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"His Madness held no affinity": Reimagining Arkham Asylum

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Abstract

The Gothic madhouse present in H. P. Lovecraft's fiction is not a dimly lit padded cell situated in a former manor house. Rather, Lovecraft gives little description to his mental hospitals, which is curious given the many narrators who end up in such institutions. Twenty-first-century popular culture, on the other hand, enjoys a fascination with the madhouse as a physical space associated with criminality, monstrosity, and themes of imprisonment. Though the figures encountered within Batman's Arkham may be inspired by the horror of Lovecraft's Weird tales, it is striking that the solitary name of a fictional landscape proves so enduring beyond, and in addition to, the mythos of its original author. As a means of exposing the negative portrayals of mental illness inherent within twenty-first century reimagining's of Arkham Asylum, namely its portrayal throughout the Batman media franchise, this article compares the depiction of asylums in two fictions by Lovecraft: "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" (1919), and "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933) alongside Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989), and Dan Slott's serial *Arkham Asylum: Living Hell* (2004). I argue that a wilful misremembering of historical madhouse regimes occurs within modern and contemporary appropriations of Lovecraft's asylum setting. Unlike the Batman comics, Lovecraft's tales show the sinister and hidden machinations of the asylum without depicting it as a violent, haunted, or necessarily horrific space.

Keywords

Madhouse; Arkham Asylum; Gothic madness; H.P. Lovecraft; Batman

Arkham, the fictional North American city which is the setting for several of H. P. Lovecraft's creative writings, has moved to another iconic territory of popular culture. In the media franchise of Batman and its various offshoots, such as the speculative fiction crime drama series *Gotham* (2014-Present), Arkham Island features a Gothic manor estate turned mental hospital. Here, the Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane becomes increasingly more grotesque as a portrayal of institutional confinement, often to a point of sinister parody. The figure of the Joker, for example, is a transgressive character who provokes questions about the interpretation of madness, and this idea is addressed in more detail below. The asylum in Lovecraft's *oeuvre* demonstrates a kind of sanctuary, while in Batman it signifies monstrosity and disorder. In both fictional productions, there is a blurring in how the literary asylum is portrayed and, to an extent, misremembered as a historical site. To demonstrate this idea, this article contrasts two Batman texts with two of Lovecraft's fictions featuring an asylum. These texts are Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989); Dan Slott's comic book serial *Arkham Asylum: Living Hell* (2004); Lovecraft's "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" (1919), and "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933). Although incorporating additional material such as Rocksteady Studio's 2009 video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, this essay primarily looks to address representations of the asylum in print culture. This article will demonstrate how Lovecraft's portrayal of the mental hospital seems muted in terms of its negative aesthetics without compromising the atmospheric effects of Horror – especially when Lovecraft depicts asylum abuse. On the other hand, the reverse holds true of the Batman texts that are discussed here. Through this comparison, I argue that a counter-memory of institutional oppression becomes evident by highlighting exploited portrayals of mental illness.

In the D. C. Comics, Inc. (D.C) representation of the secure ward, Arkham Asylum clearly signifies the negative aesthetics that Fred Botting associates specifically with the Gothic mode: "[d]arkness—an absence of the light associated with sense, security and knowledge . . . disturbances of sanity and security . . . displays of uncontrolled passion" (5-6). Adhering to Botting's notion of Gothic as the bookshelf's psychotic nightlife, Arkham Asylum is the carnivalesque prison for Batman's gallery of rogues. These characters' psychopathologies are often accompanied by monstrous and horrific physical features. In the case of Killer Croc, for example, a genetic disease has transformed wrestler Waylon Jones into a reptilian giant with implied cannibalistic tendencies. Jones's madness is externalized as his frightening appearance plays out late Victorian fantasies of degeneration: his bestial nature grows more violent and atavistic the more his disease progresses.[1] In *Living Hell* ("Chapter 4: Tic Toc"), Killer Croc is depicted wearing chains, while in Rocksteady's 2009 *Arkham Asylum* he wears an electric shock collar. Throughout Slott's serial, Killer Croc represents a wild abhuman subject whose violent nature is

1 For examples of nineteenth-century ideas of degeneration see: Francis Galton's *Inquiries into the Human Faculty* (1883); Charles Mercier's *Sanity and Insanity* (1890); Cesare Lombroso's *The Man of Genius* (1891); and Max Nordeau's *Degeneration* (1895).

incompatible with law and order. As Kelly Hurley explains, "the abhuman subject is a not-quite human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of not-itself, becoming other" (4-5). Abhuman otherness is problematic because it makes the abuse carried out in a mental health facility seem permissible, and even justifiable. At one point, Croc is shot with a tranquilizer by the asylum superintendent who glibly announces that he has "never met a problem I couldn't solve…with the right medication" (Slott n.p.). The brutality that is enacted upon those labeled by the institution as violent criminals invites the reader to spectate, judge, and complicate the notion of villainy in the Batman comics.

