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FLIGHT FROM THE LIGHT

Challenging the Ideals of the Enlightenment in the Works of
Robert W. Chambers and H.P. Lovecraft

ABSTRACT

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Master's Thesis
Tampere University
Master's Programme in English Language and Literature
April 2020

The Enlightenment Movement of the 18th century was a significant influence in the history of Western philosophy, and in many regards the influence of the Enlightenment is still present in the 21st century. The Enlightenment has been examined in a wide range of texts, ranging from academic papers to works of fiction. This thesis examines how the ideals of the Enlightenment are examined and criticized in the works of Robert W. Chambers (1865-1933) and H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1933). These ideals of the Enlightenment include the concept of unrestricted pursuit of knowledge, the rejection of myths and an optimistic approach to human abilities and the pursuit of knowledge. In the literary works of Chambers and Lovecraft these ideals are portrayed in a more negative light, and the pursuit of knowledge often acts as the catalyst that eventually brings horror, insanity and at times even death to the protagonists of Chambers and Lovecraft.

Chambers and Lovecraft utilize two fictional books in their criticism of the ideals of the Enlightenment: "The King in Yellow" for Chambers and "The Necronomicon" for Lovecraft. Using these two fictional books Chambers and Lovecraft create narratives that examine the dark side of knowledge and the limitations of human understanding. Through these fictional books Chambers and Lovecraft frame the key elements of criticism of the Enlightenment's ideals: an overtly optimistic relationship with knowledge, fascination with the myths that the movement sought to dismiss, and the naivety of the movement's goals and ideals.

1700-luvun valistusaate oli merkittävä vaikuttaja länsimaisen filosofian historiassa ja sen vaikutus näkyy yhä 2000-luvulla. Valistusaatetta on tarkasteltu monissa eri teoksissa aina akateemisista teksteistä fiktiivisiin teoksiin. Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee sitä, miten Robert W. Chambers (1865-1933) ja H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1933) käsittelevät ja kritisoivat valistuksen ihanteita teoksissaan. Näihin Chambersin ja Lovecraftin kritisoimiin valistuksen ihanteisiin kuuluvat muun muassa rajoittamaton tiedon tavoittelu, myyttien kieltäminen sekä optimistinen suhtautuminen ihmisen älyllisiin kykyihin ja hänen haluunsa tavoitella tietoa. Teoksissaan he kuvaavat näitä ihanteita negatiivisesti, ja protagonistin tiedon tavoittelu aloittaakin usein kauhean ja traagisen tapahtumaketjun, joka lopulta ajaa hänet hulluuteen ja joskus jopa kuolemaan.

Chambers ja Lovecraft hyödyntävät molemmat valistuksen kritiikissään fiktiivisiä teoksiaan. Chambersin "Keltaisen Kuninkaan" ("The King in Yellow") ja Lovecraftin "Necronomiconin" avulla he luovat kertomuksia joissa tarkastellaan tiedon synkkiä puolia ja ihmisen ymmärryksen rajallisuutta. "Keltaista Kuningasta" ja "Necronomiconia" hyödyntäen Chambers ja Lovecraft tuovat esille valistusihanteiden keskeisimmät epäkohdat; liian optimistisen suhtautumisen tietoon, kiinnostuksen aatteen itsensä halveksumia myyttejä kohtaan sekä valistuksen tavoitteiden ja ihanteiden naiiviuden.

Keywords: The Enlightenment, Forbidden Knowledge, Gothic, The King in Yellow, Myth, The Necronomicon, Temptation, Supernatural, Weird Fiction

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1. Introduction: The Enlightenment and its Myths

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

The paragraph above is the opening to H.P. Lovecraft's most renowned short story, "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928). This ominous statement is made by the narrator-protagonist of the story, Francis Wayland Thurston, after he has stumbled upon a terrible realization while examining the possessions of his deceased great uncle. Thurston's statement frames the central tenet of not just "The Call of Cthulhu", but Lovecraft's fiction in general; as Burleson states "there are some types of knowledge only by the avoidance or suppression of which can humankind maintain a semblance of well-being" in Lovecraft's literary universe. (Burleson, 140) Burleson continues to provide examples of such knowledge from the works of Lovecraft: "... the knowledge that the human race is the least of earth's sentient races (the theme of denied primacy), or the knowledge of an unwholesome survival (in that the ancient races still lurk nearby, beyond or beneath our traveled paths) ... the knowledge that there are terrible conduits of accessibility, unthinkable connections, in a shared world of dream open to the human psyche" (140). The idea of forbidden knowledge, of things humanity ought not to know, is among the most recurring ones in the works of Lovecraft, touching everything from a single protagonist's hidden family legacy ("Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family") to the hierarchy of the universe ("The Dreams in the Witch House"). These horrible realizations are a crucial element in the works of Lovecraft as well as

multiple other authors of weird tales¹, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, and Robert W. Chambers in *The King in Yellow* (1895). Lovecraft and Chambers form a logical pairing for study, as both of these authors of weird fiction deal with themes of forbidden knowledge in their works.² These two authors are also connected through their fictional universes, as elements from the works of Chambers (such as Hastur and the Yellow Sign) are also included in Lovecraftian mythos. Going back to the opening of “Call of Cthulhu” quoted earlier, both Lovecraft and Chambers portray the light of knowledge as “deadly” and something that humanity should seek sanctuary from in the form of a “new dark age”. The purpose of this thesis is to examine this flight from the light; how Lovecraft and Chambers frame knowledge as something dangerous and even undesirable and how the works of these authors challenge some fundamental ideals of Western collective consciousness: the accumulation of knowledge and the importance of that knowledge in the post-Enlightenment world. This challenge will be specifically examined through the fictional books “The King in Yellow”³ and “The Necronomicon”; how do Chambers and Lovecraft utilize these books in their challenge of the Enlightenment?

Before one begins to examine this challenge of Lovecraft and Chambers, it is crucial to first examine the ideals of Enlightenment that are being challenged. In order to do this, one must first attempt to define Enlightenment, its ideals, and its goals. Let us begin by attempting to place Enlightenment on a timeline. The Enlightenment as a philosophical movement or a school of thought that influenced Western thinking is mostly associated with the 18th century. Barnett, for example, defines the movement as a “... broad intellectual manifestation of the years c. 1690–

¹ A term used to describe “Fantasy, Supernatural Fiction and Horror tales embodying transgressive material: tales where motifs of Thinning and the Uncanny predominate, and where subject matters like Occultism or Satanism may be central, and Doppelgängers thrive” (Encyclopedia of Fantasy). This term was also used by Lovecraft himself.

² Other gothic authors have explored similar themes as well, such as Edgar Allan Poe in “The Cask of Amontillado”.

³ In order to avoid confusion between fictional and real books of the same title, the fictional books discussed in this thesis will be referred to as “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”.

1790 that we have termed the Enlightenment" (1). Throughout history there has been a great deal of debate about how the Enlightenment should be based on a timeline, and which major works or events should be highlighted as the starting and ending points of the Enlightenment. However, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) by Horkheimer and Adorno, the notion of making a timeline of the Enlightenment has been problematized. Basing their argument on the works of Nietzsche, Horkheimer and Adorno point out that many notions considered to be crucial aspects of the Enlightenment are not exclusively European and predate the intellectual movement discussed earlier:

He [Nietzsche] formulated the ambivalent relationship of enlightenment to power. Enlightenment must be "drummed into the people, so that the priests all turn into priests with a bad conscience-and likewise with the state. That is the task of enlightenment: to show up the pompous behavior of princes and statesmen as a deliberate lie." However, enlightenment had always been a means employed by the "great artists of government (Confucius in China, the Roman Empire, Napoleon, the Papacy, when it was concerned with power and not just with the world) ... [omission in the original text]. The self-deception of the masses in this respect-for instance, in all democracies-is highly advantageous: making people small and governable is hailed as 'progress!'" As this twofold character of enlightenment emerged more clearly as a basic motif of history, its concept, that of advancing thought, was traced back to the beginning of recorded history. (36)

Building on this, authors such as Hans Robert Jauss and Jason Josephson-Storm have pointed out that the Enlightenment cannot be easily defined in relation to time, and that Enlightenment as a unified, clearly defined movement is a myth. For example, Jauss points out that any specific definitions are doomed to fail:

The word modernity, which is meant to distinguish, in epochal terms, the self-understanding of our era from its past, is paradoxical. If one looks back over its literary tradition, it seems evident that it has always already forfeited, through historical repetition, the very claim it sets out to make. It was not coined specially for our period, nor does it seem in the least capable of designating, unmistakably, the unique features of an epoch. (329)

Although Jauss uses the term modernity and not Enlightenment, it is important to understand that these two terms are intertwined. For example, Barnett states that “in historical studies and indeed most fields of the humanities, the terms modernity and Enlightenment are so frequently linked that either term almost automatically evokes the other. It has become an accepted commonplace, part of the historical canon, that modernity began in the Enlightenment” (1). Keeping that in mind, Jauss’ criticism of the term modernity can be equally applied to the term Enlightenment.

Continuing from Jauss, Josephson-Storm builds on this argument:

By way of explanation, Hans Robert Jauss has reminded us that modernity was not a historical event for which we might determine a date: 1492? 1648? 1789? 1868? Modernity is first and foremost the sign of a rupture. As a term and concept, it is a device for positing significant historical breaks. To speak of “the modern” means nothing so much as to talk of the current, of the putatively new: to describe a kind of novelty. That the term has been used for hundreds of years might seem through sheer repetition to forfeit its claims to originality. (7)

As the examples used above showcase, the Enlightenment as a concept is difficult to define in terms of time. While the presence of a school of thought during the 18th century is undeniable, it is at the same time vital to remember that the traditional notion of Enlightenment is in many regards a problematic one, not embedded into a single period of history or just Europe. This thesis will primarily focus on the movement called the Enlightenment during the 18th century, which is often used interchangeably with the term modernity, while simultaneously keeping in mind the problematic notion of placing the Enlightenment on a timeline.

While the Enlightenment is a problematic concept, it is still possible to establish some of its ideals. These ideals are the central core beliefs of Enlightenment that act as the building blocks of the notion of Enlightenment. It is vital to remember that these ideals form an idealized, “perfect” Enlightenment that acts as a utopia to strive for. The reality of the Enlightenment, however, often

fell short of that utopia. Horkheimer and Adorno provide the following definition of Enlightenment and its goals:

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge. Bacon, "the father of experimental philosophy," brought these motifs together. He despised the exponents of tradition, who substituted belief for knowledge and were as unwilling to doubt as they were reckless in supplying answers. (1)

The definition of Horkheimer and Adorno links the "widest sense" of Enlightenment with the advancement and importance of human thought and its aim of installing humans "as masters". This rise to the status of masters is done through defiance, like the defiance of tradition Horkheimer and Adorno mention in relation to Bacon. The idea of defiance in order to obtain knowledge brings to mind (among other narratives) the classic myth of Prometheus: "Prometheus became our benefactor by making a raid on the knowledge withheld from us by Zeus in his anger. Prometheus' defiance became our salvation in an episode that appears to rebut the proverb that ignorance is bliss" (Shattuck, 14). Prometheus' role as a rebel and the bringer of light (knowledge) to humanity is a powerful narrative, and it is not surprising that it became a symbol of Enlightenment: "Prometheus the fire-bringer thus also becomes a figure of identification for the European Enlightenment, not only metaphorically shedding the light of human reason on religion and superstition, but also practically initiating humans into the arts and crafts. Most eighteenth-century texts emphasize Prometheus's role in engineering technological, and thus social, progress" (Jolle). While Jolle's claim that "most" 18th century texts emphasize this role for Prometheus might be an exaggeration, the mythical character's importance is still significant; for the 18th century

authors, Prometheus symbolized the changes the Enlightenment as a movement would cause.⁴

The idealized image of Enlightenment is that of an ideological, progressive Prometheus, a new ideal of thinking and knowledge that aims for the betterment of humanity.

