



“THERE’S NOTHING SCARY ABOUT LOVECRAFT”

RIVERDALE AND GREENDALE: A LOVECRAFTIAN UTOPIA

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H.P. Lovecraft is often considered as one of the most distinguished American Gothic writers. He created a distinctive sub-genre of horror fiction known as Lovecraftian Horror or Cosmic Horror. This paper seeks to explore two very popular young adult drama series, *Riverdale* (2017-ongoing) and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020) and how they have woven selected Lovecraftian references and themes in their plots, eventually contributing to the larger fandom surrounding H.P. Lovecraft’s works. At the same time, the two series recreate a perfect Lovecraftian utopia when analysed as juxtaposed as parts of the same universe despite being standalone shows. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* was developed by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa and produced by Craig Forrest, Ryan Lindenberg, and Matthew Barry, and it was first released by Netflix on 26th October, 2018. Featuring Kiernan Shipka in the lead role as the eponymous character, this is a dark coming-of-age story about a half-witch half-mortal orphan, Sabrina Spellman, living in a gloomy little town known as Greendale with her two aunts and cousin. The main storylines revolve around how the members of the family deal with the insidious forces that threaten their existence from time to time. At times it is Lord Satan (Luke Cook) himself wreaking havoc on everyone and everything Sabrina holds dear, at other times it is a group of pagan witches who endanger the very survival of Sabrina’s coven. In other occasions there are celestial beings waging their war on witches in general and Sabrina in particular. Furthermore, disruption is caused by the Eldritch Terrors who are summoned to the town of Greendale by Father Blackwood (Richard Coyle), the high Priest of the Church of Night.



Riverdale was both written and developed by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, produced by J.B Moranville, and it first aired on the CW on 26th January, 2017. The show currently comprises five seasons—with the fifth one still running in 2021—and it is heavily influenced by the works of Alfred Hitchcock, David Lynch, Edgar Allan Poe and most importantly H.P. Lovecraft. *Riverdale* is a young-adult noir drama featuring Archie Andrews (K.J Apa), Betty Cooper (Lili Reinhart), Jughead Jones (Cole Sprouse), and Veronica Lodge (Camila Mendes) in the lead roles, forming a group of teens and young adults living in the sinister town of Riverdale. The town is characterized as being rife with petty criminals, murderous thugs, serial killers, and eerie, disquieting phenomena. *Riverdale* mostly centres on abuse, obsession, the psychological effect of the environment on the characters, and the dark nightmare behind the American Dream. The ghosts, monsters, and zombies of Greendale are replaced by criminals in Riverdale, as well as people who have some kind of a physical or psychological disability and masked men slaughtering innocents based on some distorted sense of justice. Drawing on the American Gothic tradition, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa uses nightmares, superstitions, and dream visions to confuse viewers and make them unable to distinguish between oneiric dimensions and reality.

Damsels in distress, predatory men, supernatural and paranormal activity, intergenerational secrets, sinister atmosphere and settings are some of the most commonly used gothic horror tropes that can be found throughout both of these shows. However, Lovecraftian horror is a little different and includes some other peculiar features as well. Hankering after forbidden knowledge, the influence of aliens and supernatural creatures on the Earth—called Old Ones or the Elder Things by the author—, the use of runic symbols and multi-meaning words to establish a connection with the past are some of the core elements of Lovecraftian Horror or Cosmic Horror. Cosmic Horror is the horror related to and provoked by the unknowable or the incomprehensible. More specifically, it embodies the notion that ordinary life is just a thin shell over reality, a reality so alien and abstract that merely contemplating it would damage the sanity of the ordinary person. The references to Lovecraft and the employment of Lovecraftian horror are very overt in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. In *Riverdale* instead, the employment of Lovecraftian elements is done with a considerable amount of subtlety, so much so that if it is analysed as a standalone show, one might not be able to comprehend how *Riverdale* could fall within the sub-genre of Lovecraftian Horror. Nonetheless, when *Riverdale* is placed geographically next to *Sabrina's* town Greendale and the two towns are analysed together as belonging to the same universe, the observations become more complex and the inferences more suggestive. That is what this paper is primarily going to explore in light of the two popular young adult dramas.



CHILLING ADVENTURES OF SABRINA

Throughout the four seasons of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* we find several references to H.P. Lovecraft, the Elder Things and the Eldritch Terrors. The Eldritch Terrors are otherworldly entities so utterly strong and powerful that they are beyond human comprehension. *The Eldritch Tales: A Miscellany of the Macabre* (2011)—a posthumous collection of some of the finest stories written by H.P. Lovecraft—features a range of such monsters and demons. The TV series includes direct references to Lovecraft in episode titles and lines of dialogue. For example, the fifth chapter of the show is entitled “Dreams in a Witch House,” a direct reference to Lovecraft’s short story “The Dreams in the Witch House.” Similarly, the name of chapter thirty-six—“At the Mountains of Madness”—is once again a direct reference to Lovecraft’s novella of the same title. In chapter thirteen the character of Brother Lovecraft is introduced featuring alongside Father Blackwood; in chapter fourteen when Nicholas speaks of his familiar Amalia, he says that she “wouldn’t let anyone get close to me. So, I... I banished her years ago to the dark forests at the base of the Mountains of Madness” (“Lupercalia” 37:01-37:10).