For example, in the same chapter of *Living Hell*, Asylum security staff member Aaron Cash is revealed to have had his hand bitten off by Croc during a previous altercation. One scene depicts Cash during his sick-leave in an untidy apartment. The asylum superintendent, Dr. Jerimiah Arkham, phones Cash to tell him that: "You can sit there and be a cripple…or return to a job where it's socially acceptable to cripple others" (Slott n.p.).[2] That a psychiatrist is portrayed giving explicit permission to enact abuse is troubling. Dr Arkham's words suggest that not only is it permissible, or "socially acceptable," to physically assault patients, it is also pleasurable. The negative aesthetics of Arkham Asylum do not just concern the hospital's dark atmosphere and architecture; rather, they apply to, in Botting's words, the "disturbances of sanity" observable in institutional practices themselves (5). In gothicizing the asylum, *Living Hell* draws attention to the ways that staff violence and medical malpractice are a predictable occurrence in modern and contemporary fictions about the institution. This is a troubling depiction of asylums that perpetuates old and anachronistic stereotypes. The serial also exposes how the allegedly sane medical attendants can act just as violently as their patients. As Erving Goffman comments: "[t]he stigmatised and the normal are part of each other; if one can prove vulnerable, it must be expected that the other can, too" (135). The inmates of Arkham Asylum are othered by their proximity to confinement: they are abject figures of social exclusion, and as such, extreme measures to pacify their extreme behaviors appear justifiable. While asylum abuse is easy to point out in Batman, there is a certain parody observable in the fact that it appears excusable. *Living Hell* confronts its readers with the question of whose villainy is worse: the patients' or the institution's?

It is worth noting that other Batman texts have previously subverted the apportioning of blame in the portrayal of asylum abuse. In Frank Miller's futuristic *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Arkham Asylum is renamed the "Arkham Home for the Emotionally Troubled," suggesting a shift in social attitudes toward the mentally-ill. However, on closer reading, it is apparent that this perceptual shift is just as stigmatizing. A pop-psychologist featured in Miller's graphic novel, Dr. Bartholemew Wolper, is introduced as the "[a]uthor of the best-selling *Hey I'm Okay*," (Miller n.p.). Wolper appears on television interviews blaming "irresponsible media input" for anti-social behaviours (Miller n.p.). While Miller's depiction of psychiatry is a pastiche of liberal reform agendas, the figure of Wolper mockingly reproves the notion of diminished responsibility. As Mark Fisher observes:

> There is a kind of machismo of demythologization in Miller['s] . . . works. [Authors such as Miller pose] as unflinching observers who refuse to prettify the world so that it can be fitted into the supposedly simple ethical binaries of the superhero comic and the traditional crime novel. The 'realism' here is somehow underscored, rather than undercut, by [Miller's] fixation on the luridly venal—even though the hyperbolic insistence on cruelty, betrayal and savagery . . . quickly becomes pantomimic. (11)

The gritty neo-noir style of Miller's Arkham is not so much a critique of normalizing strategies for mental illness as it is a reification of them. In suggesting that the asylum is a "Home for the Emotionally Troubled," the "madness" contained there is silenced and relegated to a performative abdication of personal responsibility.

Madness is distinct from notions of mental illness because it lacks any stable referents. As Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume comment in their introduction to *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader*: "[o]nce a reviled term that signalled the worst kinds of bigotry and abuse, madness has come to represent a critical alternative to 'mental illness' or 'disorder' as a way of naming and responding to emotional, spiritual, and neuro-diversity" (10). There is a difference, then, between madness and mental illness; principally, madness is a transgressive state, not necessarily linked to psychopathology, but one that defies homogenous reason. Madness emerges in Batman as a matter of conduct, and in the Gothic and Horror more generally, madness is rarely the breakdown memoir; it is usually an unwanted presence determined mad by a madder society. This echoes how Michel Foucault has referred to madness as a form of social exclusion characterized by its difference to a supposedly superior reason. As Foucault explains, "madness is no longer the familiar strangeness of the world, but a spectacle well known to the observer from outside" (*History of Madness* 25). Throughout Batman, madness is used as a visual signifier for deviance; in the case of the Joker, for instance, madness is something that exceeds and transgresses the clinical diagnoses of the medical gaze. In Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious Place on Serious Earth* (1989), The Clown Prince of Crime is described by his doctor as "a special case. Some of us feel he may even be beyond treatment. In fact, we're not even sure if he can be properly described as insane" (Morrison and McKean). It is also explained that the Joker "can only cope with the chaotic barrage of input by going with the flow. That's why some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He has no real personality" (Morrison and McKean). Likewise, in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988), the Joker's madness defies clinical and legal pathologies, demonstrating a lifestyle inaccessible to the gaze of reason; a sane response to an insane world. As the Joker himself comments: "my point is, I went crazy. When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a coot! I admit it! Why can't you?" (Moore). The Joker's radical usurpation of madness

2 Jeremiah Arkham is portrayed ambivalently throughout the Batman comics. The question of his own madness, for example, is brought into consideration in *Batman: The Last Arkham* (1996).

demonstrates a resistance towards capitalist society's passive acceptance that mental illness is merely an inevitable fact of day-to-day existence. As Fisher argues, "the 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional" (19). The Joker sees the truth of the world that is ignored by the majority of others, either deliberately or through ignorance. This idea comes to be realized in the fictional asylums of Lovecraft and Batman, respectively. The asylum in Batman is a site of abuse and makes use of exploited portrayals of mental illness. Madness, on the other hand, demonstrates radical alterity.