Dispelling fears is a major element in Enlightenment's quest for the betterment of humanity, and Horkheimer and Adorno raise fear to be one of the major obstacles to be tackled by Enlightenment:

In the authority of universal concepts the Enlightenment detected a fear of the demons through whose effigies human beings had tried to influence nature in magic rituals. From now on matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties. For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion. (3)

In other words, Enlightenment sought to "slay the demons" of the world. Or, to use a term popularized by Max Weber (originally borrowed from Friedrich Schiller), the aim of the Enlightenment was "the disenchantment of the world" (Jenkins, 11). Here, the disenchantment means the removal of the supernatural from the phenomena of the world. The previous hierarchy of the world was being changed. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes the pre-Enlightenment hierarchy of the universe:

In other words, the general understanding of the human predicament before modernity placed us in an order where we were not at the top. Higher beings, like Gods or spirits, or a higher kind of being, like the Ideas or the cosmopolis of Gods and humans, demanded and deserved our worship, reverence, devotion or love. ... These beings commanded our awe. There was no question of treating them as we treat the forces of nature we harness for energy. (18-19)

⁴ While the Enlightenment saw Prometheus as a positive symbol, the mythical character has also been used in a less idealized fashion. One of the most notable examples is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The book's subtitle creates a connection between Victor Frankenstein and Prometheus, making the mythical symbol of the Enlightenment a part of a cautionary tale about arrogance and the dangers of pursuing knowledge.

Remembering that modernity and Enlightenment are often interchangeable, Taylor's "human predicament before modernity" can simultaneously mean the human predicament before the Enlightenment. The disenchantment of fear that Enlightenment tried to achieve is connected to Taylor's hierarchy; the universe appeared to be controlled by supernatural forces and entities beyond human understanding and rationally examining the mysteries of the universe would make these supposed supernatural forces understandable. In the idealized notions of Enlightenment, the removal of the unknown elements will eventually remove human fears: "The gods cannot take away fear from human beings, the petrified cries of whom they bear as their names. Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 11). In the works of Lovecraft and Chambers, this idea is turned upside down; the pursuit of knowledge does not remove the presence of the supernatural, but instead enforces it through horrific creatures such as Cthulhu and Hastur, and mysterious texts such as "The Necronomicon" and "The King in Yellow". Removing the unknown actually makes humanity more terrified of the universe as their own real role in it is revealed: "Lovecraft once wrote 'Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that laws and interests and emotions have no validity in the vast cosmos at large'. The element of horror in his stories, then, was the disclosure to humans of their own significance in a cosmos that is not anthropocentric" (Price, 259). Instead of a Promethean light of human knowledge, the protagonists of Lovecraft and Chambers are left with the "deadly light" described in "Call of Cthulhu". The deadly light is filled with terrifying realizations and encounters, such as the one at the end of "In the Court of the Dragon", one of Chambers' short stories: "Then I sank into the depths, and I heard the King in Yellow whispering to my soul: 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!'" (60).

Like the protagonist of “In the Court of the Dragon”, the Enlightenment also sinks into the depth of myths, as the idealized notion of the Enlightenment did not always match the reality. The ideal of disenchantment of myths was not always realized in practice, and Horkheimer and Adorno go as far as to state that the Enlightenment seems to simultaneously embrace the myths it is trying to disenchant: “But the more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects. The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself” (8). In other words, one could argue that the Enlightenment does not aim to do away with myths; it is instead preoccupied with replacing the old myths with its own “Myth of Enlightenment”. This myth of Enlightenment is a narrative that is kept alive through repetition, making it no different from the classic myths:

The actual is validated, knowledge confines itself to repeating it, thought makes itself mere tautology. The more completely the machinery of thought subjugates existence, the more blindly it is satisfied with reproducing it. Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape. For mythology had reflected in its forms the essence of the existing order—cyclical motion, fate, domination of the world as truth—and had renounced hope. In the terseness of the mythical image, as in the clarity of the scientific formula, the eternity of the actual is confirmed and mere existence is pronounced as the meaning it obstructs. The world as a gigantic analytical judgment, the only surviving dream of science, is of the same kind as the cosmic myth which linked the alternation of spring and autumn to the abduction of Persephone. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 20)

The Enlightenment’s fascination with myth is also present with the use of Prometheus as a symbol of Enlightenment discussed earlier. Ironically, a movement strongly preoccupied with the idea of removing myths could not resist the lure of one when seeking a symbol for itself.

By embracing myths, the Enlightenment as a movement fails to live up to its own unrealistic goals. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment’s embracement of myths

ends up enforcing the fears that it sought to temper: “Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the “outside” is the real source of fear” (11). As the principles of Enlightenment aim at a rational explanation of the universe, anything that cannot be explained (“the outside”) becomes mystified and terrifying. The limits of human knowledge are made something negative, a domain of the forbidden unknown. Paradoxically, by making this division into inside and outside, the Enlightenment ends up hampering thought:

For the scientific temper, any deviation of thought from the business of manipulating the actual, any stepping outside the jurisdiction of existence, is no less senseless and self-destructive than it would be for the magician to step outside the magic circle drawn for his incantation; and in both cases violation of the taboo carries a heavy price for the offender. The mastery of nature draws the circle in which the critique of pure reason holds thought spellbound. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 19)

As the examples of Horkheimer and Adorno showcase, the Enlightenment at times went against its own doctrine, highlighting its own flaws. However, it is important to remember that even during the 18th century some Enlightenment writers recognized these flaws and sought to remedy them:

Neither was there unity within the Enlightenment on perhaps the central plank of Enlightenment doctrine, the role of reason in the future of civilization. From the mid eighteenth century we see – especially in France and England in the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau and David Hume – a growing rejection of the simple panacea of reason in favour of the equal recognition of the role of the ‘passions’ in human conduct. (Barnett, 1)

Despite these attempts by Rousseau, Hume, and others, the Enlightenment’s connection to myth is something that cannot be ignored.

In addition to the previously discussed mythical nature of the Enlightenment's theory and ideals, the movement's history is similarly bound to myths. One of these is the deist movement, whose history Barnett chronicles:

The first hint of deism in the historical record is to be found in sixteenth-century Lyon. In 1563 Pierre Viret, a close colleague of the Protestant reformer Calvin, wrote the *Instruction Chrétienne*, in which he described various freethinkers who needed to be combated. Amongst them Viret mentioned those 'qui s'appellent déistes, d'un mot tout nouveau' ('who call themselves deists, a completely new word') and his description of them heavily emphasized their lack of religion. It was not, however, until the second half of the seventeenth century that the deism scare really began to take shape. In 1654 the orthodox Catholic and Bordelais barrister Jean Filleau claimed that the Catholic reformer Jansen, Saint Cyran and five others had met in Bourghfontaine in 1621 in order to plan the destruction of French Catholicism and supplant it with deism. (11)

Deist movement or deism, according to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "refers to what can be called natural religion, the acceptance of a certain body of religious knowledge that is inborn in every person or that can be acquired by the use of reason and the rejection of religious knowledge when it is acquired through either revelation or the teaching of any church". As Barnett's account states, the deists were also at times thought to be atheists. In reality, most deists were religious and believed in an active God that influenced the world. For example, Waligore states that "... a deist is a thinker who believed in God, but used reason to prove that clerical Christianity was wrong about God's nature and the way God related to humanity" (2). Although these examples seem to suggest the presence of a deist movement of considerable influence, Barnett is quick to dismiss this notion:

Some of those proclaimed fears were genuine. Some, however, were not entirely so, and were in good part the result of a matrix of personal, economic and politico-religious circumstances and exigencies that prompted some observers to exaggerate threats to Christianity. The results are beyond doubt. The deism scare proved to be one of the great and enduring European propaganda coups, the results of which, in academic terms, are still with us today. Historians, wishing to locate the origins of secular modernity in the Enlightenment, have perpetuated the

notion of a secularizing eighteenth-century international 'deist movement', which has been considered 'especially strong in Britain and France'. (11-12)

According to Barnett, the deist movement never existed in any meaningful extent "beyond the virtual reality of history books ..." (13). Still, the idea of a significant deist movement persists, and it is a significant narrative in the canon of Enlightenment. The idea of an intellectual, non-religious movement challenging the authority of Christianity and superstition is still alive today, even though such a narrative has very little historical basis. For example, many influential thinkers during the Enlightenment (which Barnett calls "The Enlightenment protagonists"), believed in God:

That Enlightenment protagonists were secular in their outlook has also been part of the Enlightenment studies canon. Until the 1970s the characterization of the Enlightenment was most usually that of reason against religion. Since then many academics have preferred the formula reason versus the Church, recognizing that most of the enlightened still retained a belief in God, even if they were hostile to the Church. (2)

The idea of a non-religious, deist moment at the heart of the Enlightenment is one of the myths of the Enlightenment, and it is almost as persevering as the myth of the light-bearing Prometheus. The myth of a highly influential and non-religious deist movement remains at the very heart of the Enlightenment, proving that myths are a part of the Enlightenment's history despite its superficial rejection of myths in favor of knowledge and truth. In an ironic turn of events, the movement which vocally rejected myths ends up creating them itself.

In addition to the presence of religion within the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century, Barnett also states that the achievements of its protagonists is also a subject of myth. The philosophes (French for "philosophers", intellectuals of the 18th century Enlightenment) often overstated their own importance in the changes happening in Europe, and at times took credit for achievements that were not theirs. (Barnett, 14) Interestingly, the philosophes were not the only

ones to exaggerate their importance, and at times their opponents had a crucial role in building the myth:

If the philosophes were often motivated to overstate their role and influence, they did not do so unaided. In this respect their greatest allies were often also their greatest enemies: those conservatives who, for their own ends, wished to talk up the deist or freethinker threat to Christianity. The bogeyman of deism was frequently identified by clerics and protagonists of the faith, of both the orthodox and dissenting type, some of whom wished to create reputations for themselves and/or their sect by publicly appearing as stalwart defenders of 'true' Christian orthodoxy. (5)

At times, some of the philosophes seemed to be hilariously egotistical about the extent of their influence: "Some enlightened readers of Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (finally published in 1782) were also presumably surprised to learn how indebted they were to the author's prompt action in preventing a revolution in 1753. With deft footwork, Rousseau had apparently distracted Paris from acute religious strife with his views on the comparative virtues of Italian and French music" (Barnett, 14). Barnett sees a more realistic way of observing the actions of the philosophes in this humorous anecdote: "... the philosophes ought to be seen more often as onlookers in truly tumultuous events which were certainly not 'enlightened' as we have come to understand the term. From this perspective, it is possible to view at least some of the thought of the philosophes as the result of a profound politicization of religion especially apparent in France, Italy and England, rather than its cause" (15). Building on this notion of the philosophes as observers, Barnett continues on to emphasize the importance of public opinion during the Enlightenment and the creation of its myths:

I wish to assert the fundamental role of public opinion in pressure for religious change, but also in the creation of enduring myths such as that of the deist movement. At times, if they did not wish to appear to be lagging behind developments, the philosophes (protagonists of enlightened ideals) were forced to claim broad changes as their own particular victories. If the philosophes cannot be

credited with as much as has been traditionally claimed, and other, broader agencies can be credited with more than has been traditionally recognized, then it is perhaps time to broaden the traditional view of Enlightenment studies. (4)

The idea of Rousseau, Voltaire and other philosophes as significant agents of change and major influencers of history during the Enlightenment is a rather persevering notion, but as the examples of Barnett showcase it is another example of a myth of the Enlightenment. While these authors hold a significant place in the history of Western philosophy, the influence that they had on the events of their own time has been subject to great exaggeration.

The ideals and myths of the Enlightenment established in the earlier paragraphs are examined in multiple ways in the works of Lovecraft and Chambers, but the focus of this thesis is the use of fictional texts of great significance in their respective literary universes: “The Necronomicon” and “The King in Yellow”. These two books share many similarities, making them an ideal pairing for examination; both of these texts have a dark, ominous reputation and a connection with the idea of forbidden knowledge, something that the characters of the narratives should not know. Due to the dark reputations of these books they have also been characterized as banned books in their literary universes, following the same trends as the banning of real books throughout history:

For centuries, books have been banned, suppressed, and censored because of political, religious, sexual, and social reasons, according to the tastes and beliefs of a particular era or a locale. As times change, formerly banned books become acceptable or even “classic,” while once-acceptable books are challenged In many cases, the same book has been banned at different times for different reasons The books do not change, but the social climate does. (Karolides et al., vii)

Out of the reasons listed by Karolides et al. (political, religious, sexual and social), “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon” fall into the categories of political and religious; “The King in

Yellow” is banned by governments worldwide for the impact it has on its readers, while “The Necronomicon’s” history is filled with religious authorities trying to destroy the infamous tome.⁵ Unlike some of the books discussed by Karolides et al., “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon” are also always defined by controversy, and the change in attitudes mentioned by Karolides et al. is not present in the narratives of Chambers and Lovecraft. The books also act as filters, limiting the number of texts to focus on; “The King in Yellow” only appears in the first four stories of Chambers’ collection, meaning that these are the ones that are relevant for the purposes of this thesis. As for Lovecraft, the list of stories that feature the “The Necronomicon” is significantly longer, although the majority of the stories only briefly mention the infamous tome. The most relevant stories for the purposes of this thesis are “The Dunwich Horror”(1929), “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1933), *Shadow Out of Time* (1936), and “History of the *Necronomicon*” (1938).