In the very next chapter, when Harvey (Ross Lynch), Sabrina’s ex-boyfriend, meets the fortune teller, she tells him “you hang between two futures, one here at home and one further away. Rhode Island.” (“Dr Cerberus’ House of Horrors” 40:40-40:50). She then shows him a vision wherein Harvey gets accepted for the summer at an arts colony in Providence, Rhode Island. The exact location forms the backdrop for most of Lovecraft’s stories because that is where he was born. Harvey soon moves to the Arkham Colony for the Arts, where he meets his roommate Howard (Nikolai Witschl), whose name is an obvious echo of the writer’s first name. Howard mostly draws pictures of strange monsters who bear a striking resemblance to H.P. Lovecraft’s own gamut of monsters. Howard works late into the night and Harvey once wakes up hearing horrible noises and noticing a sickly green glow in his room. When Harvey asks him who he was talking to, Howard says that he was conversing with his muses and that they only come out at night. The next morning, when interrogated by Harvey, Howard confesses that these monsters are “harbingers of the Void. Old Ones. Demons, Gods... The closet is some kind of window. Uh, it’s... it’s just one of many hidden, uh, portals, pits, or, uh... tunnels...” and that “they’re getting ready to do something, to... emerge, perhaps. And I thought that by painting them I could trap them... or slow them down at least” (“Dr Cerberus’ House of Horrors” 45:20-46:20). The following day Harvey wakes up to find his roommate Howard hanging from the ceiling: he committed suicide driven to insanity by these alleged demons. When Harvey opens the closet that night, he hears distorted growling and screaming and discovers that behind the door of the closet there is an entire universe full of slimy, disgusting



creatures he has never seen before. In this moment he snaps out of such a supernatural vision.

At the end of the third part of the show, a creature emerges from the nearby lake and gives Father Blackwood an egg which is supposed to contain the Eldritch Terrors. Father Blackwood breaks the egg and releases the Eldritch Terrors into the world. The entire Part 4 of the show features eight Eldritch Terrors, one in each of its episodes. Nonetheless, most of the creatures featuring in this show are not from Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, with the exception of a parasitic squid which finds a host in the body of Sabrina and eventually had to be exorcised out of her. This squid is referred to as The Weird and bears a striking resemblance to Lovecraft's brainchild Cthulhu. Furthermore, Father Blackwood takes on the name of Brother Lovecraft himself, which is seen as the show writer's homage to one of his most favourite horror writers, H.P. Lovecraft.

RIVERDALE

In contrast with *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *Riverdale* treats its Lovecraftian influences with more subtlety. In the episode "Tales from the Darkside," the show features a drug crate with H.P. Lovecraft's name and address on it. It reads "Miskatonic University, via H.P. Lovecraft. Polar Expedition Jan. 13, 1923." Jughead (Cole Sprouse) was supposed to deliver this crate to someone in the neighbouring town of Greendale, the fictional town inhabited by Sabrina, her family and friends. Apart from the obvious references to two of Lovecraft's most popular gothic tales, namely "Herbert West-Reanimator" (1922) and "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936), the excitement sparked off by these small details and references was taken one step forward in a subsequent episode titled "The Blackboard Jungle," in which one of the characters named Toni (Vanessa Morgan) reads the draft of a story written by Jughead Jones and remarks that the text was very "Lovecraftian." Further on, in another episode when Jughead shifts to a new school, Stonewall Prep—in order to learn the art of writing—the students are asked by their teacher Mr Chipping (Sam Witwer) to bring texts by their favourite horror writers to class for discussion. In this occasion, Jughead chooses to bring *The Collected Works of H.P. Lovecraft*, to which his classmate Bret Weston Wallis (Sean Depner) scoffs and states that "there's nothing scary about Lovecraft" ("Halloween" 5:55-6:05). In yet another episode in which Jughead gets accepted at Yale University, the interviewer Gerald Brooks (Tyler Gibson) admires Jughead's writing, mentioning that he is "sensing H.P. Lovecraft is an influence" and Jughead replies confirming that it is indeed "a major one" ("Varsity Blues" 17:05-17:15). This kind of references that have triggered endless speculation



among the fans, one of them being that Archie and Lovecraft belong in the same universe.