While Batman and Lovecraft's fictions are disparate, taking place in very different fictional universes, the modern turn to gruesome and violent hospital spaces is striking as Lovecraft originally characterized his asylum as a sanctuary. This is a crucial difference in the cultural work of both D.C. and Lovecraft's portrayal of the mental hospital. While the Arkham Hospital in the Batman franchise first appeared in 1974: "a New England hospital—a polite name for an asylum which houses the criminally insane" (O'Neil 7), the first named hospital in Lovecraft's Arkham is the Arkham Sanitarium as depicted in "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933), which this article will discuss later.[3] S.T. Joshi has highlighted the prevalence of madness constituting one of Lovecraft's primary Weird fiction tropes by pointing out that an "unusually large number of Lovecraft's characters go mad at some point or other, and many others have madness imputed to them" (*Weird Tale* 212). Lovecraft's use of unreliable narrators was partially inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, although Lovecraft's are more notably distinct. As David Punter explains: "Lovecraft saw terror in a very different way from Poe. Where Poe refers back to the "life within", Lovecraft is utterly devoid of psychological interest; his terrors are entirely those of the unintelligible outside" (38). Principally, this also relates to the materialist philosophy underpinning the cosmic horror that drives Lovecraft's fiction, as Joshi argues:

> Madhouses in Lovecraft are habitually places housing those who have glimpsed some truth about existence too horrible to bear. It is not necessarily the case that the inmates of asylums are actually mad, it is that a civilisation based upon rationalism is compelled to do away with those of its members who threaten its stability. (*Weird Tale* 213)

For Lovecraft, madness is always an empathetically reasonable response to the threat of impossible, incomprehensible, and unknown things from elsewhere; in Lovecraft's sanatoriums, madness is demonstrated as a sane response to cosmic horror, rather than a form of criminal transgression.

Emerging criticism of Lovecraft's work seems content to overlook the condition of madness and the figure of the madhouse.[4] Apart from Joshi's astute yet brief observation on the purpose of madhouses in Lovecraft's fiction, the issue has not inspired any critical commentary that sufficiently analyzes what role madhouses may serve in the composition of Weird fiction more generally. It is tempting to note here the conjectural possibilities from the known biography of Lovecraft: his nervous breakdowns and his family's own mental incarcerations – how might these events have informed his fiction? Though this article proposes to explore these contexts to a small extent, the primary focus here has more to do with how the author's fictions portray the asylum. It is worth noting, however, that Lovecraft's father had been incarcerated in Butler Hospital, Rhode Island, just before Lovecraft turned two. Contemporary opinion on the medical condition of his father is that it was a case of syphilis, though this had not passed on to his son and it is unclear when the infection began (*Dreamer and a Visionary* 32).

The Butler Hospital, Rhode Island, in which Lovecraft's father would spend his final years, was founded by its benefactor Nicholas Brown in 1840 and started construction in 1844 after a General Assembly meeting. David A. Rochefort has described its architectural appearance:

> No expense was spared in the construction of Butler Hospital or in procuring able leadership for its operation. The hospital was an E-shaped structure with various dormitory rooms and recreation areas. Its size was relatively small—108 beds—in keeping with one of the principal tenets of the philosophy of moral treatment. A lovely wooded area formed its surroundings and helped to isolate it from the community. (118)

The E-shaped structure, emphasis on moral treatment and recreation areas make the real-life historical hospital disparate from Batman's Arkham Asylum, which is geared towards absolute confinement and operates on segregation and punishment systems. Furthermore, this isolation by a "lovely wooded area" makes it, to appropriate Lovecraft terminology, a sinister thing lurking on the doorstep of suburbia. However, as Rochefort goes on to explain, the living conditions for inpatients during the early twentieth-century were hardly ideal: "negative attitudes and beliefs gave rise to harsh treatment practices. Indeed, for the feebleminded this difficult time extended well into the 1920s" (122).