This idea of forbidden knowledge, things that one ought not know, seems to be in strong contrast to ideals of the Enlightenment about knowledge and its importance. Yet, even in modern science, the notion of forbidden knowledge is present:

Forbidden knowledge embodies the idea that there are things we should not know. Knowledge may be forbidden because it can only be acquired through unacceptable means, such as human experiments conducted by the Nazis; knowledge may be considered too dangerous, as with weapons of mass destruction or research on sexual practices that undermine social norms; and knowledge may be prohibited by religious, moral, or secular authority, exemplified by human cloning. (Kempner et al., 854)

While the above ideas about forbidden knowledge are important, Lovecraft and Chambers have a somewhat different approach to the topic. For them, knowledge is dangerous in itself; the

⁵ The fictional histories and controversies of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon” will be discussed in greater detail in the chapters to follow.

disturbing discoveries that their protagonist make are not dangerous because of what they can be used for. The danger of knowledge is in the knowledge itself, and the ultimate “reward” that knowledge brings to the protagonists of Lovecraft and Chambers is often insanity or death. And in most of these narratives, the forbidden texts of “The Necronomicon” and “The King in Yellow” are guiding the protagonist to their fates.

The critique of the ideals of Enlightenment and progressivism that is present in the works of both of these authors is also a traditional aspect of the American gothic: “... traditionally, gothic literature in America, has challenged dominant ideologies. In fact, it might be argued that gothic literature in American culture because of its power to contradict national narrative too blithe in their acceptance of progressivism” (Emmert, 39). Themes explored by Lovecraft and Chambers, such as the limits of scientific research and the notion of forbidden knowledge, are familiar in the American Gothic tradition, having been previously examined by authors such as Edgar Allan Poe (Bottig, 80). Similarity in themes is hardly surprising, considering how much Lovecraft admired Poe⁶:

In the eighteen-thirties occurred a literary dawn directly affecting not only the history of the weird tale, but that of short fiction as a whole; and indirectly moulding the trends and fortunes of a great European aesthetic school. It is our good fortune as Americans to be able to claim that dawn as our own, for it came in the person of our illustrious and unfortunate fellow-countryman Edgar Allan Poe. (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”, 25)

These themes are not just staples of American Gothic, but Gothic literature in general:

Gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values. Gothic

⁶ Lovecraft’s deep admiration of Poe was also a burden for him. According to Alex Houstoun, Lovecraft has at times expressed that he felt like he was “laboring beneath the shadow of his very own “God of Fiction”, rather than creating anything new and unique within his own writing” (p. 46). In the context of Lovecraft, the influence of Poe forms a mythology of its own. In the same way that “the Necronomicon” influences the protagonists of Lovecraft, Poe lurks as a similar “terrifying” influence over Lovecraft. For example, the prevalent theme of madness in Lovecraft’s works is a legacy from Poe, who was “ ... one of the first writers to treat madness as a recurrent subject, Poe explores the varieties of insanity and illustrates symptomatic phobias, obsessions, and hallucinations”(Kennedy, 6-7).

condenses the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption. (Bottig, p.1)

Bottig places the criticism, the act of exposing the “underside of enlightenment”, at the very essence of Gothic. This notion places Lovecraft and Chambers firmly within the gothic tradition.

In the chapters that follow, I will be examining the various elements of “The Necronomicon” and “The King in Yellow” present in Lovecraft and Chambers, relating these books to the challenges of the Enlightenment. First, I will examine how Lovecraft and Chambers establish the mythologies of these two books and how these myths comment on the ideals of Enlightenment. After that, the act of reading these books, a crucial part of attaining the forbidden knowledge, is examined. Finally, I will combine the observations made in the previous two chapters to form a conclusion that addresses how Chambers and Lovecraft utilize their fictional books in their criticism of the Enlightenment’s naivety and overtly optimistic relationship with knowledge.

2. Terrifying Vistas of Reality: Establishing the Mythologies of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”

As it has been established in the previous chapter, the status that “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon” have in the works of Chambers and Lovecraft are quite similar: both of these books are characterized as “forbidden” and “disturbing” and an air of danger surrounds them. The act of reading these books is considered taboo, and the characters who end up reading these books are typically deeply unnerved by their reading experiences. Also, both of these books have a sort of mythology or mythos (a term often associated with Lovecraft) that surrounds them. From the point of view of the ideals of Enlightenment, these mythologies present a dilemma. Books are regarded as instruments of knowledge, making them a crucial part of the Enlightenment’s quest discussed in the previous chapter. At the same time, the highly mythologized nature of “The Necronomicon” and “The King in Yellow” turn the tools of the Enlightenment against themselves through the idea of an “evil book”. This chapter aims to examine the mythology surrounding these books, and how this mythology contributes to the challenges against the ideals of the Enlightenment discussed in the previous chapter. This examination will be performed by focusing on two major elements present in the narratives of Chambers and Lovecraft: the element of temptation associated with these books, and the supernatural elements associated with these books. The first element, temptation, is connected to the taboos that the books have in their respective fictional universes, and the fact that despite these taboos the protagonists of Chambers and Lovecraft still read these forbidden books. The second aspect to be examined is the supernatural associations of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”. While both of these books are associated with supernatural entities and phenomena (such as the mysterious King in Yellow of Chambers and The Great Old Ones of Lovecraft), it is not clear whether the books

themselves hold supernatural power. The examination of these elements will allow for a comprehensive analysis of how Chambers and Lovecraft establish the myths of these books and how those myths contribute to the narratives where the books are present. Through these myths the texts of Lovecraft and Chambers highlight how the Enlightenment has failed at dispelling myths, and that even books, the crucial tools of Enlightenment, are not immune to these myths.

The Tempting Nature of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”

“Your curiosity makes you irresponsible” -H.P. Lovecraft, “The Evil Clergyman”

Temptation is a concept that is at the very heart of both “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”. Let us begin the examination by first focusing on “The King in Yellow”. The element of temptation is already present when the book is initially introduced in “The Repairer of Reputations”, the first narrative of the short story collection and also the one that contains the most information about the origins and the reputation of “The King in Yellow”. The narrator-protagonist of the story, Hildred Castaigne, first reads the book during his recovery after falling off his horse. The disturbing and highly-tempting nature of the “The King in Yellow” is present from the very first mentions of the book: “During my convalescence I had bought and read for the first time, The King in Yellow. I remember after finishing the first act that it occurred to me that I had better stop” (3). Castaigne then proceeds to throw the book into the fireplace, only to pull it out after glancing at the first words of the second act. This scene is a prime example of the highly tempting nature of “The King in Yellow”. Castaigne himself realizes that he should not finish reading the book, but is unable to stop himself after seeing the opening words (which are never revealed to the reader) of its infamous second act. As Castaigne continues to discuss “The King in Yellow” he reveals that he is not alone with his morbid curiosity: “When the French Government seized the translated copies which had just arrived in Paris, London, of course, became eager to

read it. It is well known how the book spread like an infectious disease, from city to city, from continent to continent ..." (4). This statement showcases that Castaigne is rather familiar with "The King in Yellow" and its history, and he is aware of the controversy and fears surrounding the infamous book. The statement eliminates the possibility of ignorance: Castaigne obviously knew the fears connected with "The King in Yellow" and he still chose to read it. He was completely aware of what he was getting himself into when he opened the infamous book. Similarly to the people of London, his eagerness to read "The King in Yellow" overcomes any feelings of self-preservation and caution.

Considering the previously mentioned challenge to Enlightenment, Castaigne's choice of vocabulary in the quoted paragraph is significant; by comparing "The King in Yellow" to an infectious disease, Chambers creates a strong contrast between the forbidden knowledge of the infamous play and the Enlightenment's highly idealized notion of knowledge. As Scott Emmert states in "A Jaundiced View of America: Robert W. Chambers and *The King in Yellow*", even the title of the infamous short story collection highlights a connection to disease: "Certainly something "yellow", with all of its connotations of sickness, pervades *The King in Yellow*" (40). Instead of the Promethean light that would "install humans as masters", Chambers' knowledge is a "deadly light", spreading like a plague from country to country. This kind of rhetoric turns the whole ideal of spreading knowledge upside down; the spreading of "forbidden" knowledge is just as possible as the spreading of "right" knowledge that fits the Enlightenment's narrative, and the spread of knowledge can in reality enforce the myths that Enlightenment tries to dispel. The mythical nature of "The King in Yellow" is a primary example of this; the post-Enlightenment West of Chambers and Lovecraft should be a domain of rationality and knowledge, but the forbidden allure of the mythical play spreads through the same channels that were intended for the spread of "proper"

knowledge. Enlightenment fails to dispel myths, and the virtue of spreading knowledge can be “infected” by the spreading of myths.

While Castaigne is unable to resist the temptation of “The King in Yellow”, the narrative also portrays a resistance to its temptation in the character of Louis, Castaigne’s cousin. When Castaigne inquires his cousin whether he has read “The King in Yellow” or not, Louis is quick with a response: “I? No, thank God! I don’t want to be driven crazy” (23). Later in the conversation Louis proceeds to condemn the very existence of “The King in Yellow” and emphasize his own determination in not reading it: “It’s a crime to have written it, and I for one shall never open its pages” (23). Louis’ resistance against “The King in Yellow” shows that while the book has a tempting reputation, it is possible to resist this temptation. Louis, through his defiance of “The King in Yellow”, rejects the Promethean light of knowledge; he has the possibility to pursue knowledge and follow the ideals of the Enlightenment, but instead he rejects knowledge because of the possible dangers associated with it. For Louis, the threat posed by “The King in Yellow” is very immediate and real; he seems to genuinely believe that should he ever make the mistake of reading it he would lose his sanity. From the point of view of the Enlightenment, Louis’ actions are highly illogical; he is rejecting knowledge based on rumors and superstitions, allowing myths to not only exist, but to control him as well. Through his rejection of “The King in Yellow”, Louis creates a strong contrast with his cousin; while Castaigne rejects his possible fears and gives in to the temptation of “The King in Yellow”, Louis is afraid of the deadly light of the book, choosing to flee into self-imposed ignorance.

While a lot of the temptation of “The King in Yellow” is born out of the public outcry created by it, Lovecraft’s “The Necronomicon” is more obscure in its temptation. Starting with the very first narrative to name the infamous book, “The Hound” (1924), the notion that the act of

reading "The Necronomicon" is a taboo and something that one ought to refrain from is present: "Alien it [an amulet that the protagonist and his friend are examining] indeed was to all art and literature which sane and balanced readers know, but we recognized it as the thing hinted of in the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" (234). All of the negative word choices used in this paragraph place a strong emphasis on the social stigma that "The Necronomicon" has: the book is one that "sane and balanced readers" will not know about, it is also "forbidden" and written by "the mad Arab". Abdul Alhazred status as "the mad Arab" also lends an air of oriental mysticism to "The Necronomicon"; by connecting the infamous tome to an imagined version of Arabia, Lovecraft uses the tradition of Orientalism to establish a sense of otherness in the mythology of "The Necronomicon": "For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them"). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world, "we" lived in ours" (Said, 43-44). By invoking these Orientalist notions, Lovecraft distances "The Necronomicon" from his American protagonists. Both spatially and temporally, "The Necronomicon" is foreign to the post-Enlightenment West, making it a strong symbol of forbidden knowledge. However, despite the obvious social stigma that the protagonist of "The Hound" describes, he and his friend have still read the "forbidden" book. This speaks of the highly tempting nature of "The Necronomicon" and the forbidden knowledge it contains: all of the warnings about "The Necronomicon" are usually well known by the protagonists of Lovecraft, yet these warnings fail to stop the protagonists from giving into temptation and reading the infamous tome.

