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Magíster en Literatura

**COSMIC HORROR AND LIMINAL NATURE: A NARRATOLOGICAL,
RHETORICAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF *THE WILLOWS* BY
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation of cosmic horror in Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows* through the description of natural and terrestrial elements that act as sinister and eerie liminal spaces between dimensions. Adopting an interdisciplinary framework, the study combines rhetorical analysis—examining isotopies, chronography, and topography—with narratological perspectives focused on narrative voice, focalization, and the threshold chronotope. A psychological approach is also employed to investigate how these natural elements affect the characters' perception and emotional experience. By analyzing the symbolic and affective dimensions of the text, this work proposes a new interpretative approach that diverges from previous readings. Ultimately, it aims to demonstrate how *The Willows* destabilizes the boundary between the human and the non-human, confronting the reader with an indifferent universe where the familiar becomes a source of existential dread.

KEYWORDS

<COSMIC HORROR> <THE SINISTER> <LIMINALITY> <THE WILLOWS>
<ALGERNON BLACKWOOD> <EERINESS>

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Fear is an unpleasant emotion generally provoked by the perception of some danger that can be real or imaginary and that can be located in the past, present, or even the future. It is an inherent characteristic of human beings and provokes different responses that range from escape, as a survival mechanism, to anguish and anxiety, reflected not only psychologically but also physically, such as excessive sweating, paralysis, and increased heart rate, reactions that depend on the social and cultural context of each individual. The definition of fear can be complemented by other words that are not necessarily synonyms but provide more precision and a sense of this emotion: fright, phobia, dread, terror, horror, among others.

From a psychological point of view, Ricardo O. Moscone defines fear as

[An] emotion that arises if personal integrity or life is in danger, when he or she has a fright, that is, when an unforeseen sensory stimulus has sufficient intensity to awaken him or her, or when perceiving it in another person or group; it depends on the ability to face life, and leads to adopt adequate measures to protect oneself. Fear, alarm, startle are its synonyms. (57)¹

Along the same lines, Paula Contreras points out that, “fears are expressed at a psychic level with repercussions in our physiology and behavior. They depend as much on a historical, political and social context as on the representations and imaginaries that each person constructs of themselves and their surrounding

¹ “emoción que surge si la integridad personal o la vida está en peligro, cuando se tiene un susto, es decir, cuando un estímulo sensorial imprevisto posee la intensidad suficiente como para despertarlo, o al percibirlo en otra persona o grupo; depende de la capacidad para enfrentar la vida, y lleva a adoptar medidas adecuadas para protegerse. Temor, alarma, sobresalto son sus sinónimos”. All translations from secondary sources are by the author of the thesis.

reality”² (103). Fear is present in all living beings and its existence is socially accepted, as long as human beings can control their emotions. Fear is the emotion that helps people identify and make a decision regarding a situation that may threaten them; the experience that the subject has in this respect will help them to make the most appropriate decision to overcome the conflict.

As Delumeau observes, “individual fear is an emotion-shock, often preceded by surprise, provoked by the awareness of a present and overwhelming danger that, as we believe, threatens our preservation,”³ (18) so it is inherent to human nature and, consequently, to any living being for survival. Let us imagine for a moment the end of time and with it “the fear of seeing the sun disappear forever on the horizon”⁴ (90) that has so distressed humanity; the eternal darkness associated with a constant threat of things we can neither see nor prepare ourselves to face, the exposure to unknown forces hidden in the darkness, “the disappearance of light confines us in isolation, envelops us in silence and, therefore, makes us insecure,”⁵ (92) unprotected towards what we cannot glimpse.

However, there is a very important element to consider in this process that clearly differentiates animals from humans with respect to this emotion, and that element is imagination. According to Bauman, “In the dark anything can happen [...] Darkness is not the cause of danger, but it is the natural habitat of uncertainty and, therefore, of fear.”⁶ (*Miedo* 10) Imagination can be an ally or an enemy when assessing a situation that causes us fear: it helps us to stay alert and prepared, but in excess, it weakens us and blocks our thoughts and therefore the actions

² “se expresan a nivel psíquico con repercusiones en nuestra fisiología y conducta. Dependen tanto de un contexto histórico, político y social como de las representaciones e imaginarios que cada persona construye de sí misma y de su realidad circundante”.

³ “el miedo (individual) es una emoción-choque, frecuentemente precedida de sorpresa, provocada por la toma de conciencia de un peligro presente y agobiante que, según creemos, amenaza nuestra conservación”.

⁴ “El temor a ver desaparecer el sol para siempre en el horizonte”.

⁵ “la desaparición de la luz nos confina en el aislamiento, nos envuelve en silencio y, por tanto, nos “desasegura”.

⁶ “En la oscuridad, todo puede suceder [...]. La oscuridad no es la causa del peligro, pero sí el hábitat natural de la incertidumbre y, por tanto, del miedo”.

that can be taken to overcome the impasse. When the imagination overflows the individual, in the dark, it creates impossible scenarios that make the subject overthink situations and undesired results, but which, if properly managed, could obtain positive results, such as, the creation of remarkable literary works.

For Sara Ahmed, fear “functions by constituting others as fearsome insofar as they threaten to absorb the self”⁷ (107). Just as seeing the sun disappear forever is one of humanity's fears, so is losing the individuality of the self, which can paralyze the body's movements, preparing it for flight (Ahmed 115). Fear is represented in various forms throughout human history in different contexts or scenarios: war, famine, invasions, unbridled passions, religion, and so on. The threat to both personal and societal well-being is inherent to the human condition.

We agree when the American writer, father of what we will later define as cosmic horror, Howard Philip Lovecraft⁸ (1890-1937), states that, “the oldest and most powerful emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and most powerful kind of fear is the fear of the unknown.”⁹ (Horror 125) We fear what we cannot understand, especially if the unknown is hidden behind the shadows. The unknown that draws us even closer to see it also moves us away in horror from what we find.

In his essay, *The Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), Lovecraft points out that for the reader to feel immersed in the world created by the writer, he must possess “a certain degree of imagination, as well as the ability to detach himself from everyday life,”¹⁰ (126) in order to let himself or herself go, to abstract from the oppressive brutality of the routine and dare to enter the terrain of the strange and sinister.

⁷ “funciona constituyendo a los otros como temibles en tanto amenazan con absorber al yo”.

⁸ For more information about H. P. Lovecraft and his works, we recommend: <https://www.hplovecraft.com/>

⁹ “La más antigua y poderosa emoción de la humanidad es el miedo, y la clase más antigua y poderosa de miedo es el temor a lo desconocido”.

¹⁰ “cierto grado de imaginación, así como la capacidad de despegarse del día a día cotidiano”.

Since the middle of the 20th century, horror literature has captured the interest of scholars and critics, becoming a true object of study that deserves attention and in-depth analysis, especially with authors like H. P. Lovecraft, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, among others. Jason Ray Carney, for example, is a renowned expert on popular fiction and professor of literature at Christopher Newport University in Virginia in the United States.¹¹ His research focus is related to literary criticism and theory in the genres of fiction (horror, science fiction and fantasy) and he is the author of *Weird Tales of Modernity: The Ephemerality of the Ordinary in the Stories of Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith and H. P. Lovecraft* (2019), among other works. S. T. Joshi¹² has also dedicated much of his career to analyze works from H.P. Lovecraft, Ambrose Bierce, H. L. Mencken and other weird writers and he is considered an expert on that topic. American writer, academic and leading authority on supernatural horror, Joshi has published several books, including *I am Providence* (2010), which is a more comprehensive analysis of H. P. Lovecraft, covering his life, work and thought; *The Weird Tale* (1990), where he examines the roots of the “weird tale”; *The Modern Weird Tale* (2001), a critique of horror fiction, among other works. On the other hand, Scott Connors, an independent scholar specializing in the life and work of Clark Ashton Smith, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and other writers of weird fiction, has published many critical studies, including the edited volume *The Freedom of Fantastic Things. Selected Criticism on Clark Ashton Smith* (2006).

From a different disciplinary point of view, we can find many philosophers who have seen in horror (some specifically in cosmic horror) a form of expression to the concerns of humanity regarding these issues. Noël Carroll, professor of philosophy and “one of the leading philosophers of art and aesthetics in the United States, [who] is internationally recognized for his pioneering work in the philosophy of cinema,”¹³ defines artistic terror from the perspective of art

¹¹ <https://cnu.edu/people/jasoncarney/>

¹² For more information on this scholar, visit the website: <http://stjoshi.org/index.html>

¹³ <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/people/noel-carroll>

manifestations, primarily literature and cinema. In his book, *Philosophy of Terror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, he poses problems related to how we perceive monsters. Another philosopher, Mark Fisher, in the series of essays, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), also explores different art forms, such as literature and film, to differentiate between what he understands by weird and creepy, managing to separate what we commonly use as synonyms. Likewise, Eugene Thacker,¹⁴ PhD in Comparative Literature and professor at The New School in New York, has written several books on horror, primarily in regards to the work of H. P. Lovecraft, including *After Life* (2010), and the trilogy *Horror of Philosophy* (2011; 2015; 2015), among others. Finally, we will mention Graham Harman, a contemporary American philosopher specialized in metaphysics, who along with other authors, developed the movement of speculative realism. In fact, one of his best-known works is *Towards Speculative Realism* (2015), but the work that relates it to the present thesis is *Weird Realism* (2012), where he examines the work of H. P. Lovecraft, leaving aside the central focus of philosophy (man and his perception of reality) so as to argue that speculative realism is a reality independent of the human being.

Over time, this genre has also been incorporated into the literary canon, which implies recognizing its importance and influence in the formation of contemporary narrative, among which we can find some writers related to weird fiction, such as Brian Lumley (1937-2024), who followed in the footsteps of H. P. Lovecraft regarding the Cthulhu Mythos through the character of Titus Crow, investigator of the occult, along with Henri-Laurent de Marigny, a character who appears in “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” (1934) by the writer from Providence, are reflected in a series of books, where his adventures in Lovecraft’s “Dreamland” are described (Santos 10). Stephen King (1947) is another author considered to cultivate weird fiction. One of the most prolific and world-renowned writers (whether or not one likes him), his themes include horror, fantasy, science fiction, black comedy, post-apocalyptic fiction, suspense, and detective fiction.