From Joshi's study of the relevant medical records, it emerges that Winfield Scott Lovecraft was struck ill in April 1893 and forced to remain in Butler Hospital until his death in July 1898; Winfield was diagnosed with general paralysis and showed various symptoms of syphilis. Joshi concludes his report on these medical records by asking what Howard Philips Lovecraft would have made of this situation:

> He was two years and eight months old when his father

3 Lovecraft's use of the word "sanitarium" as opposed to "sanitorium" (a health retreat for wounded soldiers) follows the medical practice of John Harvey Kellogg. In 1902, Kellogg rebuilt and repurposed the burned down Western Health Reform Institution and named it Black Creek Sanitarium, the first sanitarium to exist in Northern America. See for instance Kellogg's The Battle Creek Sanitarium System: History, Organisation, Methods (1908).

4 See for instance Karl H. Sederholm and Jeffery Andrew Weinstock's *The Age of Lovecraft* (2016). Aside from David Punter's chapter on "Lovecraft: Suspicion, Pattern Recognition, Paranoia," there is nothing that addresses madness or the madhouse.

> was committed, and seven years and eleven months old when his father died . . . One matter of importance is whether Lovecraft ever saw his father in Butler Hospital. He never says explicitly that he did not, but his late statement that 'I was never in a hospital till 1924' certainly suggests that he himself believed (or claimed to others) that he never did so. Recently, there has been speculation that Lovecraft did indeed visit his father in the hospital; but there is absolutely no documentary evidence of this. (*Dreamer and Visionary* 15)

To examine how this contextual information emerges in Lovecraft's early fiction, note that madness is triggered by cataclysmic interactions with the cosmic unknown. There is something particularly privileged about Lovecraft's view of mental illness, privileged in the sense that it represents for Lovecraft an elite state of knowledge. Where the Batman comics might conflate mental illness with physical disfigurement, Lovecraft has a surprising, and no less problematic, idealized view of madness. While the author is known for his racist views and adherence to notions such as the late nineteenth-century idea of social "degeneration," his fiction tends to sympathize with those who have become mad. Lovecraft's "mad" characters undergo constant and endless suffering perhaps mirroring his own misanthropy, potential depression, and general despair at the world.[5] By reading this impulse in Lovecraft's asylums, and with some awareness of his family history, a sense of seclusion emerges; a haven for the Weird reader as much as for the Weird character.

For example, in "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" (1919), which first appeared in the October issue of amateur journal *Pine Cones*, and later found its way into *Weird Tales* in March 1938, a mundanely non-horrific asylum is portrayed, which helps to blur the process of identifying asylum abuse. Here, the narrator is an intern in an unnamed state psychiatric institution. The narrator, who partakes in astral projection dreams, views the dreaming process in contrast to Sigmund Freud's idea of wish fulfilment, and expresses this in a dream-like way: "[f]rom my experience, I cannot doubt but that man, when lost to terrestrial consciousness, is indeed sojourning in another and uncorporeal [*sic*] life of far different nature from the life we know" (Lovecraft, *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Tales* 11). At first, these meditations on astral travelling and lucid dreaming possibilities seem altogether innocent. In fact, the narrator clearly sees the dream much in the same way as the Romantic movement did: "[s]ometimes I believe that this less material life is our truer life, and that our vain presence on the terraqueous globe is itself the secondary or merely virtual phenomenon" ("Beyond the Wall of Sleep" 11). The psychiatric intern's self-described "youthful reverie" seems a naïve and disrespectful admission to make in what is presumably a demanding work environment; also, despite his learned and passionate reflections, the dream meandering the narrator indulges in comes across as hallucinatory (11). There is a deliberately dream-like quality to the overall emotion evinced in the imagery and descriptions that Lovecraft provides in this story, the references to "virtual phenomenon," for instance. It is partially the "dreaminess" that provides the Gothic mood here in an otherwise mundane hospital. Lovecraft experimented further with such types of writing, drawing heavily from the influences of Irish author Lord Dunsany, and in the case of this story, Jack London's *Before Adam* (1906).[6] But unlike his Dunsanian tales, "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" has far more in the way of Horror: it lulls the reader into a false sense of tranquil narration only to assert its cosmic terrors far more invasively.

The narrator's curiosity is piqued with the arrival of a new patient, "who came to the institution in the vigilant custody of four state policemen, and who was described as a highly dangerous character," even though the newcomer, Joe Slater, a native resident of the Catskill region, provides no immediate evidence suggesting his "perilous disposition" ("Beyond the Wall of Sleep" 12). It is, however, known to the asylum staff that Slater has killed one of his "countrymen" and has been declared legally insane (12). In a typically Lovecraftian style, the murdered victim was reduced to "an unrecognisable pulp-like thing" (13). (There is something of a certain irony that the term "pulp" connotes liquid mass as well as mass entertainment, and that it occurs so frequently in Lovecraft's descriptions of human dismemberment is striking). From the court documents that the narrator has been able to view, he is able to provide a lurid description of the seemingly harmless Slater:

> This man, a vagabond, hunter and trapper, had always been strange in the eyes of his primitive associates. He had habitually slept at night beyond the ordinary time, and upon waking would often talk of unknown things in a manner so bizarre as to inspire fear even in the hearts of an unimaginative populace. Not that his form of language was at all unusual, for he never spoke in the debased patois of his environment; but the tone and tenor of his utterances were of such mysterious wildness, that none might listen without apprehension. (12)

Drawn in by this hypnotic quality of Slater's raving, the narrator appears obsessed with this new patient. Unlike other asylum doctors in the Gothic – Dr. John Seward from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) for instance – the narrator takes the time to listen to Slater's personal history. He concludes that Slater's knowledge of "unknown things" are not merely the result of "drinking much liquor" (13). The hospital seems, so far, clinical and objective in its treatment of patients.