One of the main characteristics often associated with Lovecraftian horror is a preoccupation with visceral textures, protean semi-gelatinous substances and slime (Carlin and Allen 2013, 73-90). This is where the Maple Trade becomes significant. The economic lifeblood of Riverdale is the Blossom Maple Syrup Company, whose owner is Clifford Blossom (Barclay Hope), the father of twins Cheryl (Madelaine Petsch) and Jason Blossom (Trevor Stines). At the very beginning of the first season, the viewers learn that Jason Blossom died mysteriously while he was out rowing with Cheryl Blossom across the Sweetwater River. When his body is finally discovered, the corpse presents a bullet wound on the forehead. The entire season is thus devoted to the investigations of Jason Blossom's murder and the related motives. The Maple Trade thereafter becomes the locus of the Gothic in Riverdale. Maple syrup is used as a symbol in the first season of the show because of its appearance—reddish brown in colour—is almost suggestive of blood and its semi-gelatinous texture strongly reminds one of Lovecraft's preoccupation with similar substances. The themes of redness and blood also correspond with the twins' red hair. Furthermore, the Blossom family has a history of violence that includes the mass slaughter of the Indigenous Uktena tribe. At the end of the first season, the viewers discover that Clifford Blossom had actually murdered his own son Jason in a vicious act of prolicide.

When it comes to the characterization of Lovecraft's protagonists, at the very beginning of *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928)—the most famous novella written by Lovecraft—the protagonist of the story Francis Wayland Thurston says:

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 the 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 our frightened 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. (Lovecraft 1928, 25)

This quote becomes important when analysing the protagonists of *Riverdale*, Jughead Jones and Betty Cooper. The desire for knowledge is most prominent in these two characters, who work as teen investigators and journalists for the school newspaper *The Blue and Gold*. Betty unequivocally reminds us of Francis Wayland Thurston from *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) and Etienne Roulet from *The Shunned House* (1937), because of how passionate she is about each and every investigation that she undertakes. She



has an indomitable desire for forbidden knowledge which she tries to quench through these local investigations and, just like Thurston and Roulet, with each of her new discoveries Betty spirals deeper and deeper into psychological instability. Each investigation begets a fresh set of traumas which leaves indelible scars on Betty's psyche as well as the signs of self-harm. For example, she sinks her nails deep into her skin in a way to combat the darkness that overwhelms her every now and then. The viewers further discover a split in her personality when she transforms to the "dark Betty" figure. When this transformation happens, Betty loses sight of the immediate reality. For instance, while taking revenge on a misogynistic high school bully, Chuck Clayton (Jordan Calloway), Betty dresses up in a black wig and refers to both herself and Chuck by the wrong names. At the beginning of the fifth season, Betty's mental health is in shambles, she has been undergoing therapy, and she has also been barred from working for the FBI as a result.

Furthermore, the fictional game Gryphons and Gargoyles or G&G featured in *Riverdale* occupies the most of the third season. The game is directly inspired by the actual game CoC or Call of the Cthulhu (1981) designed by Sandy Peterson and published by Chaosium. CoC was a role-playing game, much like Gryphons and Gargoyles, belonging to the genre of horror fiction based on the idea of Lovecraft's novella *The Call of Cthulhu* and thus associated with the Cthulhu mythos. The characters of *Riverdale* are seen playing this game for almost the entirety of the third season of the show. However, the reason why G&G becomes important to the analysis of Lovecraftian elements in the series is the fact that there is one very obscure but extremely important reference to Lovecraft in the game of G&G: the use of runic symbols. The game almost becomes a microcosmic representation of the town of Riverdale, as if whatever happens in Riverdale could be predicted through this game. At one point, the game starts governing the lives of the people in Riverdale, so much so that in one of the episodes, Jughead tells Betty how G&G itself was Riverdale.

On November 5, 2018, the *Riverdale* podcast Dial M for Maple tweeted that the glyphs used on the show as a part of the game are certainly borrowed from a Lovecraft inspired font. The tweet claims that: "The symbol/markings of The Gargoyle King look pretty similar to the letters in some interpretations of the 'Lovecraft Alphabet'..." Another tweet on the same day reads: "Also worth noting: Is this also the 'Lovecraft Alphabet' on a blackboard at The Academy Of The Unseen Arts in #Sabrina? What else can we interpret from this? Are there any connections between the two?..." (@DialMForMaple November 5, 2018). On November 6, 2018, this discussion was taken up in the actual podcast hosted by Marah Eakin and Cameron Scheetz (*Dream Warriors: Recapping 'The Midnight Club'* 40:12-42:25). The font in question was actually known as Cthulhuian Font, a font that was the secret origin of the Gargoyle King's alphabet. However, no official Cthulhuian alphabet exists. Lovecraft did not