¹⁴ <https://eugenethacker.com/>

Among his works related to cosmic horror, we can find *Crouch End* (1980), which describes the odyssey of an American couple in a London neighborhood with fateful consequences, among several other texts. Thomas Ligotti (1953), an American writer defined as “heir and renovator of the work of the great masters of horror literature: E.A. Poe and H.P. Lovecraft,”¹⁵ as stated on the back cover of the Spanish edition of *Conspiracy against the Human Race* (2015). In his works we can appreciate that reality is a facade and that behind it hides a universe of rottenness, cruelty and death, an agenda that has nothing to do with the course of humanity. Joe Hill (1972), one of Stephen King's sons, became internationally famous for his work *The Dead Man's Suit* (2007), which won awards, including the Bram Stoker (2007) and Locus (2008), and several of his works have been taken to the big screen. In his stories the characters live everyday lives, but at some point, horror, suspense, the macabre enter the stage and everything changes color and nothing is what it was a moment ago. Finally, we will mention Argentine author Mariana Enriquez (1973), who declares that, “horror [...] for me, has always been linked to politics or, better said, I consider that it is the genre that best understands the relationship between Evil and power,”¹⁶ for, as a child, she saw horror in the descriptions of torture during the Argentine dictatorship. Her latest book, *Un lugar soleado para gente sombría* (2024), is composed of twelve horror stories that deal with evil and monstrous beings that can appear anywhere at any time.

All these authors (and several others not mentioned here) represent horror in their own way, but share common characteristics: the uncomfortable acidity that intoxicates us when within an idyllic and totally everyday landscape, we can discover the corrosive stain that the weird tale evokes, when it perversely tears the curtain of existence in which we feel so comfortable and safe, totally distorting

¹⁵ “heredero y renovador de la obra de los grandes maestros del género, E.A. Poe y H.P. Lovecraft”.

¹⁶ “el terror [...] para mí, siempre estuvo ligado a la política o, mejor dicho, considera que es el género que mejor entiende las relaciones entre el Mal y el poder”.

<https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/articles/98aad9b8-2350-45c8-b9bd-e060cd89bd3b/ficcionesimposibles-de-aplacar>

and rendering barely recognizable or acceptable the way we perceive the materiality of reality.

Gothic Literature: First Wave

Romanticism was a response to the Enlightenment because “it showed its influence in a return to nature and in absorption in the remote in time and space and a revelling in the attendant emotion of awe and wonder, in emphasis on the individual” (Moody and Lovett 253), contrary to what the Enlightenment proclaimed when it established that the use of reason should be the basis of thought and being. According to Moody and Lovett, the romantic movement “is essentially the emphasis upon the individual effort to escape from the world of conventions and social control. There are two venues of such escape—external nature and the imagination. The former appealed by contrast to the prevailing admiration of urban life; the latter led men's thoughts into the past, and to remote lands” (Moody and Lovett 253). This represents the need for escape from a world exceedingly organized by reason and laws: it becomes necessary to encounter the individual himself or herself and the introspection of thoughts and feelings to create an inner world that fills those spaces that the excess of rationality cannot occupy. American author Thomas Ligotti, discussing emotions and reason in relation to what David Hume observes in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739), indicates that, “to free reason from this slavery [being the slave of the passions] would mean turning us into causeless rationalists, paralytics crippled by mental activity”¹⁷ (145), opposite to the idea that Romanticism wishes to rescue the individual from the excess of reason of his or her time. However, we should also note that Romanticism, in addition to seeking a connection with nature and understanding the inner world of the individual, also explored the future: “in its reverence for the individual, it fostered sympathy for the oppressed, applauded

¹⁷ “liberar a la razón de esta esclavitud significaría convertirnos en racionalistas sin causa, paráliticos lisiados por la actividad mental”.

the resistance to institutions hostile to human rights, and looked forward to a more democratic social system” (Moody and Lovett 207).

Although this movement began in the late seventeenth century, its peak occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. In the previous century we can find, among others, William Blake (1757-1827), an extraordinary genius who nevertheless had little influence on his generation. In his paintings it is recurrent to find “the figure of a monstrously muscular old man whose hair and beard resemble a snowstorm, but whose limbs look like young trees. This is Blake's root concept: the old man of days, that which is old with all the horror of its past and at the same time young with all the vigor of its future”¹⁸ (Chesterton 64). As we can see, Romanticism represented a rooted connection to the past, where its roots fundamentally come from, but with a view to the new, unknown, possibly threatening but no less captivating future.

The English novel emerged in the 18th century with the work of Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) (Moody and Lovett 238) and has its roots in what is known as romance (Eagleton 2), but unlike romance, the novel is a form that is tied to common life, while ordinary people prefer the monstrous and miraculous that romance can offer (Eagleton 5) as an escape from their routine lives. During this period, there were three important types of fiction: the realistic novel, which depicts ordinary life, for “it is a model of modern society, not simply a reflection on it” (Eagleton 6); the romance, “which represents the purely emotional interest in nature and in the past” (Moody and Lovett 253), and the humanitarian novel, which attempted to make amends for the wrongs that society had inflicted upon the individual (Moody and Lovett 253).

We can point to the origin of the Gothic tale, located in Europe in the mid-18th century with Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (Moody and Lovett 253; Lovecraft 138; Carroll 127). While this novel attempted to depict

¹⁸ “la figura de un anciano monstruosamente musculoso cuyos cabellos y barbas se asemejan a una tormenta de nieve, pero cuyas extremidades parecen árboles jóvenes. Se trata del concepto raigal de Blake: el anciano de los días, aquello que es viejo con todo el horror de su pasado y al mismo tiempo joven con todo el vigor de su futuro”.

everyday life during the feudal period, for Lovecraft it is nothing more than “the tedious, artificial, melodramatic story, marred by a frivolous and prosaic style whose vivacity does not, at any time, permit the creation of a truly supernatural atmosphere”¹⁹ (Horror 138). However, Walpole “gave to the Gothic romance the elements on which it was to thrive for a generation to come— a hero sullied by unmentionable crimes, several persecuted heroines, a castle with secret passages and haunted rooms, and a plentiful sprinkling of supernatural terrors” (Moody and Lovett 254) and even “the fantasy of *The Castle of Otranto* created a vogue for camp thrillers in which nobles drug and rape beautiful Ward in the bowels of their mountain fastnesses, and statues bleed from the nose” (Alexander 202). For Lovecraft this work lacks what he called cosmic horror, but it raised such a buzz in his time that it was considered vitally important, as it kick-started a string of gothic works (139).

Another important work within the Gothic romances was *The History of the Caliph Vathek* (1786) by William Beckford, who, “well versed in Oriental novels, captured the atmosphere with singular skill, and his fantastic work reflects with tremendous power the arrogant opulence, the cunning cynicism, the gentle cruelty, the courtly treachery, and the grimly spectral horror of the Saracen spirit”²⁰ (Lovecraft 152), making *Vathek* “a perverse fantasy” (Alexander 202). Matthew Gregory Lewis, whose *The Monk* (1796) “achieved portentous popularity [...], tackled terror in more violent forms [...] and created as a result a masterpiece of active nightmare whose general gothic aspect is spiced with added snippets of necrophilia”²¹ (Lovecraft Horror 145).

¹⁹ “La historia tediosa, artificial y melodramática se ve dañada por un estilo frívolo y prosaico cuya vivacidad no permite, en ningún momento, la creación de una atmósfera verdaderamente sobrenatural”.

²⁰ “muy versado en novela oriente, captó la atmósfera con singular destreza, y su trabajo fantástico refleja con tremenda potencia la arrogante opulencia, el astuto cinismo, la crueldad amable, la traición cortés y el horror sombríamente espectral del espíritu sarraceno”.

²¹ “alcanzó una portentosa popularidad [...] abordó el terror en formas más violentas [...] y creó como resultado, una obra maestra de pesadilla activa cuyo general aspecto gótico es especiado con añadidos retazos de necrofilia”.

Ann Radcliffe was “the most successful producer of Gothic stories” (Moody and Lovett 254) and her most famous works are *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797). As Moody and Lovett point out, these novels “abound in mysterious incident, skillfully used; but they show an increasing tendency toward finding a rational explanation for apparently supernatural occurrences” (254). Lovecraft, on the other hand, notes that, “Ann Radcliffe's characters are stereotypes, though less crude than those of her colleagues. And in the creation of atmosphere, she far surpasses all those of her time”²² (Horror 143).

Of course, Romanticism had also arrived in the United States: “[America] itself was a Romantic principle-rich in remarkable landscape, new social feeling, distinctive and forward-looking political institutions, the finest flower of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment” (Ruland and Malcom 62), as a replica or rather as a way of relieving a little of the weight of so much history that Europe brought with it. And among the authors who followed the Gothic style we can find Charles Brockden Brown, who “knew perfectly well that the topography of that world belonged in Europe, where the Gothic itself came from. Europe was the seat of those old crimes, hermetic societies, dark forests, ancient castles, strange manuscripts and Piranesian ruins” (Ruland and Malcom 86). H. P. Lovecraft notes that he uses North American settings as a background to develop his mysteries, and some of his novels have “memorable scenes of fear and surpass even Ann Radcliffe in writing the workings of the disturbed mind”²³ (Horror 144). His most celebrated work is *Wieland or The Transformation* (1798), but we must also consider *Ormond* (1799), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800), and *Edgar Huntly* (1799), which all contain:

“the mixture of desire and fear—desire for new knowledge and feeling, fear of a door that might open into the darkness of insanity and self-disintegration, a landscape of collapsing faith, weakening

²² “Los personajes de Ann Radcliffe son estereotipos, aunque menos toscos que los de sus colegas. Y, en cuanto a creación de atmósferas, sobrepasa y de lejos a todos los de su época”.