Out of all of Lovecraft's narrative, "The Dunwich Horror" (1929) is probably the one that takes the theme of temptation the furthest. In the narrative, the character Wilbur Whateley risks his life and eventually dies in his pursuit of a copy of "The Necronomicon" that is kept at the

library of the Miskatonic University in Arkham. For Wilbur Whateley and the narrator of “The Hound”, as well as many other protagonists of Lovecraft, the quest for knowledge and power provides the motivation to give in to the temptation of forbidden texts such as “The Necronomicon”. This tendency is best put into words in a statement directed at the protagonist of “The Evil Clergyman” (1939): “Your curiosity makes you irresponsible” (1014). This statement, according to R. Boerem, “could stand as a motto of Lovecraft’s protagonists” (280). And like the proverbial cat, many of Lovecraft’s protagonists are killed (or at the very least driven to insanity) by curiosity. This curiosity of Lovecraft’s protagonists is described significantly differently from the curiosity of Hildred Castaigne. Lovecraft’s protagonists are often portrayed as highly dedicated and methodical in their curiosity, and their search for knowledge usually encompasses a great deal of texts in addition to the infamous “Necronomicon”. A good example of this is found in “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1933), when the texts studied by the protagonist Walter Gilman are listed: “But all these precautions came late in the day, so that Gilman had some terrible hints from the dreaded *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred, the fragmentary *Book of Eibon*, and the suppressed *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt to correlate with his abstract formulae on the properties of space and the linkage of dimensions known and unknown” (925). This list of forbidden texts extends the concept of forbidden knowledge beyond “The Necronomicon”, and since Lovecraft barely discusses these other texts, they remain even more mysterious than the infamous tome. By gathering such an impressive collection of forbidden knowledge, Gilman establishes himself as a man of Enlightenment; he has seemingly dismissed notions of forbidden knowledge, and he is willing to pursue knowledge in all places where it can be found. This pursuit, with which Gilman aims to “connect his mathematics with the fantastic legends of elder magic” (925) is Gilman’s attempt to establish himself as a master of the universe, the ultimate goal of the Enlightenment. Castaigne, on the other hand, has no such pursuits in mind when he begins his reading of “The

King in Yellow". He states that he read the book during his recovery without giving any background information or a motivation for obtaining the book. Unlike Lovecraft's protagonists, who usually have a specific purpose in mind when familiarizing themselves with forbidden literature, Castaigne seems to have chosen to read "The King in Yellow" because of his interest in the book itself and not any possible knowledge that could be obtained from it. The moral panic and sinister reputation surrounding the book also make it a taboo, meaning that Castaigne's act of reading is also an act of defiance. Castaigne's lack of focus is also evident from the fact that he almost stopped reading after the first act of the book, feeling that he should not continue. Such a strong inclination to stop is not associated with Gilman's reading of "The Necronomicon": his quest for mastery drives him forward and no desire to stop is present in him. To summarize, Castaigne lacks the focus of Gilman; he reads the "The King in Yellow" without any specific end goal or gain in mind, and he is surprised by what he reads. Gilman on the other hand has a specific purpose in mind when he seeks out "The Necronomicon" (combining his mathematics with the "elder knowledge" of "The Necronomicon" and the other occult books that he studies) and he eventually succeeds in his attempts, an outcome which Castaigne could not achieve due to the simple reason that he does not have a purpose for his reading to begin with. From the point of view of the Enlightenment, only Gilman is an agent; in his attempts to control the universe through knowledge, he is actively establishing himself as a master. Castaigne, however, lacks such a goal for his reading, ensuring that the possibility of mastery is not present for him. Through the differences between Gilman and Castaigne, a vital element of the Enlightenment's ideals is highlighted; the importance of dedication. Castaigne's lack of dedication and focus in his encounter with forbidden knowledge diminishes his potential as a protagonist of the Enlightenment, while the more dedicated Gilman manages to take mantle for himself.

While Gilman takes on the mantle of a “protagonist of the Enlightenment”, he simultaneously fails to live up to the ideals of Enlightenment. In terms of Horkheimer and Adorno, Gilman is going against the very principles of Enlightenment by reading “The Necronomicon” and the other occult texts: “Enlightenment’s mythic terror springs from a horror of myth. It detects myth not only in semantically unclarified concepts and words, as linguistic criticism imagines, but in any human utterance which has no place in the functional context of self-preservation” (22). By embracing the occult, Gilman becomes a metaphor of the Enlightenment itself; as an academic of the post-Enlightenment world, he should renounce “The Necronomicon” and other occult texts as myths and superstitions. Yet, he is willing to seek out knowledge from these myths that he should reject. Like the Enlightenment, Gilman is tempted and fascinated by the myths he seeks to dispel. In the context of “The Dreams in the Witch House”, this conflict created by myth (“The Necronomicon”) and the “functional context of self-preservation” becomes a very practical one, as the chain of events which begin with Gilman reading “The Necronomicon” ends with his death. The “myths” of the occult which are shunned by the Enlightenment are tempting enough to seal the fate of the academic Gilman.

The Supernatural, or the lack of it in “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”

“So I tried to read, and soon became tremblingly absorbed by something I found in that accursed *Necronomicon*: a thought and a legend too hideous for sanity or consciousness” -H.P. Lovecraft,
“The Festival”

As the above epigraph from Lovecraft’s 1925 short story “The Festival” showcases, “The Necronomicon” is strongly associated with legends, myths and the supernatural. The same is also true for “The King in Yellow”, although to a somewhat lesser extent. While these books are strongly connected with the supernatural, the question of their own supernatural quality is not

something that can easily be answered. The aim of this section is to examine the descriptions of these books and to try to establish whether or not the books themselves contain supernatural powers in the narratives they are present, starting with “The King in Yellow” before moving on to “The Necronomicon”. The use of the term supernatural here means anything magical or unnatural from the point of view of normal reality that is associated with the books themselves and not the creatures or places they describe.

Starting once again with “The Repairer of Reputations”, one can see a pattern of evolution about the supernatural and “The King in Yellow”. While the tempting nature of “The King in Yellow” discussed in the previous section is undeniable, it is left ambiguous whether or not there is something supernatural about the book’s temptation. Castaigne’s account of the reactions that he had after reading the book create a sense that there is something unnatural about “The King in Yellow”: “... where I read it and reread it, and wept and laughed and trembled with horror which at times assails me yet. ... I pray God will curse the writer, as the writer has cursed the world with this beautiful, stupendous creation, terrible in its simplicity, irresistible in its truth—a world which now trembles before the King in Yellow” (4). Castaigne’s description makes the “King in Yellow” seem like a genuinely dangerous and supernatural text capable of causing the whole world to “tremble” before it. Castaigne’s word choices, like the previously highlighted “tremble” and “cursed” create a sense that there indeed is something supernatural about the “King in Yellow”: the book has severely impacted Castaigne and he seems to genuinely be terrified of the book and its influence. At the same time, Castaigne’s account leaves an air of ambiguity; while the impact of “The King in Yellow” is undeniable, there is nothing concrete to suggest that the word “cursed” should be taken literally.

While Castaigne's account of "The King in Yellow" suggests that there could be something supernatural about the book, Castaigne's position as an unreliable narrator makes one question his account of "The King in Yellow". Following the accident mentioned earlier, Castaigne explains that his personality underwent a change: "From a lazy young man about town, I had become active, energetic temperate and above all-oh, above all else-ambitious" (3). While Castaigne initially sees this change of his as a positive one, it adds an air of uncertainty to his narration: his future delusions and eventual descent into insanity might not be caused by the effects of "The King in Yellow", but rather by his accident. While "The King in Yellow" is present in Castaigne's narrative, his mental switch after his accident makes it impossible to accurately state whether his madness is a result of the possible supernatural powers of the "The King in Yellow", his fall, or a possible mixture of the two. It seems more likely that there is nothing supernatural about "The King in Yellow", as the story does not feature any elements that would have to be classified as supernatural. Anything out of the ordinary, like Castaigne's accounts of "The King in Yellow's" unnerving influence, can be explained by Castaigne's accident and the resulting mental issues. Whatever the case, "The King in Yellow" looms in the background of Castaigne's narrative, creating uncertainty about Castaigne's madness and the extent of the book's own influence.

Similarly to "The Repairer of Reputations", the rest of the stories that feature "The King in Yellow" are also ambiguous when it comes to the possible supernatural elements of "The King in Yellow". This is especially true for the last two stories, "In the Court of the Dragon" and "The Yellow Sign". Although there is ambiguity in these stories as well, the supernatural is also more strongly present: Unlike "The Repairer of Reputations", which does not feature any definitely supernatural elements, "In the Court of the Dragon" and "The Yellow Sign" both feature entities and events which one is tempted to call supernatural: In "In the Court of the Dragon" the protagonist is hunted by a mysterious man, and eventually the protagonist is teleported into a

hellish landscape and encounters the King in Yellow himself, and Mr. Scott, the protagonist of “The Yellow Sign” is killed by a church watchman who “must have been dead for months” (80). “The King in Yellow” is also featured in both of these stories, adding to the confusion about the supernatural.

Despite the seemingly strong supernatural element present in “In the Court of the Dragon”, there is still a level of uncertainty present as well. The protagonist of “In the Court of the Dragon” is seeking solace in a church following a period of mental stress caused by “The King in Yellow”: “I was worn out by three nights of physical suffering and mental trouble: the last had been the worst, and it was an exhausted body, and a mind benumbed and yet acutely sensitive, which I had brought to my favourite church for healing. For I had been reading The King in Yellow” (53). Similarly to Castaigne, the protagonist of the story is greatly distressed by this act of reading. The protagonist’s fears soon take a rather concrete form, as he is terrified by the music played at the church and the organist who plays it, causing the protagonist to leave the service early. Once again it is not certain whether there is anything actually supernatural in the narrative and “The King in Yellow”: the organist that the protagonist is terrified of could be just a normal man, and the protagonist’s feeling that he is being chased by this man could be an instance of paranoia. The hellish landscape and the appearance of the King in Yellow at the end of the narrative could also be a delusion brought on by a mental breakdown or a similar psychological reason. While “The King in Yellow” seems to be the trigger for the protagonist’s mental stress and the following visions, it is once again possible that the real reason for the event is an already underlying mental issue and the influence of “The King in Yellow”, while significant, is not supernatural. The possibility that the protagonist suffers from a mental issue is supported by the fact that the rest of the people at the church seem to be unaffected by the seemingly terrifying music: “I glanced at the people near me: not one appeared to be in the least disturbed” (53). The possibility of an

illness also creates a connection with Castaigne and “The Repairer of Reputations”; by mentioning the protagonist’s “exhausted body” and creating a sense of a possible mental illness, Chambers is once again connecting “The King in Yellow” with the idea of disease. While the disease of “The King in Yellow” in Castaigne’s account is that of a highly contagious infection, the disease present in “The Court of the Dragon” is a more private grievance; since the protagonist is the only one to notice that something is amiss, he is forced to suffer the horrors of the infamous play alone. His loneliness amidst such horrors also undermines the possibility of the supernatural; since he is the only one who experiences the horrible sounds and visions, it is possible to assume that they are not real. Because of this, the protagonist of “In the Court of the Dragon” becomes an unreliable narrator, causing the credibility of everything that happens in the narrative to come under question. Since the protagonist’s account is the only one present in the narrative, there is no outside confirmation for his experiences. While “In the Court of the Dragon” features more obvious supernatural elements than “The Repairer of Reputations”, the presence of supernatural elements in the narrative and “The King in Yellow” are still left ambiguous.

While “The Repairer of Reputations” and “In the Court of the Dragon” are somewhat ambiguous with their representations of supernatural elements, “The Yellow Sign” contains the clearest example of a supernatural entity out of all of the narratives that features “The King in Yellow”: the mysterious watchman. The watchman is referred to multiple times during the narrative, and at the climax of the story he attacks the protagonist, a painter named Mr. Scott and his model Tessie. Tessie seemingly dies of shock, while the watchman assaults Scott and fatally wounds him before mysteriously dying himself. The supernatural nature of the watchman is revealed when his corpse is examined by a doctor and the dying Scott hears the doctor’s shock after completing his examination: “I have no theory, no explanation. That man must have been dead for months!” (80). This statement marks the first instance within the short story collection

when a supernatural element occurs that cannot be explained as potential delusion of the protagonist: the supernatural occurrence is confirmed by an outsider who is also a medical professional and not by Scott himself. This makes the supernatural element of "The Yellow Sign" significantly different from the previous occurrences of the supernatural in the other stories of the collection: this is the first narrative where the supernatural events are witnessed by other characters than the protagonist, and there is also scientific credibility in the observation since the observer is a doctor. While the rest of the narratives ambiguous about the possibility of the supernatural, "The Yellow Sign" explicitly states that the events of the narrative feature a supernatural occurrence.