However, the narrator is keen to examine Slater more fully, despite what his medical superiors tell him. The narrator even doubts the charge of insanity levied against Slater:

> By degrees I commenced to feel an overwhelming wonder at the mad and fantastic conceptions of Joe Slater. The man himself was pitiably inferior in mentality and language alike; but his glowing, titanic visions, though described in a barbarous and disjointed jargon,

5 Cfr. Houellebecq's *Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life.*

6 Cfr. Lovecraft's Randolph Carter stories: "The Statement of Randolph Carter" (1919); "The Silver Key" (1926); *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1926-1927), and also the dream-like prose of "Nyarlathotep" (1920) among others.

> were assuredly things which only a superior or even exceptional brain could conceive. (15)

Taking this at face value, it appears that the narrator feels pity for Slater. On a closer reading, however, it becomes apparent that this is not really pity or sympathy at all, but jealousy. In fact, the narrator betrays this in trying to demonstrate his concern for Slater's mental wellbeing, as he observes that in "the pitiful personality who cringed before me lay the disordered nucleus of something beyond my comprehension; something infinitely beyond the comprehension of my more experienced but less imaginative medical and scientific colleagues" (15). What the narrator appears to covet is Slater's ability for lucid dreaming, and he is worryingly unperturbed to learn that Slater's nightly wanderings often encounter "a certain deadly enemy, who seemed to be a being of visible yet ethereal structure, and who did not appear to be of human shape" (15). Here, the narrator betrays himself as a megalomaniac, keeping his study of Slater private from his medical colleagues: "the head of the institution had but lately warned me in his paternal way that I was overworking; that my mind needed a rest" (16). The horror, here, comes from going against the working of the functional site rather than emerging from the institution itself. In addition, the term "functional site" refers to Foucault's description of enclosed physical spaces where people are observed and partitioned. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, "particular places were defined to correspond not only to the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications, but to create a useful space" (143-144). In this sense, the asylum is a functional site because it attempts to regulate and control madness in a purpose-built enclosure. To refer this back to the fictional portrayal of the asylum in Batman and Lovecraft, the functional site complicates the treatment and regulation of mental illness by threatening to expose the true horrors of madness.

In "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," madness is once again shown to affect the custodians of the medical establishment itself. Owing to the narrator's long-held belief that "human thought consists basically of atomic or molecular motion, convertible into ether waves of radiant energy like heat, light, and electricity," he is content to justify a return to some scientific experiments that he began during his college days: "a set of transmitting and receiving instruments somewhat similar to the cumbrous devices employed in wireless telegraphy at that crude, pre-radio period" (16). While it is still possible to read the narrator's concern for his patient as admirable, especially as he wishes to understand the dream world they experience, his motives are less forgivable when realising that this medical intern is experimenting unsupervised upon a non-consenting patient: the attendant sees them as an object to be used and controlled. The story does not explicitly acknowledge this as being morally wrong in any way, and the narrator's "intellectual curiosity" masks his tyranny. The narrator proudly recalls how:

> in my intense desire to probe into the dream life of Joe Slater, I sought these instruments again; and spent several days in repairing them for action. When they were complete once more I missed no opportunity for their trial. At each outburst of Slater's violence, I would fit the transmitter to his forehead and the receiver to my own; constantly making adjustments for various hypothetical wave-lengths of intellectual energy. (16)

In what appears to be a respectable psychiatric institution, one whose only use of a straitjacket is mentioned when Slater "burst forth into a frenzy," the secret ill-treatment of patients goes on behind locked doors (14). Here, Lovecraft is focused on depicting the sinister and hidden machinations of the asylum rather than the more explicit violence of straightjackets and physical abuse.