²³ “memorables escenas de miedo y sobrepasa incluso a Ann Radcliffe a la hora de describir el funcionamiento de una mente perturbada”.

authority and parricidal emotions where minds pass by way of reason to the terrible and perverse, the unfamiliar, the estranging and the grotesque” (Ruland and Malcom 86).

Back in Europe, in 1816 Mary Shelly, her husband, Lord Byron, and John Polidori held a ghost story competition. While all four contributed ideas to the competition, only Mary Shelley wrote a really substantial work: *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, which would finally see the light in 1818 and become one of the horror classics of all time. Shelly's husband, Percy, did not write anything, Byron only wrote a small piece and Polidori gave life to what would later become his best-known work, *The Vampyre* (1819) (Joshi 96). *Frankenstein* “is crucial in the history of weird fiction in withdrawing terror from the remoteness of the Middle Ages and placing it fully in the contemporary world” (Joshi 101).

In Germany, E. T. A. Hoffman was the first writer of significance in the supernatural matter (Joshi 135), his most celebrated weird tale no doubt being *The Sandman* (1816), whose “fame was augmented by the fact that Freud used it as the springboard for his discussion of ‘The Uncanny’” (Joshi 136). Lovecraft, in referring to the German writer, points out that, “the celebrated short stories and novels [...] are paradigmatic for their maturity of setting and fullness of form, though they lean toward frivolity and extravagance, and suffer from a dearth of peak moments, in terms of acute and extreme terror, which a less sophisticated writer would have reached”²⁴ (Horror 162). This suggests that what Hoffman wants to show is more on the side of imagination, strongly related to the becoming of the soul in its darkest forms than the development of reason.

In 1820, Charles R. Maturin published *Melmoth the Wanderer*, which Lovecraft defines as “the vivid masterpiece of horror [...] in which the Gothic tale reaches heights of acute spiritual dread never before known”²⁵ (Horror 146).

²⁴ “las célebres historias cortas y novelas [...] son paradigmáticas por su madurez de escenarios y plenitud de formas, aunque se inclinan a la frivolidad y la extravagancia, y adolecen de escasez de momentos cumbres, en cuanto a terror agudo y extremo, que un escritor menos sofisticado hubiera alcanzado”.

²⁵ “la vívida obra maestra del horror [...] en la que el relato gótico alcanza cotas de agudo espanto espiritual nunca antes conocidas”.

Joshi, for his part, indicates that, “the remarkable thing [...] is that although it is manifestly based on a supernatural premise [...] the means that Maturin uses to set up the confrontations between Melmoth and his successive would-be victims are such that the novel becomes a systematic display of torture, cruelty, and misery” (110), making it by then a huge leap in the evolution of the horror tale. Maturin is an authentic genius recognized even by Balzac, often known as the last of the Gothics (Lovecraft Horror 147).

Gothic Literature: Second Wave

Great changes took place in Great Britain in the mid-19th century, which of course had their repercussions on literature. As Moody and Lovett observe, “The discoveries of science gave rise to a multitude of conceptions of the most revolutionary kind, unsettling many of the old bases of religious belief, and affecting literature in numberless ways” (295), what became known as the Victorian Age²⁶ (1837-1901). During this period Britain underwent transformations from the Industrial Revolution, developing into the world's dominant imperial power and the most captivating country and different writers, such as, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, Henry James and French writers come to London to see the wonders that the city had to offer (Alexander 247).

Horror literature continued to be written from 1820 to 1870 without interruptions, but was overshadowed in English-speaking countries by the rise of the realist novel (Carroll 27) which became a moral representation of modern life

²⁶ The Victorian era refers to the 63-year period during which Queen Victoria ruled over Great Britain and Ireland, from her ascension to the throne in 1837 until her passing in 1901. This era was marked by Britain's dominance on the world stage, both politically and economically, as the British Empire expanded its influence across vast territories, including parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The nation experienced unprecedented industrial growth, with advancements in manufacturing, transportation, and communication that transformed everyday life. This period saw significant reforms aimed at improving social conditions, including changes in labor laws, the expansion of voting rights, and the rise of movements advocating for women's suffrage and workers' rights. These transformations laid the groundwork for modern democratic and social structures. Ultimately, the Victorian era was a time of immense change and progress, many aspects of which continue to shape the modern world. For more information, see: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/victorian/>

with Dickens and Thackeray (Alexander 250); in other words, Victorian Romanticism was becoming jeopardized by Realism. Moody and Lovett point out that, “The application of the historical method to the study of the Bible resulted in the development of ‘the higher criticism’, which not only had disquieting effects upon orthodox believers but also induced skepticism, if not pessimism, in many sensitive souls” (296). Therefore, it is under this depiction of the reality of that time that the following writers are presented.

According to S. T. Joshi, Walter Scott's greatest contribution to the weird “may perhaps be *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), an exhaustive treatment of witch legendry, told from a markedly skeptical point of view” (145). Scott's research is extensive, exploring the enigmas of sensory illusions and dreams, as well as the psychological, religious, and political reasons behind judicial persecution—which, the more fervent it became, the more it fostered and grew superstition. This is not to say that in his other works, there were no traces of the supernatural, as, for example, in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), “in which a thread of Gothic supernaturalism is woven into a tale of Scottish border life in the Middle Ages” (Moody and Lovett 269).

In France, two major authors were considered practitioners of the supernatural theme, Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo, who demonstrated that horror and fantasy can be placed in the everyday, portraying characters and social situations within the dominant culture (Joshi 151). The former, with the novel *Le Peau de Chagrin* (1831), and the latter, with *Han d'Islande* (1823) and other works, both authors “employ to a greater or lesser extent the supernatural, though only as a means to a more human end, without the sincere and demonic intensity that characterizes the born artists of the shadows.”²⁷ (Lovecraft Horror 164-65) Other important French authors of horror fiction include Prosper Mérimée, with his work *La Venus d'Ille* (1835), and Guy de Maupassant, whose stories “are a genre in themselves, since they represent the morbid fall of a realistic mind in a

²⁷ “emplean en mayor o menor medida lo sobrenatural, aunque, por lo general, solo como medio para un fin más humano, sin la sincera y demoníaca intensidad que caracteriza a los artistas natos de las sombras”.

pathological state than the healthy imaginative products of a vision naturally disposed to fantasy and sensitive to the normal illusions of the invisible”²⁸ (Lovecraft Horror 166), an example of which is *The Horla* (1887), considered his masterpiece.

In the United States, although there were several authors who cultivated horror, such as Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Fitz-James O'Brien, among others, we cannot overlook the importance of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), who, as Lovecraft points out, is “to whom we owe the modern horror story in its final and most refined state.”²⁹ (Horror 170) Poe “embraced not Romantic affirmation but Romantic agony, the separation of art and nature” (Ruland and Malcom 132). He was able to “study the human mind rather than the mores of Gothic fiction, and worked with an analytical knowledge of the sources of true horror that succeeded in doubling the force of his narratives and removed him from the ridicule inherent in conventional chilling pursuits,”³⁰ (Lovecraft Horror 171) so that “often [his poems and stories] are offered to us as hoaxes or literary mysteries; but they also enfold mysteries, leading us into the realms of a hallucination where reason fractures into psychic release and the world breaks open inside and outside self.” (Ruland and Malcom 138) Here we find, for example, *Metzengerstein* (1832), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), and *William Wilson* (1839).

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), “[the author] reminds us that his American fiction belongs not to the world of Common-Sense inquiry, but to the shifting metaphysical and metaphoric world of a troubled Romantic sensibility.” (Ruland and Malcom 152) H. P. Lovecraft considers this work an “exquisite and elaborate novel among all the author's supernatural

²⁸ “son un género en sí mismo, ya que son antes la representación de la morbosa caída de una mente realista en un estado patológico que los saludables productos imaginativos de una visión naturalmente dispuesta a la fantasía y sensible a las normales ilusiones de lo invisible.

²⁹ “a él le debemos el moderno cuento de terror en su estado final y más depurado”.

³⁰ “estudió la mente humana antes que las costumbres de la ficción gótica, y trabajó con un conocimiento analítico de las fuentes del verdadero horror que conseguía duplicar la fuerza de sus narraciones y lo alejaban de las ridiculeces inherentes a las convencionales búsquedas de escalofríos”.

output,”³¹ (Horror 182) whose description shows us the furtive horror and supernatural atmosphere of a setting of gothic houses with spectral cusps, rooted chimneys and diamond-shaped window panes, “very conducive to evoke gloomy reflections and typify the dark Puritan age, of occult horrors and rumors of witchcraft, which preceded the beauty, rationality and broadmindedness of the eighteenth century.”³² (Lovecraft Horror 183)

As Ruland and Malcom argue, “Cosmic irony was very much a note of the 1890s and many of its stories end in tragedy. This was the spirit of the dark fable of Ambrose Bierce, whose macabre fin de siècle tales were collected in *In the Midst of Life* (1892),” (227) where, through short stories, the author relates supernatural episodes in the context of the Civil War. Lovecraft reminds us that, “Virtually all of Bierce’s tales are of horror, and although many of them touch only upon the physical and psychic horrors of nature, not a few of them contain elements of supernatural malignity and form a striking element in American supernatural literary production.”³³ (Horror 186)

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries,

The novel represents two tendencies each of which represents a reaction from Victorianism. The first of these tendencies— [...] Stevenson, Barrie, Kipling and Conrad—was motivated by the desire to restore the spirit of romance to the novel. [...] they were allied in their attempt to escape from the limitations of a drab and stuffy realism by seeking material or modes that would invest their novels with the aura of romance. (Moody and Lovett 377)

³¹ “entre toda la producción sobrenatural del autor se halla la famosa y exquisitamente elaborada”.

