daniel] of a certain fear and dissatisfaction. He would let fall remarks about things ‘going too far’, and would talk darkly about the need of ‘saving his identity’” (700). This quote from Daniel about his friend serves a dual purpose: first, it establishes that Derby’s identity shift is becoming increasingly more troubling. It is not just a repeated theme, but a theme that has more and more significance tied to it, as well as becoming more and more pronounced within the story itself. The second purpose this quote serves is establishing that the theme of delving into dark and unknown places is also being amplified, as Derby states things are “‘going too far’” to Daniel. The themes of identity and meddling in demonic or otherworldly forces become increasingly evident in the story, with more and more events being tied to them.

For instance, almost every strange occurrence in the story is eventually linked with Derby’s changing, shifting personality. Shortly after the time of the above quote, Daniel becomes concerned for Derby’s “sanity” because of the drastic changes in the other’s personality (701). Coinciding with this is the fact that Derby’s changes in personality are now coupled with trips to far-flung places, from which he returns fatigued and very much his weak-willed self again (707-8). This is the amplification that is so prominent in this particular piece. Given that “The Thing” is much longer than some of the other pieces discussed here, the story is more stretched and gives more time to a
technique like amplification. Amplification simply plays a larger role due to “The Thing” being a larger story.

While Amplification is very prominent in “The Thing,” Memory, that Sufficient quality in the Sublime, is not neglected. Derby experiences strong gaps in his memory which correspond to shifts in his identity: the “normal” Derby does not remember doing things the “other” more energetic and serious Derby has done. In a particularly harrowing scene, Daniel is called upon to pick up Derby from Maine—the young man had not been seen nor heard of for two months, but [Daniel] had heard he was away “on business” . . . the town marshal of Chesuncook had wired of the draggled madman who stumbled out of the woods with delirious ravings and screamed to me for protection. It was Edward—and he had been just able to recall his own name and my name and address (702).

The source of Derby’s fear is that Asenath has taken over his body, as she has periodically been doing, which explains Derby’s shifts in personality—though it is only in these final pages that the reader is told this outright, even if the information is garbled from Derby’s madness. He has a memory of that terrible place, the “‘pit of the shoggoths! Down the six thousand steps… the abomination of abominations… I never would let [Asenath] take me, and then I found myself there . . . I was there, where she promised she wouldn’t take me . . . I was there where she had gone with my body . . . I can’t stand it . . . I won’t stand it’” (702-3). Derby’s memory gaps are more than just Asenath taking over
his body, however: he is slowly being driven mad by Asenath’s continual trips with his
body, and thus has a harder and harder time making sense of what is happening to him.

Derby’s memory gaps are of course related to his being transported against his
will to various places. However, a faulty memory also connects with the literary version
of Transport sufficient for the Longinian sublime. Until this point, there is no indication
of which character, Daniel or Derby, will experience the Longinian sublime; this is
because both Derby and Daniel experience the sublime. Derby’s comes in the final trip to
the “pit of the shoggoths”: he becomes a rambling mess, his language breaking down into
“a stream of utterly insane drivel”; he has also reached a peak of his amplified identity
crisis, having difficulty distinguishing between himself in his body and himself in
Asenath, as they trade places whenever she takes his; as well, Derby has gaps in his
memory, and problems with his memory associated with his experience in the “pit”;
furthermore, the “pit” is not a place Derby has any wish to return to, and he never does,
thus preventing him from returning to that place (702-3). In the moment that he is back in
his original body, in the “pit,” Derby experiences a sublime moment of utter horror that
breaks him, but due to his subsequent memory lapses, poor mental health, and his
revulsion for the place, he cannot return to the “pit” and explore its mysteries.