In a brief but worrying disclaimer, the narrator confesses that, "[a]s I look back across the years I realise how unreal it seems; and sometimes half wonder if old Dr. Fenton was not right when he charged it all to my excited imagination" (16). As it turns out, Dr. Fenton has prescribed his young trainee "a nerve-powder and arranged for the half-year's vacation" (16). Clearly, the narrator is in denial about the extent to which his actions are causing harm to others. It is especially difficult to calmly read his later assertion that "despite the *excellent care* he had received, Joe Slater was unmistakably dying . . . perhaps the turmoil in his brain had grown too acute for his rather sluggish physique" (17; emphasis added). Given the administration of the "radio" being placed against his head night after night, Slater's death is predictable. Though the narrator's experiments do afford him with some astral pathways and "the stupendous spectacle of ultimate beauty" he is later haunted by the spirit-possessed form of Slater who warns him of the coming galactical end of time, although Slater's doppelgänger does, rather generously, refer to him as "my friend in the cosmos" (17, 19). "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" is a revealing story about asylum abuse, how it plays on notions of trust, and how things on the surface are not always as they appear. While the asylum as an institution provides sanctuary, the excessive ambition of individual practitioners is shown to be at fault. Unlike the Batman texts, it is madness and not the madhouse that appears horrific. It is equally telling that the medical authority of Dr. Fenton reclaims the hospital; trust in the institution is restored. This is a key difference between the events of *Living Hell*, where the head of Arkham Asylum encourages patient abuse.

Meanwhile, Lovecraft's New England is haunted by its past just as Gothic writing is more generally. As Chris Baldick writes in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (2009), one of the co-ordinates of the Gothic effect is the sense of being haunted by the past:

> Some attraction to the imagined vitality of past ages is indeed always there in Gothic, but this appeal consists principally in the imaginative freedoms and symbolic possibilities of discarded folk beliefs, not in any faith actually attached to them. When Gothic fiction has employed the ghostly apparitions and omens of archaic lore . . . it has at the same time placed them under strong suspicion as part of a cruelly repressive and deluded past. There is often a kind of homeopathic principle at work here, in the way that Gothic writers have borrowed the fables and nightmares of a past age in order to repudiate their authority. (xiii-xiv)

To demonstrate this, it is worth singling out some of the criticism that deals with Lovecraft's geography alongside his first named

madhouse in "The Thing on the Doorstep." In a revealing essay that reunites some of Lovecraft's key fictitious landmarks with their real-life counterparts, Donovan K. Loucks writes that "[a] lthough Lovecraft made it clear that his hometown of Providence was his favourite of all New England towns, he made it equally clear that Marblehead, Massachusetts was a close second" (45). Marblehead is widely believed to be the setting of Kingsport in Lovecraft's fiction, and southeast of this town lies Arkham. There have been recent attempts made by fans to map Lovecraft's Arkham and to pinpoint particular story locations, and the results of these offer modern and contemporary readers of Lovecraft a visual aid to fictional geography: where elements of the real are interwoven with the Weird.[7] In the vast majority of these fan-designed maps, however, the Arkham Sanitarium is either surprisingly absent or situated outside the city. This may be a result of Lovecraft's unwillingness to offer literary directions. In "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933), published in *Weird Tales* on January 1937, Lovecraft painstakingly describes the history of Arkham, its various localities, the nearby Miskatonic University, and the dark roads to hideous Innsmouth. The Sanitarium, on the other hand, only appears when a character meets too many cosmic terrors. Lovecraft seems especially disinterested in providing any geographical or architectural detail about the first of his madhouses that he names. Lovecraft's asylums, in a way, remain unlocatable, outside of two worlds: his own, and the cosmic outside of his creations; madness seems excluded.

The opening of "The Thing on the Doorstep" announces its location amidst the confession of a crime: "At first I shall be called a madman – madder than the man I shot in his cell at the Arkham Sanitarium" (341). In addition to the plethora of madness found in such a sentence, the asylum is merely there in passing. Edward Derby, a once bohemian arts student at Miskatonic, turns his scholarly pursuits towards the occult and marries Innsmouth resident Asenath Waite, "dark, smallish, and very good-looking except for overprotuberant eyes; but something in her expression alienated extremely sensitive people" (344). For those of Lovecraft's readers who are familiar with "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1931), Asenath's hometown should inspire a knowing sense of dread that might equally alienate astute readers. Derby undergoes a complete character transformation, and the narrator, Daniel Upton, reluctantly becomes his guardian after Derby is institutionalized at Arkham. Upton soon discovers the horror of the magic rituals that Derby has been subjected to, and in an act of mercy, kills his friend to rid him of a sinister possession: the wrathful spirit of Innsmouth magician and Asenath's father, Ephraim Waite.

Gina Wisker crucially observes that Asenath "is actually a man, as she is possessed by her deceased father" (32). In order to understand fully the ramifications of miscegenation and contamination achieved through the psychic possession in the story, (in other words, the "madness" of the tale), Lovecraft's use of a monstrous polygender is key. As Wisker argues, "Lovecraft's women dramatize and embody the concerns of the early twentieth century, the disgust and abjection of reproduction, fear of the weird more generally, and imperial concern of the foreign and alien Other through miscegenation" (32). Moreover, Asenath is misogynistically described in abhuman terms, and, similar to the treatment of Croc in *Living Hell*, this has the effect of normalizing the narrator's aspersions toward her. As he observes of Edward, this "was a case for the asylum, but I would not be the one to send him there. Perhaps time and freedom from Asenath would do its work. I could see that he would never wish to dabble in morbid occultism again" (357). Upton prefers to see Asenath as the reason for Edward's medical incarceration, instead of taking responsibility for the commitment of his friend. Equally, it is the influence and abject presence of Asenath which leads Edward to a nervous breakdown, at least according to Upton who is the more threatened by her true nature. In Lovecraft's story, the real madness concerns the issue of radical difference.