The role of "The King in Yellow" in "The Yellow Sign" marks the pinnacle of the supernatural evolution of these narratives, as it is the one where the supernatural elements become undeniable reality. This manifestation of the supernatural manifests itself through multiple differences which separate "The Yellow Sign" from the rest of the narratives. The first major difference is the fact that the character who reads "The King in Yellow" is not the protagonist; Scott states that "I had long ago decided that I should never open that book, and nothing on earth could have persuaded me to buy it. Fearful lest curiosity might tempt me to open it, I had never even looked at it in bookstores" (77). While Scott alludes to the temptation of the book, he at the same time manages to resist it. The one to actually read the book is Tessie. The effect that the book has on her is immediate and strong: Scott discovers her in an almost catatonic state after she has read the second act. While Scott never reads the book directly, he is also exposed to it through an interaction with Tessie: "We had been speaking for some time in a dull monotonous strain before I realized we were discussing the King in Yellow. ... Oh the wickedness, the hopeless damnation of a soul who could fascinate and paralyze human creatures with such words,-words understood by the ignorant and wise alike, words which are more precious than

jewels, more soothing than music, more awful than death!" (78). Even though Scott never reads the book himself, his discussion with Tessie is enough to create a sense of horror in him and brings out such a strong description of the book's wickedness, not unlike the description of Castaigne discussed earlier. Once again, vocabulary connecting "The King in Yellow" with a disease is present; this time Chambers compares the infamous play's effect to that of a paralysis, robbing its reader of agency and distancing them from the possibility of mastery of the universe. As a paralyzing element, "The King in Yellow" becomes something unthinkable for the Enlightenment; a book that physically stops the reader from accumulating more knowledge. This level of conveyed horror also creates a sense of the supernatural about "The King in Yellow", as the book's influence is shown to be strong enough that it can affect people who just discuss it without actually reading it. As Castaigne described, the spreading of the book's influence is like a disease, spreading from the originally infected to others through interaction, even when the book itself is not read during these interactions.

The second difference to the way "The King in Yellow" is portrayed in "The Yellow Sign" is its central involvement to the narrative's plot. As has been discussed previously, "The King in Yellow" has a somewhat limited role in "The Repairer of Reputations" and "In the Court of the Dragon". The book and its influence looms in the background, but its only direct impact on these narratives is the role as a potential source of the madness of the protagonists. The book is more central to the plot of "The Yellow Sign", as it provides crucial information to Scott and Tessie. Earlier in the story Tessie gives Scott a "clasp of black onyx" as a gift, and after Tessie reads "The King in Yellow" the pair realizes that the clasp portrays the Yellow Sign, an infamous mark associated with the King in Yellow. At the climax of the narrative Scott realizes that the Yellow sign is drawing the watchman to them, marking them for death. This power that the Yellow Sign possess also further confirms the supernatural element that "The King in Yellow" possesses in the

narrative; a sign described in the book exists outside the book and it is connected to the supernatural entity of the watchman. While this does not necessarily prove that the book itself possesses supernatural power, it does connect it to the supernatural in a fashion that does not occur in the other narratives. "The Yellow Sign" marks the end of an evolution regarding "The King in Yellow" and the supernatural; from a book with a sinister reputation that may or may not have supernatural elements to it in "The Repairer of Reputations" to a book with a seemingly unquestionable connection to a supernatural occurrence in "The Yellow Sign". Through this evolution, the texts of Chambers highlight the nature of myth and The Enlightenment; while the Enlightenment's ideals state that myths are a declining element of culture, Chambers' narratives create an opposite progression. They start with ambiguous elements that may or may not be supernatural in nature and then progress to highly mythical elements (a walking corpse) present in "The Yellow Sign". Through these choices Chambers' texts criticize the Enlightenment's perception about myths; they are not going to vanish, and even the modern, post-Enlightenment world generates its own myths. For Chambers, myths are a part of humanity and they will not be eliminated by the progress of science and reason.

While "The King in Yellow" has different levels of supernatural elements in the narratives of Chambers, the role of the supernatural is more consistent in the works of Lovecraft. While Lovecraft's "The Necronomicon" contains information about supernatural events and entities, the book itself is not treated as a supernatural object. While "The King in Yellow" is highlighted as a book that induces madness in its readers, "The Necronomicon" does not have the same distinction. Instead, the typical pattern of Lovecraft's narratives is that the reading of "The Necronomicon" and other occult books sets the protagonist on a path of terrible discovery that eventually drives them insane or greatly shocks them. While "The Necronomicon" is usually at the start of such a path of discovery, it is not the actual cause of the mental shock that the

protagonists receive. This is usually caused by the fact that although “The Necronomicon” contains knowledge that heavily disturbs its readers, the knowledge contained in the book is limited and the final shocking discoveries have to be attained from somewhere else. A good example of this can be found in *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931): “I found myself faced by names and terms that I had heard elsewhere in the most hideous of connexions - Yuggoth, Great Cthulhu, ... and was drawn back through nameless eons and inconceivable dimensions to worlds of elder, outer entity at which the crazed author of the *Necronomicon* had only guessed in the vaguest ways” (p.731). Although it contains knowledge that is considered dangerous and frightening, “The Necronomicon” is still a book created by a human, “The Mad Arab Abdul Alhazred”.⁷ This means that it is flawed and that it does not contain all the knowledge about “The Great Old Ones” or other entities of Lovecraft’s Mythos. For the protagonists of Lovecraft, “The Necronomicon” is the first source of forbidden knowledge on the supernatural, but a more thorough understanding of Lovecraft’s cosmos requires more than the infamous tome. While “The King in Yellow” becomes more supernatural as the stories of *The King in Yellow* progress, “The Necronomicon” is more consistent in its portrayals: it is portrayed as a non-supernatural object, which contains enough hints of the supernatural to allow Lovecraft’s characters to continue their studies of the occult and the supernatural. “The Necronomicon” also has its limitations, and through these limitations Lovecraft also strengthens his own criticism of the Enlightenment; the tome of “The Mad Arab” contains more knowledge about the supernatural universe of Lovecraft than any other text created by humans, but even it is deeply flawed. This seems to suggest that the limits of humanity make the Enlightenment’s quest for mastery and impossibility. “The Necronomicon” is written by a human being whose perception about reality is limited. This means that the tome is, and always

⁷ The fact that Lovecraft consistently refers to the madness of Abdul Alhazred creates a connection between disease and “The Necronomicon” like the one Chambers creates with “The King in Yellow”.

will be, limited as well. At the same time, the tome is able to reveal something about the universe, limited insights into the terror of the cosmos. "The Necronomicon" is a fictional, artificial creation which contains the Promethean light of knowledge, and reading it steers Lovecraft's protagonists on a path to terrifying revelations. Without such an instrument of forbidden knowledge, the protagonists of Lovecraft would never be able to start their quest to uncover the secrets of the universe. By comparison, Lovecraft makes the Enlightenment's vision of knowledge in the real world seem less optimistic; since we lack "The Necronomicon" and other such tools that would help in the quest to overcome the limits of humanity, the Enlightenment's goal of the true mastery of the universe will not be achieved. At the same time it is important to remember the limitations of "The Necronomicon" as well. Since it is a tome created by a human, it also suffers from human limitations. But even with all of these limitations, the small glances provided by "The Necronomicon" are enough to nudge the protagonists of Lovecraft towards terrifying revelations.

Conclusions about Temptation and the Supernatural in "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon"

As the previous sections demonstrate, the notions of temptation and the supernatural are crucial elements used by Chambers and Lovecraft to establish the mythical nature of "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon". The strongly tempting nature of the two infamous books is unquestionable, as a wide range of characters from Castaigne in "The Repairer of Reputations" to Gilman in "The Dreams in the Witch House" give into these temptations. The temptation surrounding the "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon" establishes a sense of uneasiness about the books; the repeating failures to resist them make seem more dangerous, adding to the air of mystery that surrounds them. The lure of the books is compared to an infectious disease that spreads despite the best effort to contain it. Even academics such as Gilman are not immune

to the danger, causing the books to appear as challenges to the world of academics, and by extension, the Enlightenment.

The second major feature used to create a mythology for “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon” is the possible supernatural elements associated with the books. While some stories, such as “The Repairer of Reputations” can also be interpreted from a non-supernatural point of view, others such as “The Yellow Sign” highlight the supernatural elements and make them hard to dismiss. The varying interpretations in turn strengthen the mythology of the books; the fact that there seems to be conflicting evidence about the supernatural elements of the books creates a sense of mystery which contributes to the air of danger about the books. The fact that there is such a strong element of the unknown within the books makes them more impactful, both to the characters within these narratives and the real-world readers. This real world impact has been discussed by John Engle, who in his essay “Cults of Lovecraft: The Impact of H.P. Lovecraft’s Fiction on Contemporary Occult Practices” points out that some real-world occultists believe that “The Necronomicon” is an actual text and not just a creation of Lovecraft (90). These real world believers of “The Necronomicon” showcase the success of Lovecraft in the creation of the book’s mythos; the mystery and fascination created for the book is enough to make it more impactful than just a fictional text of horror. Through this inspiration of real life occultists, Lovecraft has posthumously proved his criticism of the Enlightenment to be pertinent; his works have created modern myths around them in a post-Enlightenment world that should reject myths. The Enlightenment’s fascination with myths has not diminished over the years, and Lovecraft’s mythos is just a single addition to the ever growing list of modernity’s myths.

3. God-Kings and Layers of Fear: The Dangerous Act of Reading in Chambers and

Lovecraft

Knowledge is a deadly friend
If no one sets the rules
The fate of all mankind, I see
Is in the hands of fools
-King Crimson, "Epitaph"

"The Necronomicon" and "The King in Yellow" possess a sinister mythos that both terrifies and intrigues the characters around them. Given the importance of these infamous books, it is no surprise that the act of reading holds special significance for Lovecraft and Chambers. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the acts of reading "The Necronomicon" and "The King in Yellow", and what kind of role reading has in the works of Lovecraft and Chambers. In the challenge against Enlightenment, reading becomes a central element because of reading's connection with the Enlightenment. For the Enlightenment, the act of reading is a crucial part of the movement's previously discussed task of establishing humans as "masters". The disenchantment of the world depends on the spreading of knowledge through the act of reading, creating a bond between reading and the Enlightenment. By using "The Necronomicon" and "The King in Yellow", Lovecraft and Chambers integrate reading, one of the most crucial actions of the Enlightenment, into their own challenge. Using their forbidden texts, they turn the act of reading from an illuminating experience into a dark one, emphasizing their theme of flight from light. Through the act of reading, the dark mythos of these books is realized. For Lovecraft and Chambers, this idea of transformation is at the heart of reading "The Necronomicon" and "The King in Yellow"; completing the act of reading these texts irreversibly changes the world for their protagonists,

changing their perception of self in the process as well. With this approach, Lovecraft and Chambers are relatively close to the Enlightenment's ideal of reading: For the Enlightenment, reading holds special significance. For example, Robert Darnton highlights the role of books and reading for the Enlightenment in *The Business of Enlightenment*;

How did great intellectual movements like the Enlightenment spread through society? How far did they reach, how deeply did they penetrate? What form did the thought of the philosophes acquire when it materialized into books, and what does this process reveal about the transmission of ideas? ... The questions could be multiplied endlessly because books touched on such a vast range of human activity – everything from picking rags to transmitting the word of God. They were products of artisanal labor, objects of economic exchange, vehicles of ideas, and elements in political and religious conflict. (1)

For Darnton, the “supreme work of the Enlightenment” is Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (p.4), as it embodies the Enlightenment's ideals:

The great ordering agent was reason, which combined sense data, working with the sister faculties of memory and imagination. Thus everything man knew derived from the world around him and the operations of his own mind. The *Encyclopédie* made the point graphically, with an engraving of a tree of knowledge ... Philosophy formed the trunk of the tree, while theology occupied a remote branch, next to black magic. Diderot and d'Alembert had dethroned the ancient queen of the sciences. They had rearranged the cognitive universe and reoriented man within it, while elbowing God outside. (7)

As Darnton's examples show, books and reading are a crucial part of the narrative of Enlightenment. Reading is an act of great transformative power which can alter the way readers perceive reality. However, while the Enlightenment's ideals about this transformative power are fairly optimistic, Lovecraft and Chambers adopt a more pessimistic approach; reading can also cause unwanted and disturbing changes in the reader's reality, making reading a dangerous action. The act of reading in Lovecraft and Chambers will be examined through two examples; Castaigne's reading of the “King in Yellow” mentioned earlier, and the act of reading “The

Necronomicon” present in “The Dunwich Horror”. These two acts of reading are used to create imperfect acts of reading, which are then used by Chambers and Lovecraft in their challenge of the Enlightenment.