Daniel’s Longinian sublime experience happens further on and is more complex
than Derby’s, as the reader is shown this experience in the text, while Derby’s happens
“off-screen,” so to speak, similar to Harley Warren’s death in “The Statement of
Randolph Carter.” Daniel’s sublime experience is truly a slow build to a supreme
moment. It begins in the midst of their drive back to Arkham, just as Derby is attempting
to elucidate for Daniel what has been happening to him—Asenath’s slow takeover of Derby’s entire identity. Suddenly, after a series of truly broken ramblings about Asenath, Derby’s face “twisted almost unrecognisably for a moment, while through the whole body there passed a shivering motion—as if all the bones, organs, muscles, nerves, and glands were readjusting themselves to a radically different posture, set of stresses, and general personality” and Daniel is made to feel a “supreme horror” at the sight of such a terrifying and strange transformation of his friend, right in front of him (705). As this event begins the Amplification of horror toward Daniel’s sublime experience, Daniel is confused and doesn’t know “[j]ust where the supreme horror lay . . . yet there swept over me such a swamping wave of sickness and repulsion—such a freezing, petrifying sense of utter alienage and abnormality—that my grasp of the wheel grew feeble and uncertain” and the transformed Derby is able to take over driving (705). In this moment, Asenath has completely taken over Derby. This is not the moment in which Daniel has a Longinian sublime experience, because Daniel could easily ask Derby what has happened to him; however, it does begin the build-up, the Amplification, of the unknown for Daniel: the unknown source of his fear.

After returning with Daniel to Arkham, Derby retreats to his home and claims to have sent Asenath away, though in reality he has killed her in the hopes of relinquishing himself of her hold (712). Daniel begins to make consistent mention of the “unknown” or things he cannot explain (706-712). For instance, Derby has become something alien and different due to “unknown and malign cosmic forces” and Derby’s voice, to Daniel, has an accent he “could not quite place” (706). These “unknowns” increase in frequency and
magnitude in the story, becoming the focus on the final page with the unknown thing on the doorstep: an actual, physical presence, rather than a taint of unknown fear (712). The fact that Daniel consistently refers to the “thing” on his doorstep as a “thing” is significant, because Daniel knows full well that the horrible, skulking, stinking horror that visits his doorstep one fateful evening is in fact Derby in the decaying body of Asenath (712). The “thing” is the final amplification, the most intense instance of the theme of the unknown, right on Daniel’s doorstep.

Before this culminating horror, however, Daniel discusses his memory of the event, as well as begins to hint at memory problems earlier. For instance, in thinking back on his conversation with Derby in the car when Asenath had taken his friend’s body, Daniel can “not recall” his side of the conversation (707). In the pages preceding the story’s climax, and Daniel’s sublime experience, Daniel’s ability to convey the narrative begins to break down as does his memory of the event. He must “try to tell coherently of that final horror.” He must “try to,” as in he’s not sure if he can manage to. He “will not speak” about things he doesn’t want to confront; he either doesn’t have the words to, or cannot reconcile the horrors he’s trying to remain dimly aware of, with his view of his old friend (716). There is a knock at the door, and by the pattern of the knocks Daniel knows that Derby should be the one at the door, but instead he finds a “foul, stunted parody.” The creature hands Daniel a note, and Daniel “tried to read it in the light from the doorway,” making the language, the words detailing the horrors that Derby is trying to illuminate for Daniel, unclear (717). Here Daniel collapses: Daniel faints rather than fully confront the fact that something so far beyond himself, something so horrible,
exists. Much like the flight of the narrator in “The Music of Erich Zann,” or the escape of Carter in “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” Daniel forges his own means of escape from his terrifying sublime experience (717). He faints several more times, creating gaps in his memory as well as gaps in understanding (718).

“Derby,” meanwhile is still in an asylum, where he was trapped just before Asenath took him over fully. Daniel, compelled by the Derby in Asenath’s corpse, shoots and kills Asenath, as she is still in Derby’s body. In the overwhelming emotion of his Longinian sublime experience, Daniel is rendered unconscious. But upon regaining his wits, he immediately sets out to end the terror that Asenath—who, as Daniel and the reader find out, is really Ephraim, Asenath’s father, in her body—inflicted on Derby and himself. In killing her and thusly Ephraim, Daniel effectively prevents himself from ever “returning” to the sublime moment—furthermore, he insists that Derby be cremated, removing the evidence of Asenath’s body and thus also preventing his return to that moment. There is no way that Daniel can understand more about his experience; he has no new information, and does not desire to pursue it further (716). Daniel never says outright that he has no plans to further explore what happened to his friend, but so reluctant was he to believe what was happening to Derby in the first place, and given what he has seen happens when one delves into the depths of occultism, there is no evidence that Daniel would pursue the line of inquiry left open by his friend.
CONCLUSION

A sublime experience in the Romantic sense provides one with an increased understanding as a direct result of that sublime experience, whether the knowledge gained is knowledge of the self, the world, God, nature, or any number of transcendent ideas. The Romantic sublime can be revisited, even if that experience cannot be recreated exactly. For the Romantics, the sublime inspires a need for deep reflection. The Longinian sublime, in contrast, suggests that the sublime is a momentary flash that, while leaving a lasting imprint on one’s memory, provides no insights, no knowledge. The experience is memorable, much like the Romantic sublime experience would be. However, while the experience is impossible to forget, nothing more is learned or gained. The Longinian sublime is its own reward; the experience itself is enough.