³² “muy propicio para evocar reflexiones sombrías y tipificar la oscura edad puritana, de horrores ocultos y rumores sobre brujería, que precedieron a la belleza, la racionalidad y la amplitud de miras del siglo XVIII.”

³³ “virtualmente, todos los cuentos de Bierce son de horror, y aunque muchos de ellos tocan tan solo horrores físicos y psíquicos de la naturaleza, no pocos de ellos contienen elementos de malignidad sobrenatural y forman un elemento descollante en la producción literaria sobrenatural norteamericana”.

It is here where we find Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), "a tale of spiritual adventure, a scientific fantasy fraught with moral symbolism." (Moody and Lovett 378) For Lovecraft, this work "deals more with events than with details of atmosphere and addresses the intellect rather than the impressionable imagination"³⁴ (Horror 160), which we assume Lovecraft considers a negative quality since his own literary works privilege atmosphere to create a supernatural environment. On the other hand, *The King in Yellow* (1895), by Robert W. Chambers, is a collection of stories that makes its author an undisputed master of the modern horror tale, far removed from the classic Gothic monster and ghost. For Lovecraft, "it reaches remarkable heights of cosmic fear in spite of its uneven interest and the somewhat trivial and affected cultivation of the contrived atmosphere of French influence"³⁵ (Horror 192), aside from regretting that the author did not follow that path, since "he would undoubtedly have become a reputed master."³⁶ (Horror 193) Likewise, although Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) "is not a particular success from a purely aesthetic point of view" (Joshi 306), "it has become the paradigm of the modern approach to the ghastly vampire myth."³⁷ (Lovecraft Horror 199)

State of the Art: Horror Literature of the First Half of the 20th Century

The work of Algernon Blackwood has been subject to several studies. *The Willows*, which is considered one of his famous works, not only reflects the author's experience and his relationship with the world, but mostly with Nature. Within what we have investigated we can divide the state of the art into three main areas: Posthumanism/Otherness, Ecohorror/Ecocriticism/Ecophobia, and the

³⁴ "se ocupan más de los sucesos que de los detalles de atmósfera, y que se dirigen al intelecto antes que a la impresionable imaginación".

³⁵ "alcanza notables alturas de miedo cósmico a pesar de su desigual interés y el cultivo, algo trivial y afectado, de la atmósfera artificiosa, de influencia francesa".

³⁶ "se hubiera convertido en reputado maestro".

³⁷ "se ha convertido casi en el paradigma de la moderna aproximación al espantoso mito del vampiro".

Outside World; in some cases, the studies are intertwined, but they gravitate around a central topic which we will point out below.

The first area focuses on the terms Posthumanism/Otherness. Posthumanism is a philosophical framework that challenges anthropocentric perspectives by shifting the focus away from humans as the central point of study. It advocates for the inclusion of nonhuman entities in intellectual discourse while rejecting the rigid human/nonhuman binary, ultimately reshaping the humanities in a fundamental way (Merzlyakov 475 and Bolter 7). Otherness arises less from the inherent differences of the Other than from the perspective and discourse of those who label someone as Other. By contrasting concepts like “us,” “self,” “them,” and “the Other,” we adopt a criterion that divides humanity into two groups: one that represents the norm and is valued, and another that is marked by flaws, devalued, and prone to discrimination³⁸. Therefore, by decentering humanness from the measure of things, the encounter with the nonhuman other is inevitable, and the look towards the human being becomes a dizzying consequence.

In “Weird Beyond Description: Weird Fiction and the Suspicion of Scenery” (2020), John MacNeill points out that, “the weird tale expresses an emergent environmental remorse, an anxious awareness that significant nonhuman subjects have been left undervalued or unaccounted for in our anthropocentric representations of the world.” (245) Within our anthropocentric vision we do not visualize other agents: we are aware of other living beings, of course, but always under our human gaze. For the author, *The Willows* is a story that represents what he could call plant horror or botanical gothic; without going into further detail in these terms that do not concern this work, we will point out that what matters in this article is that, as the author points out, “Weird fiction like *The Willows* [...] resists description by pointing up the ideological function of description as a kind of cloaking device that hides potentially significant agentic beings.” (249) Which allows for further inquiry into these issues.

³⁸ Jean-François Staszak, “Otherness” *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2020 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/otherness>

Emily Adler, in her article “Weird Energies: Physics, Futures, and The Secrets of the Universe in Hodgson and Blackwood” (2020), stresses that weird tales could only have developed from the 1880s and 1890s onward because it was a period of great change that saw the development of scientific theories, practices, philosophy and, in general, new discoveries and propositions. She argues that, “Weird terrors, as natural entities operating on entirely different physical systems from those of normal terrestrial life and in abfuture times, are unpredictable, uncontrollable, and never fully knowable”. (227) Another aspect to point out in the article is that these types of literary works “emphasize the outsideness of the entities faced by the protagonist, distinctly weird because they are not human, not revenant, not of this time, and not of this world.” (228) They do not deal with ghosts or spirits as in the texts of early Gothic literature, but with entities that come from “outside” our world and/or dimension. And he also adds that “Weird fictions like *The Willows* and *The Night Land* don’t sort their science either, but instead present storyworlds that are weird because they are woven tapestries of science, metaphysics, occultism, imagination, and genre tropes,” (201) so they not only entertain but also introduce and use other elements in the construction of realities.

In “Decentering the Human in Weird Horror,” Marianne Gunderson notes that “[Weird stories] all rely on evolutionary distance to underscore the difference, the otherness, of the weird monsters.” (15) Nothing in *The Willows* is still or passive, even the land on which the protagonists find themselves is constantly changing, resisting the two men's ability to comprehend. According to Gunderson, “The vision that Blackwood invokes in *The Willows* is that of a universe that is not our own. It is not there for us” (17) and, therefore, “Weird fiction like *The Willows* brings new, non-human creatures to the theory about monsters and the monstrous, creatures which put us face to non-face with the unspeakable and unthinkable unknown” (21) in order to rethink our reality.

Finally, Andrzej Kasperek, in “*The Willows* by Algernon Blackwood, *das Unheimliche* and sociology: Horror literature in the dispute on what is recognized

as real” (2024), states that, “Blackwood reports a human struggle – in this case of the narrator, who is confronted with experiences which he cannot explain by reaching the reservoir of socially shared knowledge he has acquired so far” (10) and, therefore, the protagonist deals with “an unknown reality, inhabited by real and living creatures, whose existence goes far beyond the cognitive abilities of biologists and the possibilities to register (photograph) them.” (10) Perhaps what most people consider a dream, was formerly considered a connection with a supernatural reality (14), which we should not underestimate.

A second area is Ecohorror/Ecocriticism/Ecophobia. Ecohorror is associated with two kinds of meaning: on the one hand, it is a revenge of nature against humans in defense of nature survival against human depredation, and on the other hand, it is the actions done by humans to destroy nature for their own benefit no matter the cost. This is the reason why the natural world is seen “as monstrous/monstrously wronged with humanity at its center” (Fitzpatrick 260). Ecocriticism, in general terms, is the “study of human–nature relations in literature, film and other cultural expressions.” (Erin and Morel 355) Finally, we must understand Ecophobia as humans being considered a threat to the natural environment and therefore “being part of the food chain rather than at its apex.” (Fitzpatrick 266)

Elizabeth Parker points out in her article, “‘What if It's the Trees?': The Living Forest” (2020), that, “Blackwood wrote [*The Willows*] as a reaction against Victorian scientism and technology, which he saw as destroying the natural world and our relationship with it.” (82) Such a stance has been a characteristic in his work, since all of it is related to the defense of Nature against the depredation of humanity. In another of Blackwood's tales, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved,” the protagonist finally unites in a sexual way with the forest that surrounds his house and, therefore, “these tales from Blackwood each present the forest as sentient, animate, and foreboding. [...] the forest is thoroughly aware of human existence and is shown to either seek to destroy it, or to unnervingly merge with it” (92). The text concludes by indicating that the fact that Nature is cognizant leaves humanity

with the bitter taste of reconfiguring reality and consequently our actions towards Nature which we consider an object to subjugate at will.

On the other hand, in “The Lie of the Land: Decadence, Ecology, and Arboreal Communications” (2021), Dennis Denisoff poses the question of “how humans can even come to understand the communication of attraction and repulsion across species without colonizing others through the very discourses of our effort at engagement,” (627) if we are not capable of expanding our minds as Blackwood points out through the tale *The Man Whom the Trees Loved*. Blackwood's approach to Nature is an attitude that does not correspond to horror itself (or as we tend to understand it today), but rather to the eerie, that sense of discomfort that grows into real fear (633), like what we experience in our spine and expands to the whole body when we feel threatened physically or psychologically. Seen in this way, the trees are an ecological community and humans are transgressors (or colonizers) who come to take possession/damage/modify for their own benefit, which would allow us to analyze the work from a postcolonial perspective that would require further reflection in the future.

The last area corresponds to what we will call the Outside World, and here we find connections with our reality from an external perspective, either physically or interdimensionally. The outside world is the world beyond the constraints of a secluded or isolated place, for example, a subject in a prison, a hermit, a follower of a sect, etc. The idea is simple: humans only know Earth, and the rest of the universe is the Outside World, where unknown beings have their own agenda that we are unaware of.

In this group, Kahn Faassen's article “Cthulhu Calling: Weird Intimacy and Estrangement in the Anthropocene” (2021), points out that true weird horror is “the sense that the easy rapport between human and nonhuman and the enchanted animacy of the world that somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience can at any moment fall away and be revealed as illusory,” (264) considering that humanity has “the conviction that nature is, or should be, a

site of wonder, in the face of scientific reductionism, capitalism, and its concomitant ideologies of commodification and utilitarianism” (265). Therefore, the same would happen to us as to the characters in *The Willows* when we are thrown

to a world of infinite alienation and remoteness, which nevertheless shimmers with a strange kind of sublimity that leads them (us) to fantasise about being consumed and subsumed by forces beyond themselves (ourselves), [...] but when these “others” take over the world of human life and human experience can at any moment fall away and be revealed as illusory. (264)

Such an experience would dissolve all sense of humanity from the characters and could probably drive them to madness. The comprehension of a reality with entities that are not within our paradigm for interpreting what surrounds us entails a knowledge they do not possess.