Such radical difference is eventually what Upton comes to confront in Arkham Sanitarium when he visits who he believes at first to be Edward:

> The patient rose to greet me, extending his hand with a polite smile; but I saw in an instant that he bore the strangely energised personality which had seemed so foreign to his own nature—the competent personality I had found so vaguely horrible, and which Edward himself had once vowed was the intruding soul of his wife. There was the same blazing vision—so like Asenath's and old Ephraim's—and the same firm mouth; and when he spoke I could sense the same grim, pervasive irony in his voice – the deep irony so redolent of potential evil. (360)

The blurring of the recognizably human is often central in Lovecraft's writing, and it is the more forcefully apparent in his accounts of psychic possession. What should be realized about his development of Arkham Sanitarium, however, and it is notable that this is his first named asylum, is that Arkham is haunted by its past; its figures, territories, and foreign invaders. Despite this, the authority of the hospital remains uncompromised: Arkham Sanitarium offers respite to the harrowing and haunting effects of Upton's descent into madness.

Lovecraft's madhouses remain places of sanctuary. They are not without the guilt of institutional abuse, nor are they safeguards against the admittance of monsters. But the madness contained in these hospitals is very unlike the madness found in the later Lovecraftian imaginary of twenty-first century popular culture. An in-progress game currently under development by the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society is entitled "The Arkham Sanitarium Sanity Assessment" (ASSAK), which apparently, began "as an amusing little quiz on our old website, and . . . has grown into something insanely complicated with a board game, card game and more" ("Arkham Sanitarium Sanity Assessment Page 2017"). It will be interesting to see how this game, as its title implies, deals with the topic of psychiatric assessment. Meanwhile, alongside the intertextual relocation of Arkham is the accompaniment of a commodity culture that sells toys and playsets

7 For examples of these maps, see: "Arkham adapted from a sketch by H.P. Lovecraft" (Morales), and "A map of Arkham by Gahan Wilson" (Lai). The latter does include the estimated location of Arkham Sanitarium.

of the Batman-inspired Arkham Asylum. While, for example, no official Lego product for Lovecraft's cosmic horrors yet exists, (although plenty of unofficial ideas are available online), there have been several renditions of Lego Batman Arkham Asylum sets, usually for ages twelve and upward. The 2017 edition, inspired by the animated film *Lego Batman* (2017), is replete with model syringes, a security scanner, a Panopticon five-story lookout tower, and police car– there is an extent to which the inclusion of these tools reinforce stereotypical assumptions about the purpose of the asylum, and the relationship between staff and patient is introduced to children as a power dynamic, rather than a therapeutic one. Here, the rogues' gallery mini-figures are adorned with orange jumpsuits and belts, an accessory, which, in a real-life hospital, would constitute a ligature risk. The playset clearly resembles a prison, a complaint that has been levied against the D. C. franchise's portrayal of mental hospitals before, but it also reiterates the social stigma that mental illness is rooted in notions of criminality: there is a conflation between mental illness and criminal wrongdoing that implies madness as a prerequisite for villainy.[8]

There is a curious difference in the fictional portrayals of asylums that this essay has examined: on the one hand, Lovecraft's sanitariums are places of sanctuary, even though they feature torture and monstrous transformations. On the other hand, the authority of these institutions is always inviolable. In the Batman texts, which demonstrate far more gruesome scenes of the secure ward, Arkham Asylum's holding power is constantly undermined and stated unfavorably: the asylum is built and operates on corruption. While the patients of Arkham Asylum frequently escape or take over the institution (as in Rocksteady's *Arkham Asylum*), the administrators are also implicated by grisly madness. In *Living Hell*, it is revealed that prior to becoming the manor home of Amadeus Arkham, it was an ancient institution called the "Gotham House of Madness and Ill Humors." In this representation, occultist Jason Blood performs violent lobotomies on patients strapped to tables, stating that "our war on madness is fought in the head" ("Whole in the Head" n. p.). While the Batman stories are generally considered to take place in a speculative historical timeline, there is a slight anachronism here as these events of *Living Hell* allegedly take place in the pre-1900s. In actuality, leucotomy (lobotomy) was developed by Portuguese neurologist Egas Moniz in the 1930s, However, this satire is itself quite stigmatizing as it presumes a shared understanding that the asylum is an unpleasant place where bad things are likely to occur. While there are many debates surrounding the effectiveness of electroconvulsive therapy, not to mention the ethical aspects to this treatment, *A Serious Place on Serious Earth* perpetuates the gloominess of the secure ward to the detriment of wider philosophical engagement, which it otherwise achieves elsewhere in its portrayal of the Joker's madness and even Batman's.