Terrible in its Simplicity, Irresistible in its Truth: Reading “The King in Yellow”

As we have seen, Castaigne’s reading of “The King in Yellow” in “The Repairer of Reputations” highlights the play’s highly tempting nature, and this temptation is then made a part of the challenge against the ideals of the Enlightenment. Building on this previous analysis, let us now inspect the actual act of reading and the language surrounding it more thoroughly: “During my convalescence I had bought and read for the first time “The King in Yellow.” I remember after finishing the first act that it occurred to me that I had better stop” (3). From the very beginning of Castaigne’s description, the act of reading is framed as an anxiety inducing action. Castaigne’s initial reluctance to finish reading the book after the first act is already creating a strong conflict between the idealized reading of the Enlightenment and the reading in the universes of Chambers and Lovecraft; Castaigne’s reluctance to read (or to accumulate knowledge) means that he falls short of the ideal protagonist of the Enlightenment. After finishing the first act, Castaigne allows himself to be intimidated by the reputation of “The King in Yellow”. In this moment of superstition and worry, Castaigne fails to live up to the standard of the Enlightenment described by Horkheimer and Adorno: “Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their “in-itself” becomes “for him” (6). By allowing the mythology of “The King in Yellow” to intimidate him, Castaigne allows the book (a thing) to manipulate him and not the other way around. Castaigne’s doubts threaten to rob him of his status as a master that the Enlightenment aims to bestow upon him. Castaigne’s anxiety and

fears about “The King in Yellow” make his initial act of reading distinctly “non-Enlightenment” in nature. This “non-Enlightenment” sentiment of wishing to remain in the dark peaks when Castaigne throws the book into his fireplace, trying to stop the Promethean fire of knowledge with literal fire.

Castaigne’s resistance to “The King in Yellow” is short-lived, and he eventually gives in to temptation and reads the book from cover to cover. From the point of view of the idealized Enlightenment, Castaigne has regained his agency and role as a human; he no longer allows mythology to stand in the way of his ascension to the status of a master. He has welcomed the Promethean light of knowledge, and the reputation of “The King in Yellow” has not managed to stop Castaigne. For the narrative of the Enlightenment, the fact that Castaigne gave into temptation and read the book is a triumph. Chambers’ narrative, however, offers a much darker approach to the act of reading: “... I snatched the thing from the hearth and crept shaking to my bedroom, where I read it and reread it, and wept and laughed and trembled with a horror which at times assails me yet” (4). Instead of an illuminating experience, Chambers portrays reading as an anxiety inducing action that deeply disturbs Castaigne. By making reading such a negative action, Chambers challenges the optimism of Enlightenment. The free circulation of ideas, of which reading is a crucial part, is a major element in the narrative of Enlightenment. Many authors have highlighted its importance, such as Roger Shattuck, who calls it a part of the “optimistic wager accepted by the West” (Shattuck, 6). By portraying reading in a negative light, Chambers points out that such an optimism might be uncalled for. In the pursuit of knowledge, Castaigne’s dark fate is a possibility that Enlightenment seems to ignore. This possibility of a disturbing realization and of things that should not be known are omitted from the optimistic narrative of the Enlightenment.

The act of reading in *The King in Yellow* also contains another layer through Chambers' use of sections from the fictional book that are present through the narratives, giving the reader glimpses of the infamous play. The longest one of these sections, titled "Cassilda's Song", acts as a prologue to the whole short story collection, appearing before Chambers provides any descriptions or context for "The King in Yellow" have been given:

Along the shore the cloud waves break,
The twin suns sink beneath the lake,
The shadows lengthen,
In Carcosa.

Strange is the night where black stars rise,
And strange moons circle through the skies
But stronger still is
Lost Carcosa.

Songs that the Hyades shall sing,
Where flap the tatters of the King.
Must die unheard in
Dim Carcosa.

Song of my soul, my voice is dead;
Die thou, unsung, as tears unshed
Shall dry and die in
Lost Carcosa.

Cassilda's Song in "The King in Yellow," Act i, Scene 2 (IV)

Through Cassilda's Song and the other sections from "The King in Yellow", Chambers introduces a new level of reading to the narrative: these short glimpses invite the reader to construct "The King in Yellow" as it appears for Castaigne and the other protagonists. However, the reader's attempts to create "The King in Yellow" are doomed to fail, as the brief quotations from "The King in Yellow" are too few and fragmented to form a coherent narrative. Cassilda's Song is a good example of this, as the brief poem describing a location called Carcosa raises more questions than it answers, especially since it appears as the very first section in the real-life version of *The King in*

Yellow. The names mentioned in the poem hold no relevance to the reader, and the fantastical world (a world of twin suns, black stars etc.) described remains a mystery to the reader.

The mystery created by the brief, fragmented sections from "The King in Yellow" emphasize Chambers' challenge to the ideals of the Enlightenment. By only providing these cryptic sections from the book Chambers creates an act of reading that hinders the reader's attempts to comprehend "The King in Yellow". Similarly to Castaigne's, the reader's act of reading *The King in Yellow* is not an experience of receiving the Promethean light of knowledge. Instead, the reader attempts to form a coherent entity from small fragments that are destined to fail in satisfying their curiosity; Chambers intentionally leaves most of the contents of "The King in Yellow" in the dark, giving the fictional book the power to resist attempts to understand it. While simultaneously building into the mythology surrounding "The King in Yellow" discussed in the previous chapter, Chambers' choice of limited quotations also brings his challenge of the Enlightenment and its optimism more directly to the reader; by creating "The King in Yellow", a fictional book that cannot be read, Chambers gives the reader a specific example of the limits of human understanding in the form of an impossible act of reading. Trying to understand "The King in Yellow" is an artificial, impossible task. At the same time, this impossible task brings to light a possibility that the Enlightenment seems to be willing to ignore; sometimes the pursuit of knowledge is destined to face impossible challenges, and the idea of limitless potential of human knowledge is as artificial as "The King in Yellow". While the Enlightenment might aim for a perfect understanding of the universe, Chambers points out that is most likely impossible; even with the Promethean light we can only see so much. The Enlightenment's narrative of progress is based on ideals that can never be fully realized because of humanity's limitations. By forcing the reader to go through this failure of understanding, Chambers' challenge to the Enlightenment is realized beyond his fictional characters.

While the failure to read "The King in Yellow" forms a crucial part of Chambers' challenge of the Enlightenment, this failure also has a positive dimension to it. Unlike Castaigne and the other protagonists of Chambers, the reader is spared from the highly disturbing content of "The King in Yellow". The small fragments from Cassilda's Song and the other sections allow the reader to recognize some elements discussed by the characters, while simultaneously leaving distance between the reader's experiences and the disturbed accounts of characters like Castaigne who read "The King in Yellow": "This is the thing that troubles me, for I cannot forget Carcosa, where black stars hang in the heavens, where the shadows of men's thoughts lengthen in the afternoon, when the twin suns sink into the Lake of Hali, and my mind will bear forever the memory of the Pallid Mask" (4). While some of the elements that Castaigne mentions are also familiar to the reader, the failed act of reading means that the reader cannot fully comprehend Castaigne's distress. By this contrast, Chambers seems to be emphasizing the importance of leaving forbidden knowledge untouched: by probing into the realm of things that should not be known, Castaigne (like Adam and Eve, Faust, and many others) receives punishment for his transgression. The reader, however, avoids this transgression through the actions of Chambers as an author; the readers are spared the horrors that Castaigne faces.

By his omissions, Chambers becomes like the King described by Jacques Derrida in "Plato's Pharmacy", determining the value of the written word: "The value of writing ... has of course been spelled out to the King, but it is the King who will give it value, who will set the price of what, in the act of receiving, he constitutes or institutes. ... The value of writing will not be itself, writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it" (76). Although Derrida is using the example of the King to discuss the relationship between spoken and written word, the metaphor of a king with the power to assign value to text is also useful in relation to Chambers. By assigning value to only certain sections of the imagined, complete "The King in

Yellow”, Chambers determines how the act of reading will be significantly different for his readers than it is for Castaigne; by omitting all of the “dangerous” parts of the later acts of “The King in Yellow”, Chambers forces his readers to perform a “flight from light” that he does not allow for Castaigne. In his role as a King, Chambers decides who is allowed to stay in blissful ignorance and who must face the “deadly light” of knowledge. In his role as the King, Chambers values the boundaries of forbidden knowledge that the Enlightenment seeks to remove; Chambers suggests that some forms of knowledge will bring ruin to those who receive it, and the optimistic relationship that the Enlightenment has with knowledge seems to ignore such possibilities. Paradoxically, by assuming this role of the censor Chambers becomes like the protagonists of the Enlightenment; by trying to block out the forbidden myth, he ends up highlighting it. Because “The King in Yellow” forms an impossible act of reading, it becomes mysterious and intriguing. Just like the Enlightenment, Chambers has drawn attention to the myth he is trying to diminish. While he allows a flight from light to the “placid island” of ignorance, he simultaneously causes his readers to be drawn to the black seas he tries to protect them from.

Key to Blasphemous Outer Spheres: Reading “The Necronomicon”

Just like Chambers, Lovecraft also places a special significance on the act of reading “The Necronomicon”. While the tome is just briefly referred to in most of Lovecraft’s narratives, the act of reading it always holds terrifying importance. The most relevant example of reading “The Necronomicon” can be found in Lovecraft’s 1929 short story “The Dunwich Horror”, as it contains a lengthy quotation from “The Necronomicon”. Similarly to Chambers with “The King in Yellow”, Lovecraft also incorporates very few lines directly from “The Necronomicon” into his stories. This makes the quotation present in “The Dunwich Horror” an especially significant paragraph:

“Nor is it to be thought,” ran the text as Armitage mentally translated it, “that man is either the oldest or the last of earth’s masters, or that the common bulk of life

and substance walks alone. The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but *between* them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen. *Yog-Sothoth* knows the gate. *Yog-Sothoth* is the gate. *Yog-Sothoth* is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in *Yog-Sothoth*. He knows where the Old Ones broke through of old, and where They shall break through again. He knows where They have trod earth's fields, and where They still tread them, and why no one can behold Them as They tread. By Their smell can men sometimes know Them near, but of Their semblance can no man know, *saving only in the features of those They have begotten on mankind*; and of those are there many sorts, differing in likeness from man's truest eidolon to that shape without sight or substance which is *Them*. They walk unseen and foul in lonely places where the Words have been spoken and the Rites howled through at their Seasons. The wind gibbers with Their voices, and the earth mutters with Their consciousness. They bend the forest and crush the city, yet may not forest or city behold the hand that smites. Kadath in the cold waste hath known Them, and what man knows Kadath? The ice desert of the South and the sunken isles of Ocean hold stones whereon Their seal is engraven, but who hath seen the deep frozen city or the sealed tower long garlanded with seaweed and barnacles? Great Cthulhu is Their cousin, yet can he spy Them only dimly⁸. *Iä! Shub-Niggurath!* As a foulness shall ye know Them. Their hand is at your throats, yet ye see Them not; and Their habitation is even one with your guarded threshold. *Yog-Sothoth* is the key to the gate, whereby the spheres meet. Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They reign again". (687) [Italics in the original]

As was the case with "The King in Yellow", the reader is faced with a highly confusing act of reading with "The Necronomicon". While the lengthy quotation present in "The Dunwich Horror" forms a more coherent entity than "Cassilda's Song" and the sections from "The King in Yellow", "The Necronomicon" still remains a mysterious text to the reader. In order to achieve this air of mystery, Lovecraft utilizes similar methods to Chambers; The quotation from "The Necronomicon" makes references to phenomena beyond the reader's understanding, such as the fact that The Old Ones exist "not in the spaces we know, but *between* them...". The confusion is only intensified by the seemingly nonsensical exclamation "*Iä! Shub-Niggurath!*" and the repetition of the term

⁸ In the King James Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:12 contains a similar verse: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known". Similarly to humans trying to observe God, Cthulhu observes the Old Ones through a filter, unable to fully grasp their true form.