Marko Pišev, in his article “Nature as the Source of Mysterium Tremendum: An Essay on the Poetic Works of Blackwood, Smith and Campbell” (2023), points out that, “in a horror story, the supernatural element is usually not integrated in the natural law of the textual reality, but rather proves itself to be a disruption of this realistic environment.” (454) When humanity tries to understand that which does not exist, according to our conceptual paradigms of reality, “the more terrified it becomes, until it reaches the breaking point, or passes over it into decomposition” (458). Therefore, the characters in *The Willows* feel that although they are in a familiar place, “there is something wrong with it, entering, thus the domain of the uncanny.” (470) The notion that there are entities superior to us, that do not fit into our conception of reality and that can possibly threaten our existence is what causes fear and the loss of self-control.

In Anthony Camara’s “Nature Unbound: Cosmic Horror in Algernon Blackwood’s ‘The Willows’” (2013), he notes that, “Blackwood’s great outdoors is continuous with an even greater outdoors, namely the starry expanses and abyssal depths of space, and all of the wonders and terror it harbours in its infinite

dimensionality,” (44) understanding the Earth as a reflection of the universe, as if it were a miniature cosmos. The vast and unexplored Earth in many areas harbors creatures of whose existence we have no notion and, therefore, ignore. “The nightmare par excellence, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror.” (48-49) What turns the subject, as a result of abduction, is not his or her destruction as death, but in losing his or her own individuality and joining the universe as if it were a great collectivity. Finally, this would make us aware that, “space and matter are not empty or dead phenomena, but occupied by metaphysical beings” (57) with a different plan undisclosed for humans.

Justification for the Research

Since the turn of the 20th century, there has been a rise in the study and analysis of horror literature. In general, this type of literature would not be considered part of the literary canon, but from the middle of the last century to the present day, horror literature has become an important subject of study and is increasingly being considered within the canon. Much of the horror literature of the early 20th century was published in pulp magazines and alluded to the type of material from which they were made.³⁹ Despite this, new instances have opened up that allow us to examine these writings more formally. Thus, for this paper, we will analyze Algernon Blackwood’s short novel, *The Willows*, from a rhetorical, narrative, and psychological viewpoint. This approach will be different from previous ones since it will focus on the relationship generated between the characters and the natural elements from a narratological and psychological approach.

³⁹ Pulp refers to a type of wood pulp that was used to make yellowish, crumby and very poor-quality paper. This cheap paper was used at the beginning of the 20th century for the publications of the time, the so-called “pulp magazines”. In the words of Fernando Savater, “the content of the pulps would be an extrovert type of literature, that is to say, one that focuses on the action itself and places little emphasis on the springs that move it or the elementary assumptions: it gives priority to the ‘what’ and even more to the ‘how’ over the ‘why’; it likes bright colors, strong spices, agile rhythm, and prefers muscular exhibition to emotional analysis” (Iglesias par. 1).

There is no doubt that criticism in this area has dealt with aspects that will not be included in the present work, as evidenced in the “State of the Art” section of this thesis. We intend to develop a critical analysis from the perspectives mentioned above, which has never been done before, from the point of view of the way in which cosmic horror is represented in the story.

Corpus: *The Willows* by Algernon Blackwood

The Willows, a short novel that first appeared in *The Listener and Other Stories* (1907), is considered by H. P. Lovecraft as “a major production that stands on a genuinely classical level, and evokes as no one else in literature a frightening and convincing feeling that strange spheres or spiritual entities exist.”⁴⁰ (*Horror* 220) This is largely due to the atmosphere that Blackwood manages to evoke. As Ligotti reminds us, “Atmosphere is created by anything that suggests an ominous situation beyond what our senses perceive and our minds can fully comprehend”⁴¹ (227).

The text narrates the experience of two travelers who get trapped on an islet in the Danube, where they will experience sinister and eerie contact with entities beyond their comprehension. This experience, that of sailing on the Danube, was lived by the author himself on more than one occasion (Joshi 87): Blackwood traveled with a friend along the Danube in 1900, so he had become quite familiar with the area. Apart from that, he was a great lover of outdoor landscapes: “Blackwood's nature is eternally and unstably balanced between the metaphysical and the real—between nature as the unity of all things and nature as the great outdoors.” (Joshi 104)

According to Worth, “*The Willows* is a masterpiece of both description and the tactical withholding of description,” (xix) for the author begins with a broad

⁴⁰ “la mayor producción se coloca a un nivel genuinamente clásico, y evoca como nadie en la literatura un espantado y convincente sentimiento de que existen extrañas esferas o entidades espirituales”.

⁴¹ “la atmósfera la crea cualquier cosa que sugiera una situación ominosa más allá de lo que perciben nuestros sentidos y pueden comprender plenamente nuestras mentes”.

overview of the setting, emphasizing details like the Danube. However, when introducing the threatening agents, the characterization diminishes significantly, offering only vague notions that barely relate to the described elements. It is in this representation of the agents that the protagonists and the reader himself will feel this hostility towards humanity, not only because of their configuration as alien beings to terrestrial biology, but also because of their alien condition (Worth xxx), which warns us that we are not the only “intelligent” beings on Earth, thus exposing our human frailty.

Research Questions

Based on what we have discussed so far, the following questions will guide this thesis:

- How is cosmic horror represented in Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows* through common natural/terrestrial elements that behave as sinister or eerie liminal spaces between dimensions?
 - How is cosmic horror characterized in the work through rhetorical and narratological resources used by the author?
 - What are the characteristics of these sinister and eerie liminal spaces associated with the threshold chronotope?
 - What are the characteristics in symbolic terms of the natural elements that are represented in the novella and how are they perceived by the protagonists?

Objectives

The general objective of this dissertation is to analyze the representation of cosmic horror in Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows* through common natural and terrestrial elements that function as sinister or unsettling liminal spaces between dimensions. In order to do so, this study sets forth three specific objectives. First,

we aim to define the concept of cosmic horror within the context of the work by examining the rhetorical and narratological techniques employed by the author. Second, the study seeks to identify the distinct features of these eerie and disturbing liminal spaces, with particular attention to those associated with the threshold chronotope. Finally, we look to explore the symbolic nature of the natural elements depicted in the text and investigate how they are perceived by the protagonists.

Hypothesis

The concept of cosmic horror is deeply linked to the sinister and the eerie, two terms that, although often used as synonyms, present crucial differences that deserve to be unraveled. While the sinister evokes that which is disturbing in its familiarity, the eerie brings us to a state of unease when confronted with the unknown or incomprehensible. In this framework, cosmic horror emerges as a literary experience that transcends the limitations of human understanding, connecting the known with unfathomable forces alien to our existence.

To explore this relationship, we will resort to the analysis of various rhetorical elements, such as isotopies, tropes of similarity, chronography and topography, which allow us to identify recurrent patterns and meanings in the text. Likewise, from narratology, we will examine aspects such as the type of narrator, focalization and the chronotope of the threshold, which frame the transitions between the human and the unknown. In addition, we will integrate a psychological analysis to unravel how the interaction of the internal elements of the characters and the subjective perspective of the protagonist shape an experience that impacts both the characters and the reader. Through this interdisciplinary approach, we will demonstrate how cosmic horror bridges human realities and forces beyond our comprehension. This intertwining produces a break in the boundaries of understanding, where the familiar, rather than providing comfort, becomes a disturbing threat. Ultimately, we will analyze how this rupture evidences that the human and non-human spheres not only interact, but do so in such an intimate way that they destabilize the most fundamental certainties, revealing a vast and indifferent universe in which the human feels small and helpless.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.1 What is Cosmic Horror?

In this chapter we will try to explain what, in effect, cosmic horror consists of. To do so, we identify three elements that we consider essential to its manifestation: the sinister, the eeriness, and the liminal spaces. These components, taken together, generate a disturbance in both the characters and the reader.

1.1.1 Fantastic, Horror, and Terror

Tzvetan Todorov, in his book *Introduction to Fantastic Literature* (1971), immerses us in the concept of “the fantastic,” where he points out that, “the fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a being [the protagonist and, consequently, the reader] who knows nothing but natural laws in the face of an apparently supernatural event.”⁴² (24) As we see, it is this perplexity, or rather, the irresolution of understanding the fantastic event presented first to the protagonists and, over their shoulder, to the reader that, in the first instance, gives rise to the illusion of unreality, the same idea that Roger Caillois indicates when he states that, “the fantastic story [...] generally, presents us with men who, like us, inhabit the real world but who suddenly find themselves faced with the inexplicable.”⁴³ (qtd. in Todorov 25)

This vacillation that arises from the inconceivability of understanding reality as we have been understanding it up to now and is faced, at the same time, by both the protagonist and the reader, is what provokes the fantastic event, that is to say, the rupture of the paradigm with which we grasp the very existence of our beliefs.

⁴² “lo fantástico es la vacilación experimentada por un ser que no conoce más que las leyes naturales, frente a un acontecimiento aparentemente sobrenatural”.

⁴³ “el relato fantástico... nos presenta por lo general a hombres que, como nosotros, habitan el mundo real pero que de pronto, se encuentran ante lo inexplicable”.

Thus, Todorov establishes a difference between the terms “the marvelous,” “the fantastic” and “the uncanny,” which, although they can sometimes be used as synonyms, we will see that they are not. The first is understood as “an unknown phenomenon, not yet seen: consequently, to a future,”⁴⁴ (38) such as that found in science fiction literature, for instance, where the marvelous events are a part of the text's logical reality rather than supernatural forces that influence the protagonists. The second is a hesitation, in which the reader must consider the world of the work as real and “vacillate” between a rational explanation or a supernatural one to the facts presented. We must interpret here that the reader places his trust in a character to show him this exegesis of reality: therefore, the fantastic is situated in the present (38). Finally, the uncanny would be when “the inexplicable is reduced to known facts, to an experience, and, in this way, to the past.”⁴⁵ (38) Furthermore, the author adds that if “the laws of reality remain intact and allow explaining the described phenomena,”⁴⁶ (37) we are in the face of the strange. Therefore, if there is no answer to the fantastic events using the indicated laws, we would find ourselves experiencing the marvelous (37).