create any. He never included any part of this otherworldly alphabet in his text since reading the font would drive people insane and therefore considered leaving it to the reader's imagination. This font was created by Stacey Marshall, who—in one of his interviews with the Decider—informs the readers that he is “a big Lovecraft/Cthulhu Mythos fan and play[s] the Chaosium Call of Cthulhu role-playing game. [He] originally designed the font so [he] could make some prop handouts of pages from the Necronomicon” (Zalben 2019). Zalben's article in the Decider further states that the font was originally offered for free, until the creator deciding to make a living from his art and started charging \$2.59 for the download. Marshall now offers a commercial license for the Cthulhuian alphabet. Chaosium too ended up using the Cthulhuian font themselves in several publications. Cyanide Studios licensed the same for the PS4 game *Call of Cthulhu*, as stated in the article. This is how, through these subtle hints and references, *Riverdale* contributes to a larger fandom around Lovecraft's works.

THE LOVECRAFTIAN UTOPIA

There are no Lovecraftian monsters or supernatural creatures in *Riverdale*. There are only mentions of H.P. Lovecraft, mostly in relation to Jughead's style of writing and the drug crate delivery. Indeed, there are only hints and speculations of a certain Gargoyle King who seems to be supernatural but is actually human. Therefore, what happens in *Riverdale* is very different from what would happen in a typical Lovecraft story. There is always a practical, logical and realistic explanation behind whatever bizarre incidents happen in the town. Everything that happens in *Riverdale* can be connected to either some serial killer, some addictive game, or drugs. *Riverdale* is undoubtedly gothic, but is it Lovecraftian? The following quote from Lovecraft's *From Beyond* (1934) and the location and proximity of the two towns—*Riverdale* and *Greendale*—completely change the equation:

With five feeble senses we pretend to comprehend the boundlessly complex cosmos, yet other beings with wider, stronger, or different range of senses might not only see very differently the things we see, but might see and study whole worlds of matter, energy, and life which lie close at hand yet can never be detected with the senses we have. (Lovecraft 1934, 264)

Keeping this quote in mind, we must analyse the geographical significance of the neighbouring towns of *Riverdale* and *Greendale*, which can be considered as belonging to the same fictional universe. The viewers know about this from the numerous crossovers that happen throughout both series. *Greendale* is Sabrina's fictional town—a town full of people with an advanced set of senses like witches,



psychics, clairvoyants, in other words, people endowed with special powers whose perception of the world is radically different from that of the ordinary people in Riverdale. On the other hand, Archie and friends try to apply their logic and reason to get to the bottom of every mystery. However, they are only using their “five feeble senses” (Lovecraft 1934, 264) to make sense of their world. So, there are two sets of people living side by side, right next to each other, but their experience of the same universe is so drastically different from one another. Despite the proximity of the two towns, Riverdale residents appear oblivious to the supernatural happenings just next door in Greendale, like the arrival of the Greendale Thirteen, the Red Angel of Death, the destructive pagan witches and later on the Eldritch Terrors. Archie and his friends are so caught up in their own drama that they are not really open to the idea of any extra-terrestrial or supernatural possibility, despite their proximity to Greendale’s world of matter, energy and life. Disasters keep brewing in the town of Greendale, the kind of disasters that could wipe out every mortal living on the face of the earth, yet in Riverdale, everything is absolutely normal.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, when viewed through Lovecraftian lens, Riverdale is nothing but a microcosmic representation of the ordinary life inhabited by ordinary human beings trying to use their five feeble senses to infuse the world with meaning. The teens struggle with their existential angst and cope with the uncanny by engaging excessively in rough sports like wrestling and boxing, partying and clubbing hard, substance abuse, joining cults and gangs to feel like they belong, lusting for sex and power and carrying out obsessive investigations. On the other hand, Greendale is the microcosmic representation of the Lovecraftian vision of reality: the world housing within it a realm beyond anything remotely ordinary, a dimension that one cannot navigate through one’s five feeble senses. It could be argued that Riverdale and Greendale juxtaposed constitute a world much like how H.P. Lovecraft would have envisioned it, with one half inhabited by ordinary human beings and the other half inhabited by superior beings who could communicate with the Old Ones. Thus, when we analyse the two shows separately, *Riverdale* might seem like just another crime-thriller, and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* just another show featuring monsters and magical creatures. However, only when we place these two shows side by side and examine them as belonging to the same universe will our analysis be complete. The reason why Riverdale and Greendale are situated so close to each other is to remind us that the Lovecraftian reality is replete with abstract, incomprehensible phenomena and supremely powerful monsters who can destroy the world with just the blink of an eye, and they are just behind a thin curtain veil. Though things might appear



completely fine in our seemingly ordinary world, it takes just one trip to the neighbouring town to come face to face with the unfathomable which always “lie close at hand yet can never be detected with the senses we have” (Lovecraft 1934, 264). All it takes is just one look behind the curtain.

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