Kadath. Like Chambers, Lovecraft also assumes the role of the merciful King who protects his readers by omitting (or to use Derrida's terms, not approving) significant portions of "The Necronomicon". The cryptic nature of the text, combined with the fact that Lovecraft included only a handful of other direct quotations from "The Necronomicon" into his works, yield same result that Chambers did with "The King in Yellow"; an act of reading that is destined to fall short of the illuminating reading valued by the Enlightenment. Instead of forcefully pulling his readers into "the deadly light", Lovecraft is kind enough to allow them to remain on the "placid island of ignorance".

While there are significant similarities between the acts of reading "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon", Lovecraft highlights elements associated with reading not explored in Chambers. One of these is the narrative of "The Necronomicon" itself: while the origins of "The King in Yellow" are only mentioned in passing, Lovecraft creates a fictional history for his tome. In the short text "History of The Necronomicon", Lovecraft chronicles the transformation of "Al Azif" ("The Necronomicon's" original, Arabic title) into the infamous "Necronomicon" encountered by his protagonist in the early 20th century:

Al Azif written circa 730 A.D. at Damascus by Abdul Alhazred
Tr. to Greek 950 A.D. as *Necronomicon* by Theodorus Philetas
Burnt by Patriarch Michael 1050 (i.e., Greek text). Arabic text now lost.
Olaus translates Gr. to Latin 1228
1232 Latin ed. (and Gr.) suppr. by Pope Gregory IX
14... Black-letter printed edition (Germany)
15... Gr. text printed in Italy
16... Spanish reprint of Latin text. (673)

This account of the turbulent history of "The Necronomicon" highlights two significant aspects of the infamous tome. Firstly, it showcases that controversy has always surrounded the book and it has been considered "forbidden knowledge" since 1050. This long history of controversy ties "The

Necronomicon” to the Gothic tradition, as the historical element of horror is a crucial part of Gothic narratives: “The pleasures of horror and terror came from the reappearance of figures long gone (Bottig, 2). “The Necronomicon” certainly has the ability and influence to reappear, as the attempts to stop its spread have failed. This influence also expands into rewriting real-life history, as Lovecraft includes Chambers’ *The King in Yellow* into his own mythos regarding “The Necronomicon”: “It was from rumours of this book (of which relatively few of the general public know) that R.W. Chambers is said to have derived the idea of his early novel *The King in Yellow*” (673). By creating a connection between “The Necronomicon” and Chambers’ real-life book, Lovecraft blurs the line between fact and fiction. This blurring of the line underlines the ease of creating myths, an action that The Enlightenment tries to combat, while simultaneously creating myths itself. One could even argue that because of the Enlightenment’s attempt to establish humans (such as Lovecraft) as master, Lovecraft now has the power as a “master” to create this blurring of the line that highlights the Enlightenment’s folly. By empowering people with free thought and pursuit of knowledge, the Enlightenment simultaneously creates its own critics, who in turn rewrite the narrative and the myths of the Enlightenment.

The second crucial element when discussing the act of reading “The Necronomicon” is the idea of layers and translations. As Lovecraft’s account details, “The Necronomicon” has undergone multiple translations, first from Arabic to Greek, and then from Greek to Latin. The act of reading that takes place in “The Dunwich Horror” adds yet another level of translation through the character of Armitage, who translates the Latin text into English in his mind as he reads along. Through these translations, “The Necronomicon” has been the subject of multiple changes, as the act of translating is simultaneously an act of rewriting: “Far from being a straightforward process of linguistic transfer, translation involves complex negotiation between languages. ... the translator has to engage in both interpretation of the source and reformulation in another

language. As will be discussed later, translation has been redefined in recent years as a form of rewriting...(Basnett, 2-3). Through these multiple acts of rewriting, the essence of “The Necronomicon”⁹ has been altered, with each new language further distancing the book from the original “Al Azif”. Each new translation is akin to a new circle in the Labyrinth of Daedalus; further distancing the reader from the “monster” lurking in the center. But instead of the Minotaur, the monster of this labyrinth is the original, unaltered “Al Azif”. This monster, however, is already dead; the original Arabic text has been lost to time, and whatever horrors this untranslated version contained are lost with it. Through the disappearance of the original text, Lovecraft suggests that some knowledge will remain always remain hidden; even though the echoes of “Al Azif” are present in its translation, the original can never be reached.

Through the omission of “Al Azif” Lovecraft highlights another aspect of knowledge that the Enlightenment seems to ignore; the impossibility of achieving a full understanding of reality. Lovecraft’s narratives consistently highlight the limits of human understanding, as we are trying to reach a truth we cannot hope to comprehend. We are, as Derrida puts it, looking at the supplements of supplements;

The concept of the supplement and the theory of writing designate textuality itself in Rousseau's text in an indefinitely multiplied structure-en abyme [in an abyss]-to employ the current phrase. And we shall see that this abyss is not a happy or unhappy accident. An entire theory of the structural necessity of the abyss will be gradually constituted in our reading; the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already infiltrated presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self. Representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation, etc. The supplement itself is quite exorbitant, in every sense of the word. (*Of Grammatology*, 163)

⁹ As it was mentioned earlier, even the name “Necronomicon”, the very synonym of forbidden knowledge in Lovecraft’s universe, is a translation.

The abyss, or indefinite multiplication, forms an endless cycle trying to find the mystical “original”, to comprehend the universe. This quest is like trying to uncover the original “Al Azif”; all that remains are the translations of translations, while the mystical original is lost. And even if “Al Azif” could somehow be salvaged, the cycle would not stop; since “Al Azif” chronicles the Old Ones, creatures beyond humanity’s comprehension, it would still be impossible to obtain a true understanding of the universe. Through this impossibility Lovecraft brings another angle to the concept of forbidden knowledge; some “forbidden” knowledge will never be reached. This is not necessarily because such knowledge should not be reached, but because a full comprehension of the universe is akin to chasing shadows; an impossible task. The Promethean light, even at its most terrifying intensity, cannot illuminate everything.

The Nature of Limits: Conclusions about Reading “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”

Through the acts of reading, both Chambers and Lovecraft highlight the significance of books for the Enlightenment’s quest. Ideally, books are the missionaries of the Enlightenment; spreading a Promethean light on humanity. This idealized notion is challenged by Chambers and Lovecraft, who assume the role of Derrida’s King to provide filters in order to protect their readers from the desolation of their respective texts. In doing so they provide a criticism of the idea of unrestricted knowledge; such an idea is seen as too optimistic, and knowledge without restrictions is a source of doom and terror for Chambers and Lovecraft. At the same time, Chambers and Lovecraft provide their readers instances of the failures of reading. While these failures are artificially created through the deliberate omissions made by these authors, these examples highlight the limitations of human ability to accumulate knowledge. While the Enlightenment has an optimistic ideal about human abilities, the pursuit of knowledge can also be like trying to read a book that does not fully exist, destined to fail despite the reader’s best efforts.

4. The Terrible Promethean Light Or A Placid Island of Ignorance : Conclusions about Chambers, Lovecraft and the Nature of Knowledge

You reached for the secret too soon, you cried for the moon
Shine on you crazy diamond
Threatened by shadows at night, and exposed in the light
Shine on you crazy diamond
Well you wore out your welcome with random precision
Rode on the steel breeze
Come on you raver, you seer of visions
Come on you painter, you piper, you prisoner, and shine

-Pink Floyd, "Shine On You Crazy Diamond"

As we have seen in the previous chapters, both Chambers and Lovecraft utilize their fictional books to challenge the optimistic narrative of the Enlightenment. Instead of optimism, the pursuit of knowledge is a distinctly pessimistic endeavor in Chambers and Lovecraft, and this pessimism is embedded in these two books; "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon" are crucial elements in their respective universes, standing as the symbols of forbidden knowledge and the dangers of limitless pursuit of knowledge. They are impactful, they are terrifying, and they are mysterious. They speak of entities beyond humanity's perception and remind us of our insignificance in the cosmos. While the Enlightenment wishes to establish humans as masters of the universe, "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon" are there to remind humanity of the folly of such ambitions. In the universes inhabited by beings such as Hastur, Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth, humanity can never hope to achieve true mastery. This pessimistic observation about humanity's insignificance is at the core of Chambers and Lovecraft, always looming in the background. While this pessimism is prevalent in their works, is that all there is? Chambers and Lovecraft criticize the

Enlightenment's optimistic attitude about pursuing knowledge through "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon", but is the stopping of such pursuits a preferable alternative to them? This is the final question to be asked about the works of Chambers and Lovecraft; how should one respond to the flaws of the Enlightenment that they have pointed out? Should one fear or embrace knowledge, or is there a third option? What should one make of the role given to "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon" by Chambers and Lovecraft?

As it has already been established, Chambers and Lovecraft use "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon" to create highly pessimistic narratives about knowledge. Any warnings about the dangers of these books fall on deaf ears, and the lure of forbidden knowledge almost always triumphs over caution.¹⁰ The protagonists who use these books are ambitious and proud in their pursuit of knowledge, and just like Icarus, they fly too close to the Sun (the deadly light), causing them to crash and burn. This occurs with such consistency that patterns start to become visible. For example, Dziemianowicz points out a combination of two traits within these narratives: protagonists underestimating the forces that they are dealing with, and the isolation of the protagonists (165). One can detect similarities between these protagonists of cosmic (or Lovecraftian¹¹) horror and the protagonists of the Enlightenment: exceptional individuals who value knowledge to a great extent. At the same time, they also observe the world around them in a somewhat deluded manner; Lovecraftian protagonists underestimate the dangers of their world, while the protagonists of the Enlightenment see their own achievements in places where they actually do not exist. The most significant difference between these two sets of protagonists is the relationship to knowledge; the protagonist of Enlightenment maintains an optimistic relationship with knowledge, while a Lovecraftian protagonist eventually grows to curse the knowledge he

¹⁰ Some exceptions to this rule are Castaigne's cousin in "The Repairer of Reputations" and Scott in "The Yellow Sign"

¹¹ Please note that these two terms can often be used interchangeably. For the purposes of this chapter, the term Lovecraftian means cosmic horror in general and not just the works of Lovecraft himself.

finds and its maddening effect: “From that day on my life has been a nightmare of brooding and apprehension, nor do I know how much is hideous truth and how much madness” (*The Shadow over Innsmouth*, 921).

For Lovecraftian protagonists, this connection between knowledge and insanity is an inseparable duality; the pursuit of knowledge is either an obsession that escalates into insanity,¹² or the revelation at the end of this pursuit is the source of madness. Even those protagonists who seemingly escape with their mental health intact are forever haunted by the horrors they discovered: “I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me” (“Call of Cthulhu”, 407). Possessing or pursuing knowledge in the universes of Chambers and Lovecraft is synonymous with tempting fate; characters like Castaigne’s cousin, who are willing to remain in the dark, are a rarity. To continue with the metaphor of Icarus used earlier, the sensible voice of Daedalus is almost exclusively absent in Chambers and Lovecraft while the Icarian protagonists are destined to soar too high. For these protagonists, possessing knowledge is like an addiction: the sensible amount is not enough, while enough is too much.

While Chambers and Lovecraft frame the pursuit of knowledge with strong negative connotations, the lack of knowledge is not idealized either. Mostly the lack of knowledge is deprived of a voice, as the uneducated and the ignorant are in the sidelines or completely absent in these narratives. The protagonists of Chambers and Lovecraft are almost exclusively educated men of the upper classes. They are scholars, scientists and artists who have made the pursuit of knowledge either a hobby or a profession. This places the protagonists of Chambers and Lovecraft into the tradition of the gentleman narrator as it is defined by Boerem: “Because education is very much part of the gentleman, most of those in the stories to be discussed have had education,

¹² Some examples of this include “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Last Test” by Adolphe de Castro and Lovecraft.

many to a university degree. Those few who have not are self-educated. Many have some special subject of interest and may have some unique sensitivity to complement this interest” (271).

While the pursuit of knowledge is a dangerous act, it is also a gentlemanly act for Chambers and Lovecraft.