For H. P. Lovecraft,

the true test of the truly strange is simply this: whether or not a deep sense of fear and contact with unknown spheres and powers is unleashed in the reader; an underhanded attitude of frightened listening, as if sensing the flapping of black wings or the scratching of alien beings and entities at the very edge of the known universe (130)⁴⁷.

The reader can extrapolate the knowledge acquired in the work to the point of wondering about the real possibility that what is described could somehow be

⁴⁴ “fenómeno desconocido, aún no visto, por venir: por consiguiente, a un futuro”.

⁴⁵ “lo inexplicable es reducido a hechos conocidos, a una experiencia previa, y, de esta suerte, al pasado”.

⁴⁶ “las leyes de la realidad quedan intactas y permiten explicar los fenómenos descritos”.

⁴⁷ “La verdadera prueba de lo realmente extraño es sencillamente esta: comprobar si se desata o no, en el lector, un profundo sentido de miedo y de contacto con esferas y poderse desconocidos; una solapada actitud de escucha atemorizada, como intuyendo el batir de alas negras o el rasguñar de seres y entidades ajenas en el postrer límite del universo conocido”.

true, as a what if? It is not only the fear we may feel at the moment of reading but also the concrete possibility that there are agents that could be operating beyond our knowledge and understanding that makes us hesitate in the face of our existence.

When we think of horror, we immediately consider terror as its equivalent, but there is a difference; they are associated, no doubt, but not as synonyms. For Noël Carroll, “the genres of suspense, mystery, and horror derive their very names from the affects they are intended to promote—a sense of suspense, a sense of mystery, and a sense of horror.” (14) In horror, what prevails are monsters, and these can be of supernatural or science fictional origin. However, it is clear that not all monsters are related to horror, for example, the monstrous creatures that inhabit fairy tales, myths, and odysseys do not provoke horror in the reader because we consider monsters abnormal, transgressors of what we consider natural and logical according to the “norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story.” (Carroll 16) In addition, we must associate this with another fundamental characteristic of monsters: their connection with sensations of repulsion, nausea, and disgust, because they are often represented as dirty, rotten, physically deteriorated, and slimy, which, in general terms, is the essence of disgust (Carroll 22; Joshi 23). In horror, the monster, on the one hand, produces fear by breaking the laws with which we understand our existence and, on the other hand, is perceived as a corrupted and dubious being; we feel fright and disgust just by looking at them.

To give us an idea of this, the following text by H. P. Lovecraft in his short story “The Outsider” (1921) brilliantly describes this feeling:

I cannot even hint what it was like, for it was a compound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable. It was the ghoulish shade of decay, antiquity, and desolation; the putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation; the awful baring of that which the merciful earth should always hide. God knows it was not of this world—or no longer of this world—yet to my horror I saw in

its eaten-away and bone-revealing outlines a leering, abhorrent travesty on the human shape; and in its mouldy, disintegrating apparel an unspeakable quality that chilled me even more. (4)

Exposure to monsters generates a change of a rather psychological type. That is, people who come into contact with them tend to lose a sense of rationality and go insane, become deranged (Carroll 47) because it is impossible to make such creatures fit in with our way of perceiving the world. Therefore, most experiences with monsters produce a disconnection with reality.

At the other extreme, we have terror that explores human psychological phenomena that relate, unlike horror, to accounts of abnormal psychology (Carroll 15). Consider a human agent that terrorizes the victim (which leads to producing the feeling of terror), and by the same token, torture, massacre, holocaust, and any inhumane treatment are associated with terror and, consequently, with provoked pain, considering pain a bodily sensation of anguish.

1.1.2 Supernatural and Cosmic Horror

Cosmic horror, also called Lovecraftian horror, is what we know today thanks to the work of American author H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937), who not only wrote an abundance of short stories, “but also a treatise entitled *Supernatural Horror in Literature* and a vast correspondence through which he advanced his particular aesthetic of horror,” (Carroll 6) which produced a shock wave in the genre that continues to this day. S. T. Joshi summarizes Lovecraft’s metaphysical and ethical stance:

Modern science tells us that—whatever may be the actual “stuff” of nature—the earth is but a tiny inkblot in the vast expanse of the cosmos. The whole history of human life is a momentary incident in the ceaseless churning of electrons that makes up an eternal and infinite universe. The ethics implicit in such a view is, first, the minimization of human self-importance and, second, the application of the pleasure principle as the only viable alternative to the loss of

cosmic direction and purpose once supplied by the comforting teleology of the Judeo-Christian religion. (175)

For the Providence writer, the cosmic approach that he had created in his stories is “based on the fundamental premise that common human laws, interests, and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large.” (qtd. in Tibbets 17) Therefore, humanity had to leave aside everything it understands about human life and what is related to it, that is, “organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind,” (qtd. in Tibbets 17) get the certainty that humanity is an insubstantial point in the great black cloth of the universe.

Some critics prefer to use the term “weird horror,” which often involves the occult and the mystical but by adding to the cosmic tale “rarefied otherworldly visions are present as part of an antimaterialist ideology that indicts Victorian scientism and technology and presents mystical experience as an alternative to the grayness and mechanized tedium of modern life.” (Sullivan 224) Lovecraft himself argues that a true weird tale should possess:

a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daeligmoms of unplumbed space (129)⁴⁸.

Therefore, cosmic horror must possess two essential characteristics: on the one hand, the atmosphere, which must be well defined to produce a concrete sensation, and, on the other, the sense of external agents to whom we do not

⁴⁸ “una cierta atmósfera de inquietud e inexplicable miedo a fuerzas desconocidas y ajenas, y ha de haber un atisbo, expresado con la apropiada seriedad y sentido de portento, de esa concepción, supremamente terrible, del cerebro humano, que es la de la maligna y específica suspensión o abolición de las leyes inmutables de la naturaleza que constituyen nuestra única salvaguarda contra el ataque del caos y los demonios del espacio insondado”.

matter or who do not even know of our existence, which makes us insignificant beings in the face of the enormity and infinity of the cosmos.

Let us consider Carroll's idea when he points out that the idea of something that horrifies us is produced by the author's descriptions of monsters or reality in the literary work (82). Just as we are horrified, we are also moved, and this is what the writer appeals to. But, in addition, he stipulates that "we do not identify with characters but, rather, we assimilate their situation," (95) that is, acquire an understanding of the internal situation of the character. Imagine how they evaluate their disposition in the face of the facts presented (Carroll 95); what would I, as a reader, do in their place?

Therefore, we ask ourselves, how is cosmic horror, or the monsters that inhabit it, achieved? Graham Harman, an American philosopher within the school of speculative materialism who speaks of an object-oriented ontology (OOO), points out that reality is independent of human beings (realism) and that it can be known through a special (speculative) means, be it mathematics, the arts, or the sciences. He states that, "instead of representational realism, Lovecraft works in the idiom of a weird realism" (21), that is, a weird realism outside the spheres of humanity, forcing us to think "outside the box" and, in that attempt, to imagine what frustrates our way of apprehending reality because we are not sure if we have understood it correctly, or even if we have understood it at all. Harman will go further, indicating that what the writer will deliver to the readers is "a general outline of the whole;" (26) with this, it is the reader who will have to shape, through his imagination, the creatures that dwell in the author's works, thus provoking horror. For Harman, "the most advanced knowledge of cosmic truth belongs not to scientists but to those who gain insight from direct contact with the more monstrous beings that fill his writings," (83) because science is contrary to man's perception of reality and has denied him that connection he had with Nature in ancient times.

According to Harman, Lovecraft regretted that common language was not capable of describing cosmic horror, so he was obliged to insinuate certain

characteristics of it that the characters in his works faced (10). This same ambiguity in the description of cosmic entities and realities that language grants him (or does not grant him), however, is what makes possible the creation of cosmic horror in a form that we only partially perceive and which strongly attracts us.

1.2 The Sinister and the Eerie

According to Sigmund Freud, “the sinister would be that sort of frightfulness that affects things known and familiar from time immemorial”⁴⁹ (6) and comes from an unknown realm. Freud uses the term *Unheimlich*, which “would be everything that should have remained hidden, secret, but which has manifested itself.”⁵⁰ (13) The renowned German psychoanalyst considers, for example, the fear that some people feel towards mannequins, since it is as if “a lifeless object is in some way animated,”⁵¹ (Freud 15) waiting for it to move. But it is not only that, since we see them constantly in store windows and they do not generate this *Unheimlich* feeling on their own, so it is the author's handling of the atmosphere that produces the desired effect.

Another aspect of the sinister, according to Freud, has to do with the feeling of being helpless in the face of threat, such as what happens when we dream (mainly in a nightmare), where the sense of danger that lurks is particularly intense. A recurrent dream is to know that something or someone is chasing us and that flight is perceived as useless; no matter how much we run, we do not get away from the threat, or worse, it is always on the verge of reaching us and harming us in some way.

⁴⁹ “lo siniestro sería aquella suerte de espantoso que afecta las cosas conocidas y familiares desde tiempo atrás”.

⁵⁰ “sería todo lo que debía haber quedado oculto, secreto, pero que se ha manifestado”.

⁵¹ “un objeto sin vida esté en alguna manera animado”.

We must consider that the sinister “occurs frequently and easily, when the boundaries between fantasy and reality vanish”⁵² (Freud 33), but not in all circumstances. We know that, in children's stories, inanimate objects that take on a life of their own we do not consider them sinister. Therefore, Freud considers that the sinister “occurs when repressed infantile complexes are revived by an external impression, or when overcome primitive convictions seem to find a new confirmation.”⁵³ (39) Darkness, for example, generates the sensation of fear, as when we are children and we take refuge under the covers to get away from the supposed danger and generate shelter.