In looking at Lovecraft’s fiction through the lens of the Longinian sublime, there comes to light a pattern: Lovecraft’s modernist style, rejecting the traditional Romantic notion of sublimity, presents the sublime experience as catastrophic rather than transcendent or grand, resulting in madness, or often death. Lovecraft’s use of the Longinian sublime in his horror fiction takes the idea of the experience itself as a reward and reverses it, presenting the Longinian sublime in horror as a loss. Rather than just nothing gained, Lovecraft uses the sublime to demonstrate a fundamental destruction or loss of sanity, or even life. This catastrophic loss is ironic, in that one would expect, given the transcendent sublime, that the experience is positive. Lovecraft, however, turns sublimity, even Longinian sublimity, in on itself and presents something that
fundamentally changes the characters in his fiction as something terrifying and
dangerous. Those who experience the Longinian sublime in Lovecraft’s fiction are
suffering, not transcending. Using the Longinian sublime as a starting point, exploring
Lovecraft’s horrific form of the sublime exposes new ways of looking at his fiction, as
well as horror fiction in general. Lovecraft has many other stories featuring characters
experiencing sights, sounds, smells and other sensations beyond their comprehension or
control.

For instance, “The Call of Cthulhu,” which is too long to fit easily with the other
pieces selected for this project, tells the tale of Francis Wayland Thurston encountering
the titular Elder God, Cthulhu, in his island city R’lyeh, a place that does not follow the
laws of man, God, or physics. Thurston is left horrified and broken upon seeing the
visage of Cthulhu. He predicts that the Cult of Cthulhu, a lingering presence on the
island, wants to bring about Cthulhu’s mighty reign once again. However, the framework
of the story, that of a man reading Thurston’s report, heavily implies that nothing came of
Thurston’s prediction: no monster rising from the sea, no cult taking over the world.
Thurston’s experience, like many other characters who suffer the sublime in Lovecraft’s
works, could be easily explained as a moment of intense madness that left him
irreversibly changed. Normally, looking at a work like “The Call of Cthulhu” would be
simply an exploration of horror, but thinking of it in terms of the sublime, “The Call of
Cthulhu” shifts from a horror story to something more. The absence of a reward or
compensation inverts the sublime experience and makes the lack of reward a theme in the
story. Thurston’s experience, when read as a sublime experience, is ironic, not just horrific.

Similar examples are found in other longer stories by Lovecraft. “The Lurking Fear” is one such notable example. Another unnamed narrator takes the reader on a journey to the Catskills, to the fictional Tempest Mountain and the Martense mansion that “crowned the high but gradual eminence whose liability to frequent thunderstorms gave [Tempest Mountain its] name” (56). The narrator was originally a man very interested in the macabre and supernatural, whose “career [was] a series of quests for strange horrors in literature and life” (55). However, what he sees in Martense mansion, what he experiences there, causes him not only to decimate the mansion (after the death of the men he brought with him), but to end his career (74-77). His sanity is badly damaged, leaving him sleepless and forced “to take opiates when it thunders” as the noise “reminds him of the mountain”; as well, he cannot “see a well or a subway entrance without shuddering” (74-75). He no longer seeks out the strange and macabre, and rather than gaining something by seeking it out before his career ends, he ends up worse off than he was when he started his journey.

Modernism and the Longinian sublime cast new light and shadows on Lovecraft’s works. In fact, using the methods explored here, modern horror from multiple mediums can be re-examined. Horror stories are seen as genre fiction, whether they be Gothic or not. While there is a plethora of scholarship on them, and many great works of horror are part of the canon, finding crossovers between horror and the sublime is fairly rare. But if a work like Mark Z. Danielewski’s riveting *House of Leaves*, or Ira Levin’s *Satanic
Rosemary's Baby, or perhaps some or all of the short stories in Stephen King’s disturbing Night Shift, were explored with the Longinian sublime in mind, new conclusions could be drawn about character, irony in horror, and the sublime itself.