The primary intertextual focus on Arkham Asylum in Batman appears to be linked to the idea of a "spooky" atmosphere, something not really apparent in Lovecraft's Weird tales featuring the mental hospital. In *Arkham Asylum: A Serious Place on Serious Earth*, Morrison explains that:

> The story's themes were inspired by Lewis Carroll, quantum physics, Jung and Crowley, its visual style by surrealism, Eastern European creepiness, Cocteau, Artaud, Svankmajer, the Brothers Quay, etc. I wanted to approach Batman from the point of view of the dreamlike, emotional and irrational hemisphere, as a response to the very literal 'realistic' 'left-brain' treatment of superheroes which was in vogue at the time. (n. p.)

These hallucinatory dreamlike visuals are clearly observable in the text, while Crowley and Jung feature briefly as characters. Lovecraft, on the other hand, muted the atmosphere of his hospitals: his fictions are already replete enough with cosmic horrors. In his novella, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927), for instance, he features "a private hospital for the insane near Providence, Rhode Island" (90). Yet, despite these almost non-existent descriptions of the hospital, Arkham Asylum in popular culture invokes the Batman version. Arguably, Lovecraft is misremembered in modern and contemporary reimaginings of the asylum. His hospitals, which lack significant description about their physical environment, are assumed to be grim and foreboding spaces as opposed to the sanctuary which keeps cosmic horrors at bay.

Part of the reason for this misremembering may be that the Batman comics and video games depict Arkham Asylum as based on the external appearance of Danvers State Hospital, Massachusetts, rather than the Butler-Hospital, Rhode Island. Danvers State Hospital is an iconic site in horror fiction, as it is the setting for the 2001 film *Session 9*, amongst other productions. Tellingly, Danvers (and not Arkham Sanitarium or another fictional hospital) is passingly mentioned by name in two of Lovecraft's fictions. In "Pickman's Model" (1926), the narrator explains how he "would listen for hours like a schoolboy to art theories and philosophical speculations wild enough to qualify him for the Danvers asylum" , associating madness as a kind of esoteric knowledge (80). Similarly, in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1931), the narrator is informed of a citizen "who went crazy and is out at Danvers now" (274). These references to existing hospitals serve a purpose in Lovecraft's writing. As Joshi explains, Lovecraft's use of the real "heightens the weird by contrast" (*The Weird Tale* 193). It is telling that later fictional manifestations of Arkham Asylum are less focused on the real and instead concerned with a foreboding and haunting atmosphere of dark hospital spaces. This change likely reflects a growing cultural awareness of the Western history of mental health treatment and an increased public knowledge about specific psychopathologies. The fact that the asylum is shown to be an anachronistic prison throughout the Batman texts points to a lack of understanding,

8 See for instance an opinion article in *The New York Times* Sept. 2011 entitled "Putting the Caped Crusader on the Couch." The forensic psychiatrist authors argued that: "Arkham grossly confuses the concept of psychiatric hospital and prison. Patients are called 'inmates', decked out in shackles with orange jumpsuits, while a mental health professional doubles as the 'warden'. Even the antiquated word "asylum" implies that the patients are locked away with no treatment and little hope of re-joining society' (Bender, Praveen and Pozios 2011).

(or willful ignorance), in the accumulation of this knowledge: mental illness is not so easily understood, and the invocation of imagined care practices offers an alternative narrative to the uncertainty of accommodating difference and alterity. The willful misremembering of asylum memory that occurs throughout popular culture owes much to the gothicizing of real-life institutions. In reviewing these notions, the exploitation of mental illness and the social exclusion of "madness" can be more thoroughly understood and contextualized. In Lovecraft's asylums, Horror is not immediately associated with the hospital space itself. Readers of Lovecraft's Weird asylum are encouraged to hear and take seriously the warnings of his mad narrators; they are inclined to see past the limitations of madness and delight in the perils of researching forbidden ideas. This in itself is a problematic depiction of mental illness, as it glosses and trivializes the experience of going "mad." The Lovecraftian Arkham Asylum demonstrates little interest in the actual workings of such institutions. On the other hand, the Batman Arkham Asylum revels in the most abject occasions of institutional abuse. While both portrayals are potentially adding to the stigma surrounding discussions of mental illness, there is a wider question about why the legacy of Lovecraft's Arkham Asylum retains such a haunting aura. Part of this is that the Batman texts appear to misread Lovecraft's stories, forming the asylum in an absolute image that encompasses various tropes of the Weird. Alternatively, this misremembering of the source material adds to the appeal of Lovecraft in popular culture: the presence of Arkham Asylum makes us question what has really improved historically in the treatment and accommodation of mental illness.

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