The author creates a mimesis of reality that uses elements familiar and close to the reader, which they can easily recognize. The representations prepare the reader to obtain a certain knowledge and also provide them with specific information, “through which the intended fact must be represented; but not given.”⁵⁴ (Iser 299) However, the author suddenly places sinister elements in the text, that is to say, what should have been hidden in the beginning has now become evident. If we continue with the exercise of the mannequin, and upon arriving at our house we find it in the living room, as soon as we open the door, our first reaction will be astonishment, and then we will ask ourselves what it is doing there. Distrust will make us look for a rational explanation, some answer as to how it arrived. Finally, when we do not find it, after having searched everywhere, fear will emerge; we are unable to interpret the presence of the object in question. The same will happen with the characters and the reader when the sinister object is presented to them: they will react to it, first trying to find an explanation within the parameters of the known reality. When they do not understand what is happening, they will feel fear and resist it.

On the other hand, following the line of the sinister, Andrea Hidalgo, points out that, “the sinister will be internalized as the product of the existence of a latent

⁵² “se da, frecuentemente y fácilmente, cuando se desvanecen los límites entre fantasía y realidad”.

⁵³ “se da cuando complejos infantiles reprimidos son reanimados por una impresión exterior, o cuando convicciones primitivas superadas parecen hallar una nueva confirmación”.

⁵⁴ “por medio de las que debe ser representados el hecho pretendido; pero no dado”.

evil power in everything that exists (materialized within the Christian ideology in the idea of the demonic)".⁵⁵ (20) Both terms here, sinister and demonic, are intertwined, capable of being used as synonyms, as long as we understand that what is "outside" our frame of reference is neither acceptable nor within the established order and is, therefore, intrinsically evil or demonic, according to our conceptions of good and evil. The creation of a suitable atmosphere to maintain throughout the work that "whiff" of something unpleasant, but not yet (or perhaps never) fully understood, is essential for the sinister to function. For Hidalgo, the sinister, besides being an aesthetic category, is also an experience, in terms that the reader must "go through" the represented world of the work, as if it were an Escher illustration, that is to say, go through it everywhere as if nothing mattered to soak up the reality that the literary work is showing him (18) and experience it in the same way as the characters do.

We must consider an important aspect in what Hidalgo points out and that we can associate with the depiction of the monsters described above: "the incorporation in the work of art of images that allude to the injury, amputation, dismemberment, or decomposition of the human body"⁵⁶ (31) is a form of relationship with the sinister, in the sense that what was once familiar (a complete human body, meaning healthy), has now become threatening, has lost its finished and perfect state to become something or someone incomplete and somehow corrupted, which generates rejection, "a metaphor of the fragility of our existence."⁵⁷ (31)

Let us understand the sinister as "fractures in the way of understanding reality"⁵⁸ (Hidalgo 37); if what was once homey to us and from one moment to another, for reasons that we cannot initially understand, becomes intimidating to our senses, then we have entered the space of the malignant. To get out of there,

⁵⁵ "lo siniestro será internalizado como el producto de la existencia de un poder maligno latente en todo lo que existe (materializado dentro del ideario cristiano en la idea de lo demoníaco)".

⁵⁶ "la incorporación en la obra de arte de imágenes que aluden a la lesión, amputación, desmembramiento o descomposición del cuerpo humano".

⁵⁷ "metáfora de la fragilidad de nuestra existencia".

⁵⁸ "fracturas en la forma de comprender la realidad".

we must assimilate or reconceptualize that which has become sinister, leaving the reality established by our way of perceiving the universe.

As Hidalgo points out, “the abrupt intrusion of the fantastic into everyday reality is perhaps one of the ways in which the sinister unfolds its most terrifying effects.”⁵⁹ (Hidalgo 39) The break that occurs in the reality we know and accept as such when it is invaded by elements or circumstances that are beyond our comprehension, is the sinister that appears in the form of fear when facing a scenario that we cannot understand (the unknown), so that “it is familiar to us and from one moment to the next it becomes threatening to our senses and also to our perception of the world.”⁶⁰ (40)

Another way in which the sinister is exposed is “the presentation of fragmented, dislocated, and fantastic worlds situated within a chaotic reality in permanent transformation.”⁶¹ (Hidalgo 45) Here, we can point to any text that describes, for example, the development of a war. The city, the country that was once dear to the character, has been transformed into an unknown, destroyed, unstable, and floating place, which does not allow the process of assimilation or adaptation (obviously some people can superimpose themselves more effectively than others to the changes) in an efficient way, which generates anguish and regret, paralyzes us in one way or another, or makes us flee in terror.

Along this line, we will also consider what Eduardo Schele points out when he relates the sublime with horror: “the sublime as a pleasurable horror that violently pulls us out of indifference,”⁶² (64) so that, on the one hand, there is the fear that horror provokes in us and, on the other, the attraction that it exerts on us, in both cases moving us from our daily posture of existence. The horror of the sublime attracts and repels us at the same time because it somehow makes us

⁵⁹ “la intromisión abrupta de lo fantástico en la realidad cotidiana es quizás uno de los modos en que lo siniestro despliega de manera más aterradora sus efectos”.

⁶⁰ “nos es familiar y de un momento a otro se torna amenazante para nuestros sentidos y también para nuestra percepción del mundo”.

⁶¹ “la presentación de mundos fragmentados, dislocados y fantásticos situados dentro de una realidad caótica y en permanente transformación”.

⁶² “lo sublime, como un placentero horror que nos saca violentamente de la indiferencia”.

aware of our limitations and removes that feeling of protection and immunity that covers our beliefs and affirmations of reality.

Our first contact with the sublime amazes us (Schele 65) and then moves us (67), as we are overwhelmed by the presence of eminence. As for Algernon Blackwood, for Schele, “the unattainable human quest for the sublime, which, far from resigning itself, ends up turning once again to nature,”⁶³ (93) is that we will always return to it, where we can find peace and where there are still secrets to be unveiled, with the possibility of finding something (or someone) superior to ourselves and wishing at the same time not to find it.

Aldous Huxley points out that, “the greater the level of alienation, the greater the need to transcend,”⁶⁴ (qtd. in Schele 95) as it is in our society today and has been since the beginning of the 20th century. Humanity, which, on the one hand, loves its technology and mechanization, has not been able, on the other hand, to achieve a healthy balance and coexistence. For this reason, in his tireless search for the sublime, wherever he can find it, even in horror, partly due to the alienation imposed by society, Huxley tries to find answers to what horrifies and seduces him, since “in the experience of horror and the sinister he has found a way to rise from tedium and emotional annihilation.”⁶⁵ (Schele 98)

For Mark Fisher, British philosopher and writer, the individual feels fascination “for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience,” (8) that which gravitates around us and cannot be understood at first glance, but when seen, awakens our curiosity and desire to grasp it rationally and empirically. In order to achieve this, Fisher states that, “the weird and the eerie [...] allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside,” (10) so that we understand our reality and feel attracted to it and the objects it contains. Consequently, if something of it catches our attention, we try to grasp it with our mind (also intellect, knowledge, etc.) in a rhizomatic way, that

⁶³ “en la inalcanzable búsqueda humana por lo sublime, la que, lejos de resignarse, termina virando una vez más hacia la naturaleza”.

⁶⁴ “mientras mayor es el nivel de enajenación, mayor será la necesidad de trascender”.

⁶⁵ “en la experiencia del terror y lo siniestro una forma de elevarse del tedio y el anonadamiento emocional”.

is, the contact of that new thing with the understanding will generate other paths, expanding the mental network of how we perceive reality.

Weirdness, according to the author, is the sensation of something, be it an object or an entity, that should not exist in our reality (in the way we understand it) (15). But that something is closely related to what H. P. Lovecraft described to generate the sensation of weirdness represented in his work. In that sense:

Lovecraft's stories are obsessively fixated on the question of the outside: an outside that breaks through in encounters with anomalous entities from the deep past, in altered states of consciousness, in bizarre twists in the structure of time. The encounter with the outside often ends in breakdown and psychosis. (Fisher 16)

There is a fascination, accompanied by a certain trepidation (Fisher 17) that is not horror, as we understand it or, on the contrary, as Lovecraft captures it in his works. The union of that fascination and trepidation is what results in weirdness, that insoluble dichotomy of attraction/rejection that we cannot avoid, nor do we want to. Even the characters in Lovecraft's works are drawn "towards the dissolution, disintegration or degeneration," (Fisher 17) because we, the readers, like them, the characters, are undoubtedly attracted to what lies beyond the veil of our reality's understanding.

In Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" (1931) we can find the dichotomy of attraction/rejection:

Walking cautiously downhill over the crusted snow toward the stupendous stone labyrinth that loomed against the opalescent west, we felt almost as keen a sense of imminent marvels as we had felt on approaching the unfathomed mountain pass four hours previously. True, we had become visually familiar with the incredible secret concealed by the barrier peaks; yet the prospect of actually entering primordial walls reared by conscious beings perhaps

millions of years ago –before any known race of men could have existed– was none the less awesome and potentially terrible in its implications of cosmic abnormality. (50-51)

We can clearly appreciate the sensation of growing curiosity with the fear of the unknown that can be triggered by the presence of the marvelous and/or sublime.