For example, House of Leaves tells a three-fold story: the primary frame is that of Johnny Truant, a Los Angeles-based tattoo artist whose specialty is the construction of tattoo needles. The secondary frame is that of an old man, Zampanò, and the tale of the movie made out of a book he was writing. The third frame is Zampanò’s book, The Navidson Record, which tells the story of Will Navidson, a photojournalist, and his experiences in the house in which he and his family lived. The house is bigger on the inside than on the outside, and slowly grows ever larger, producing long, pitch-black hallways which slowly seem to digest any object left behind. Truant, Zampanò, and Navidson’s stories are all told in a complex narrative that moves quickly from one person to the next. No one ever discovers why the house expands, from where the house came to be, or what happened to the house after Navidson’s experience; though the house still stands, the extra, black spaces are inexplicably gone. Navidson eventually makes a long trip through the bowels of the expanding house, coming out the other side a changed man, but a man without understanding of his experience; Zampanò writes that “the Navidsons may have left the house, they may have even left Virginia, but they will never be able to leave the memory of that place” (526). While still passionate about his work, “Navidson has never stopped wrestling with the meaning of his experience” which has “literally crippled him,” claiming a hand, eye, and some of the flesh from his feet and face (527). Truant, too, experiences a loss, perhaps dying or going mad by the end of the
book; neither is certain give the tenuous description of his attack by someone who is simultaneously six different people. And Zampanò, who started the tale, really, with his account of Navidson’s adventures, is dead at the start.

*House of Leaves* represents for the reader a figurative and literal loss of self and body, but it’s arguably a cult-classic, and like Lovecraft’s works in his lifetime, not as widely-known. The Modernist subversion of the sublime happens, however, even in well-known works. For example, Ira Levin’s famous *Rosemary’s Baby* tells the story of Rosemary, a young woman who wants to start a life with her husband Guy, and ambitious actor. After Guy makes a deal with the Devil through the help of their (unbeknownst to Rosemary) witch neighbors, Minnie and Roman Castevet, he becomes successful at the expense of another actor’s sight. Part of the deal, however, was allowing the Devil to rape his wife, Rosemary, and impregnate her with the Antichrist. All of this happens with Rosemary thinking only that Minnie and Roman are pushy elderly neighbors—it isn’t until the end of the story that Rosemary understands she has produced the Antichrist. However, Rosemary has broken at this point in the tale, her mind decimated by what has happened to her, and she only has the singular idea to take care of her monstrous child. She experiences a loss of her entire life as she had planned it.

Then there is *Night Shift*, a collection of King’s short horror stories. Not all the stories exhibit a character experiencing the Longinian sublime, but several do. For instance, “Graveyard Shift” tells the story of a drifter, Hall, and his final days working in a textile mill. The hateful foreman sends the men to clean out the basement of the mill over Fourth of July weekend, but the conditions are appallingly dangerous—especially
the rats, which have grown to monstrous, impossible size due to mutations. Eventually Hall can no longer abide the foreman’s laziness and uncaring attitude for his workers, and after finding a sub-basement, forces the foreman and another man to enter the sub-basement with him and explore it—Hall assuming that the foreman will learn a lesson about sending men to do tasks he’s unwilling to do himself. In the end, however, every man that enters the basement is devoured by humongous, legless, eyeless rat mutants. Hall dies with a mad laugh in his throat.

Modernism traditionally rejects the formal elements of pre-twentieth century literature, and the sublime is no exception. For the modernists, the sublime is not transcendent, and is impossible to achieve in the chaos and violence of the modern world. During World War I, for the first time, moving pictures, film, made it possible for citizens to see the tragedy of war. Romantic notions of the world were rejected in the face of the truth: that rational men and women are capable of terrible things. Modernist horror writers, too, began to move away from traditional Gothic horror, at the same time other modernists moved away from Romantic tropes. The Longinian sublime, being momentary, complements the nature of modern horror, which is punctuated by moments of intense sensation and sensory overload. When these final moments are examined through the lens of the Longinian sublime, Lovecraft and other horror authors’ modernist sensibilities become more apparent. His representation of the Longinian sublime as a lack of reward is quintessential modernism, as Lovecraft’s sublime as loss rejects the Romantic notion of sublimity leading to transcendence. Using Lovecraft’s inversion of the Romantic notion
of the sublime, twentieth century horror in general can be re-explored for these sublime losses.
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