In addition to this lack of voice, the uneducated are usually portrayed in a negative light in the rare instances when they are described. A good example of this is the way how Lovecraft describes the denizens of the fictional town of Dunwich in “The Dunwich Horror”: “... the natives are now repellently decadent, having gone far along that path of retrogression so common in many New England backwaters. They have come to form a race by themselves, with well-defined mental and physical stigmata of degeneracy and inbreeding. The average of their intelligence is woefully low ...” (676).¹³ In addition to their low intelligence, Lovecraft’s description highlights the Dunwich people’s connection with the idea of decay and devolution; not only are they mentally inferior to the protagonists of Chambers and Lovecraft, they are also not part of the narrative of the Enlightenment. Because of their “woefully low” intelligence, they are incapable of being elevated to the status of masters. While the narrative of Enlightenment is that of progress, Lovecraft’s narrative of the people of Dunwich is one of decline, reversing the march of human progress. As Donald Burleson points out in *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe*, even the origins of the name Dunwich are associated with decay: “The town name Dunwich itself derives from the name of an ancient town in England on the coast of the North Sea, a town which, over the centuries of its existence from Saxon times to the present, has gradually crumbled away into the encroaching sea” (119-120). The idea of crumbling connects the fictional and real-life Dunwich; while the real English town has literally crumbled into the North Sea, the fictional Dunwich of New

¹³ These themes of retrogression and devolution are explored in other narratives of Lovecraft as well, such as “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family” and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”.

England is crumbling metaphorically through the “retrogression” of its inhabitants. For Lovecraft, the effect of such a retrogression, caused by a “woefully low intelligence” and a lack of knowledge, is as devastating as a sea that swallows a town.

The description of Dunwich and its people adds a new angle to Lovecraft’s challenge of the Enlightenment. While most of the discussion in the previous chapters has focused on the dangers of pursuing and possessing knowledge, “The Dunwich Horror” provides an example of the opposite: a lack of both knowledge and its pursuit. Considering the dangers and horrible outcomes that Chambers and Lovecraft associate with pursuing knowledge, one would assume that ignorance would be somewhat idealized by Chambers and Lovecraft as an alternative to the horrors of knowledge that they portray. That, however, is not the case; the idealized “Noble Savage” who, according to Hayden White’s “The Forms of Wildness: Archeology of an Idea”, acts as a “model of all that was admirable and uncorrupted in human nature” (3) is nowhere to be found in Dunwich. Instead, Lovecraft’s description attributes only negative qualities to the people of Dunwich; there is nothing “noble” in their ignorance, and despite their lack of knowledge they are still corrupted, even criminal in nature: “... their annals reek of overt viciousness and of half-hidden murders, incests, and deeds of almost unnamable violence and perversity” (676). The ignorance of the Dunwich people also fails to protect them from the titular horror that terrorizes their town, as some of them catch terrifying glimpses of the creature and suffer the consequences: “Curtis [a citizen of Dunwich] was past all coherence, and even isolated replies were almost too much for him. ... This final memory, whatever it was, proved too much for poor Curtis; and he collapsed completely before he could say more” (708). Despite not possessing the reckless curiosity and intellect of a Lovecraftian protagonist, Curtis is still forced to face unspeakable horrors. Even without the corrupting influence of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”, Curtis is still dragged into the deadly Promethean light. This aspect of “The Dunwich Horror”

seems to suggest that the flight from the deadly light into the placid island of ignorance discussed in the opening to “Call of Cthulhu” is an impossibility, and that the Promethean light can shine even to those who are seemingly safe from it. While Chambers and Lovecraft challenge the Enlightenment’s highly idealized notion about knowledge, the example of Dunwich showcases that a lack of knowledge is not a valid alternative; the degeneration that Lovecraft associates with ignorance is too severe of a price to pay, and ignorance can also fail as a protection against horrible realizations.

With “The Dunwich Horror”, Lovecraft provides the opposite to the terrifying knowledge of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”; on the spectrum of knowledge, the ignorance of Dunwich forms one end, while the other one is formed by the horrible and maddening knowledge born of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon”. As was previously discussed, the ignorance of Dunwich is an undesirable outcome for Lovecraft. Going to that end of the spectrum would mean a total rejection of Promethean Light, an act that Lovecraft associates with degeneration and criminality. Since the ignorance of Curtis and the other inhabitants of Dunwich also fails to protect them from Lovecraftian horrors, this approach would also be a futile one. The other end of the spectrum is equally uninviting, as it contains all the horrors of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon” discussed in the previous chapters; pursuing knowledge to such an extent is an Icarian act of self-destruction through hubris. As both ends of the spectrum contain such unwholesome extremes, the Aristotelian golden mean¹⁴ between them becomes highlighted. Staying in this middle ground is a possibility that is also present in the works of Chambers and Lovecraft, although their protagonists repeatedly fail to do so. In “The Repairer of Reputations”,

¹⁴ Lovecraft’s creation of this golden mean is highly ironic when one considers the impact that the Enlightenment had on Aristotelian ethics: “... the nature of philosophical thinking that was initiated during the Enlightenment contributed to the demise of Aristotelian ethics, relegating it to be an almost forgotten virtue during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries” (Faure, 62). By establishing this spectrum of knowledge and ignorance Lovecraft resurrects a way of perceiving the world that the Enlightenment had seemingly made obsolete.

Castaigne briefly pauses while reading "The King in Yellow". This moment of reflection occurs after he has finished reading the first act of the play, before passing the point of no return into the second act. Here, in this brief moment, Chambers showcases the possibility of choosing the golden mean; Castaigne has read the first act and thus has already stepped party into the Promethean Light. On the spectrum of knowledge, Castaigne has moved away from Dunwich-like ignorance without yet venturing into the domain of the forbidden knowledge and horrible realizations. If he were to stop now, he would remain between these two extremes; he has received some insight from "The King in Yellow" without succumbing to the insanity it brings. However, the temptation ultimately proves to be too much for Castaigne to resist, and his transition to the deadly light is completed when he finishes all of "The King in Yellow".

Similar moments that highlight the possibility of the golden mean are also present in the works of Lovecraft. While "The Necronomicon" is strongly associated with the dangerous and tempting pursuit of knowledge, the book itself is not the direct cause of the ensuing madness and horror. Often the act of reading "The Necronomicon" is described to be in the past; the protagonists usually make a passing mention of the infamous book as something that they have studied prior to the beginning of the narrative in question. An example of this can be found in *The Shadow out of Time*, where the protagonist Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee mentions knowledge acquired from "The Necronomicon": "There probably never was a time when groups or cults did not secretly cherish certain of these hints. In the *Necronomicon* the presence of such a cult among human beings was suggested..." (1037). The brief nature of this mentioning of "The Necronomicon" is significant; Peaslee's comment suggests that he has read "The Necronomicon", but the reading process itself has not revealed anything too disturbing to him. What he has read in "The Necronomicon" is mere suggestion, and the act of reading has not resulted in madness. As was the case with Castaigne and "The King in Yellow", the possibility to stand between the

extremes of ignorance and maddening truths is present for Peaslee; he has gained knowledge from “The Necronomicon” while leaving his sanity intact. This act of reading has moved him from ignorance and towards the deadly light of knowledge, but he has not reached it yet. Similarly to Castaigne, the possibility of staying in this middle ground is also present for Peaslee. There is a gap between him reading “The Necronomicon” and discovering the awful truth that awaits him at the end of the narrative, and within this gap Peaslee could have decided that he has seen enough of the deadly light. But alas, Peaslee is a Lovecraftian protagonist, soaring too close to the sun in his pursuit for answers.

With these brief glimpses from “The Repairer of Reputations” and *Shadow out of Time* Chambers and Lovecraft provide a crucial element to their challenge of the Enlightenment: the possibility of the golden mean. While most of their narratives highlight the dangers of excess when it comes to knowledge, these brief instances act as reminders that reaching such an excess is not necessarily an inevitability. Although tempting and dangerous, the evils of “The King in Yellow” and “The Necronomicon” are not insurmountable. While Castaigne and Peaslee eventually face insanity and horrible realizations, Chambers and Lovecraft also provide examples of the opposite; Alec, the protagonist of Chambers’ “The Mask”, survives his ordeals with his life and sanity intact despite having read “The King in Yellow”. Dr. Armitage reads sections of “The Necronomicon” and comes face to face with the titular Dunwich Horror, but also manages to keep both his life and sanity. Unlike most Lovecraftian protagonists, Alec and Armitage manage to glance into the deadly light without fully succumbing to the horrors it reveals. Through these characters, Chambers and Lovecraft also highlight a different aspect of moderation, as it not only includes the golden mean between ignorance and the deadly light discussed earlier, but also moderation when it comes to the act of reading. Especially Chambers forms a significant pairing between Castaigne and Alec. Castaigne’s act of reading “The King in Yellow” is defined by its intensity, as he “...read it and

reread it, and wept and laughed and trembled with horror...". The fact that Castaigne read the book multiple times also suggests an element of obsession, a desire to repeatedly stare into the deadly light. Castaigne's act of reading creates a strong contrast with Alec; while Castaigne seems to be obsessed with "The King in Yellow", Alec does not share this strong bond with the play. Alec's act of reading the infamous text is not described, creating a sense of distance between him and the text; he has read the text at some point prior to the beginning of the narrative, but the exact time and manner of reading is not mentioned. While there is a greater sense of distance, Alec is still clearly influenced by the text: "I thought, too, of the King in Yellow wrapped in the fantastic colours of his tattered mantle, and that bitter cry of Cassilda, "not upon us, oh King, not upon us!" (45). In this moment, the distance between Alec and "The King in Yellow" vanishes and the disturbing passages that he read become intertwined with his nightmares. While the impact that the book has had on Alec is unquestionable, there is still a crucial difference when compared to Castaigne; Alec's utterance occurs during a fever dream¹⁵ as he is not fully aware of the reality that surrounds him. His illness makes his reality distorted, blending "The King in Yellow" into his sickly experiences. The influence of "The King in Yellow" takes over during his weakened state, while the book's power over Alec seems to be limited when he is at full strength; Alec's first mention of "The King in Yellow" is preceded by the observation that he is going to be ill, creating a strong connection between "The King in Yellow" and disease.¹⁶ Because of Alec's more moderate approach to "The King in Yellow", the obsession which defines Castaigne's act of reading does not

¹⁵ Dreams hold a special significance in Lovecraftian horror, especially for Lovecraft himself. In her article "*Cthulhu Fhtag: Dreams and Nightmares in the Fantasy Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft*" Kelly Bulkeley suggest that Lovecraft was a Jungian "big dreamer": "... I propose that Lovecraft can best be understood as an unusually gifted big dreamer who specialized in the exploring the elemental axis of prototypical dreaming. As Jung first noted, "big dreams" are unusually vivid and highly memorable dreams, often occurring in childhood, that tap into deep unconscious energies and make long-lasting impressions on waking awareness" (56). These big dreams were a significant influence for Lovecraft, and dreams are a crucial part of many of his narratives, such as "The Dreams in the Witch-House" and *Shadow out of Time*.

¹⁶ As it was already established in the earlier chapters, Chambers connects "The King in Yellow" with the idea of a disease that spreads despite efforts to control it. Alec's fever continues this metaphor of an illness.

take over Alec, allowing him to avoid the traditional fate of the Lovecraftian protagonist; out of all Chambers' narratives that feature "The King in Yellow", "The Mask" is the only one which could be argued to have a happy ending, while all the rest end with madness and death.

Ultimately, the examples of "The Dunwich Horror", *Shadow out of Time* and "The Mask" discussed in this chapter complete Chambers and Lovecraft's challenge of the Enlightenment by providing an alternative. While the highly optimistic relationship that the Enlightenment has with knowledge has been the subject of a great deal of criticism from Chambers and Lovecraft, a lack of knowledge is portrayed as a highly negative state of being as well. By warning about the dangers of both extremes, Chambers and Lovecraft assume the role of Daedalus warning Icarus; soaring too close to the Sun is dangerous, but simultaneously Daedalus also warns Icarus of flying too close to the sea. In both of these extremes, a potential disaster lurks; a dangerous Promethean light of knowledge, or the black seas of ignorance. But staying in this safe golden mean is problematic, as the Lovecraftian protagonist's repeated failures to remain there illustrate. While Chambers and Lovecraft criticize the Enlightenment of soaring too recklessly, they at the same time recognize the value of flight. While they point out that the Enlightenment's quest to establish humans as masters of the universe might be a fool's errand, they also remember that willingly submitting to the servitude of ignorance is not a valid alternative. The tools of their criticism, "The King in Yellow" and "The Necronomicon", might hold a tempting and dark influence over humanity within their universes, but that power is not born of the books themselves; their dangers are born of the obsessions and recklessness of the Lovecraftian protagonist, soaring ever higher and higher despite the warnings that he receives. Refusing to exist in the fantasy of "the placid island of ignorance", the Lovecraftian protagonist embodies the ideals of the Enlightenment to the bitter end of madness and death. Fearing the sea beneath him, he will always be drawn towards the deadly light, even if he might not like what the light reveals.

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