We must emphasize here that, according to Fisher, the weird “is not the impossible but the outside,” (20) meaning that when the external becomes internal by entering our reality, it is the irruption of exogenous agents or elements that provokes a feeling of weirdness, for these agents or elements do not coincide with how we grasp the existence of everything around us. Therefore, “the outside is not ‘empirically’ exterior; it is transcendently exterior, i. e. it is not just a matter of something being distant in space and time, but of something which is beyond our ordinary experience and conception of space and time itself.” (Fisher 22)

As for the eerie, Fisher points out that it “seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human,” (11) such as the ruins of abandoned houses, buildings, or cities, and natural landscapes like desolate forests, mountains, and deserts. We can relate certain adjectives to the eerie: barren, evocative and solitary, an outdoor space that is heartbreakingly captivating yet exotically disconcerting, for example, nature, especially that which is removed from civilization, yet evokes a certain seduction. In this case, he defines it as “a lack of absence or a lack of presence [...], that is, if there is a presence when there should be nothing, or if there is no presence when there should be something.” (61) The sensation of eeriness is certainly related to the unknown, but with the idea that we are on the verge of grasping it, without completely doing so, like the shadows that we perceive out of the corner of our eye that vanish when we turn to look at them head on.

For Fisher, “the eerie necessarily involves forms of speculation and suspense that are not an essential feature of the weird.” (62) Thus, he indicates

that it is not only speculation, but further meditation on an enigma that may lead us on a path to knowledge, subjectivity and perceptions that are outside the everyday (62), which would be a mentally and physically overwhelming human capacity.

According to the author, in the eerie a key aspect is “the problem of agency” (63), which is related to “the forces that govern our lives and the world,” (64) and even more, “the suspicion that an entity to which we do not normally ascribe it possesses a deliberative agency.” (65) Eeriness generates in the characters and, consequently, the reader, anxiety and fear, since we cannot understand the reason for the events presented to us. As Fisher states, “A consideration of outer space quickly engenders a sense of the eerie because of the questions about agency that contemplating it cannot but pose,” (110) which makes us wonder, what is the purpose of the exogenous agents? What would such an encounter be like? Would we lose our reason, as Lovecraft points out? If all the foundations on which our reality is founded would falter, how would these agents fit into our paradigm of reality?

1.3 Liminal Spaces and Atmosphere

1.3.1 Threshold Chronotope

To incorporate this concept, we must first define a chronotope, which literally means “time-space,” so that it is “the essential connection of temporal and spatial relations artistically assimilated in literature.”⁶⁶ (Bakhtin 237) The relationship between time and space is indissoluble and helps to understand texts, since in them time is compressed, making it artistically visible, and space is intensified, allowing the movement of the argument (Bakhtin 238). In this way the text becomes more dynamic. The chronotope also considers the literary work in its relation to reality, so it will always have an emotional-valuable moment, and each

⁶⁶ “la conexión esencial de relaciones temporales y especiales asimiladas artísticamente en la literatura”.

important element of the work constitutes towards this value that cannot be separated (Bakhtin 393).

There are two chronotopes that are important for our analysis, one being more relevant than the other. We will start with the chronotope of the road, since, in the text to be analyzed, the protagonists are on a journey and it is here where they will have different types of encounters that will mark essential plot nodes for the development of the text. As Bakhtin notes, “the chronotope of the road (‘the great road’) [has] all kinds of encounters along the way. [...] many [texts] are structured directly on the motif of the road, of encounters or adventures on the road.”⁶⁷ (250-251) In the chronotope of the road, we find metamorphosis along with identity, although in *The Willows* these elements are disrupted. For Bakhtin, these elements belong to the folkloric image of man, especially evident in the folk tale (265), and is related to evolution. This means that a protagonist can never return to the previous state of metamorphosis, which should not be understood as a physical change, but rather a transformation of consciousness. In the text we are analyzing, this change has a direct relationship with the discovery of the alien agents. Therefore, as Bakhtin points out, under the approach of metamorphosis, the idea of the whole cosmogonic and historical process is preserved (267). Although Bakhtin discusses metamorphosis by analyzing Greek, Russian (Dostoevsky), French (Stendhal and Balzac) and English (Dickens and Thackeray) literature, the idea that persists is of a change from one situation to another: for example, the transformation of a vagabond into a rich aristocrat or a bandit into a repentant good Christian (280).

As Bakhtin points out, “on the basis of metamorphosis a kind of representation of the whole of human life is created in its crucial moments.”⁶⁸ (268) This would mean that, in the case of the work analyzed, the realization of one’s own insignificance is a transcendental experience, since it dictates the characters’

⁶⁷ “el cronotopo del camino (‘el gran camino’): todo tipo de encuentros por el camino [...] muchas [obras] que están estructuradas directamente sobre el motivo del camino, de los encuentros o aventuras en el camino”.

⁶⁸ “sobre la base de la metamorfosis se crea un tipo de representación de toda la vida humana en sus momentos cruciales”.

actions, first separately and then together when they reveal their thoughts to each other. Therefore, “[t]here is no process of formation in the strict sense, but rather a crisis and a rebirth,” (Bakhtin 268) crisis because the revelation becomes for the characters, for a moment, unthinkable and untenable, and rebirth, because once the initial shock is overcome the instinct of survival, at all costs, is the guide for their next steps.

The second chronotope relevant for this dissertation is the chronotope of the threshold, which possesses the greatest emotional-valuative intensity. It can be associated with the motive of the encounter, but it is highlighted mainly for being the chronotope of crisis and vital rupture (Bakhtin 399). The threshold that represents the passage from one place to another, from one state to another or from one period to another, marks the “moment of the rupture in life, of the crisis, of the decision that modifies life (or of the lack of decision, of the fear of crossing the threshold).”⁶⁹ (Bakhtin 399) When it is crossed, there is no longer any possibility of returning to the previous situation; even if this threshold were not crossed, the situation would not be the same, since the circumstance would continue its course, as if it were the Rubicon River.

In the chronotope of the threshold are the chronotopes of crisis and vital rupture (Bakhtin 399), which can encompass either facing setbacks (which could also be vital threats) or avoiding them and, therefore, not crossing the threshold. This is where the events that produce crucial changes take place and, consequently, determine the actions that will follow. According to Bakhtin, this chronotope, “always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes overtly, but more often, implicitly”⁷⁰ (399), is an image that evokes another to which it is somehow related. For example, in Lovecraft’s “In the Mouth of Madness”, the author writes, “and in the beckoning sea of opalescent sky glimpsed betwixt their summits, was a highly subtle and attenuated matter not to be explained in literal words.” (44)

⁶⁹ “momento de la ruptura en la vida, de la crisis, de la decisión que modifica la vida (o al de la falta de decisión, al miedo a atravesar el umbral”.

⁷⁰ “siempre metafórico y simbólico; a veces en forma abierta, pero más frecuentemente, en forma implícita”.

The contrast of the sky, compared to the sea, as if above were below and vice versa, creates confusion, describing something that does not quite fit with the landscape. This may be a sublime sensation, but we can perceive an approaching crisis.

In general terms, we can point out that, “in the chronotope, plot events take shape, acquire body, are filled with life [...] it offers the main field for the representation of events in images,” (Bakhtin 400-401) since they provide information and communicate the facts to the reader for a better understanding of the text, which also tends towards dynamism, avoiding the static (Bakhtin 402).

If we consider the chronotope of the road in *The Willows* as an indicator of the beginning and end in the story and, within this, we find that of the threshold where the crucial moments of discovery and identity will be signaled (as Bakhtin points out, “each chronotope can include an unlimited number of smaller chronotopes: for each motif can have its own chronotope,” [402]) then we can observe that the complement of both is indissoluble and necessary for the development of the story, since both add information and give dynamism to the text forming a fluid narrative-image.

We find here a relationship with Wolfgang Iser, although the chronotope gives mobility to the story and generates in the reader this narrative-image, this “shows something that is not identical neither to the given reality [...] nor to the meaning of the represented object.” (234) Therefore, the text obliges the reader to possess a certain knowledge and prepare certain functions to represent the presumed, but not given fact (Iser 299). In this way, the reader, with the information extracted from the text, must create the image and understand what will follow, as if it were a puzzle.

1.3.2 Liminality

Liminality is being on the “threshold” between one place and another, or not being in a place, both physical and mental. It can also be a moment of indecision

between one state or another, between one place and another, also entering and leaving or vice versa. Likewise, if we consider physical spaces, we can relate liminality to Marc Augé's non-places: "if a place can be defined as a place of identity, relational and historical, a space that can be defined neither as a space of identity nor as relational nor as historical, will define a non-place." (83) In the novella *The Willows*, because it is a journey, the protagonists are in constant movement and everything they leave behind is a non-place. They do not establish a relationship with the places they pass through, so their stay, if it can be called that, is transitory.

The non-place has a negative connotation, since there are no ties to identity, relationships or history with authentic meaning. Loneliness is perceived as an excess or a lack of individuality and only the quick view of images seen for a moment provides an idea of transiting from one place to another: the hypothesis of a past and the possibility of a future (Augé 92), as in a journey, going to a place where we do not intend to stay for long, because in the end we "go and come back."

As non-places are instants, they develop in the present and can only travel and be measured in time units (Augé 107). Therefore, time (present) and space (non-place) have a close relationship, as in a chronotope, and in this way, the characters live a concrete and specific time within the non-place. The reader knows that it is temporal, unlike the characters, but does not know the outcome of the events described in the narrative.

Following the idea of non-places, we find Zygmunt Bauman who points out that these "discourage any idea of permanence, making the colonization or domestication of space impossible." (110) In some places, nature resists human domination, so we have not yet been able to subdue at will certain areas, such as deserts, the depths of the oceans, some forests or predominantly frozen areas of the planet. This is the reason why these non-places are places of transit; since it is not possible to colonize them, they do not possess identity, relationships, or histories (as opposed to those that generate a sense of belonging), such as

airports, highways, hotel rooms, public transportation, among others (Bauman 111). Clearly, the individuals who inhabit these spaces are temporary: they are only “passing through” and their intention is only to use the non-place as a means to reach their final destination, with the idea of crossing the threshold to move from “here” to “there.”

Although both authors allude to cities when using these terms, in this thesis we will use them extrapolating their meaning and intention, so that the non-places will continue to be places of passage, but in a natural environment. Nature is the one that shows itself as threatening to the characters and resists “domestication.” It is the one that wants its transient inhabitants to leave this non-place as soon as possible, which in the text is presented by the German term *Sümpfe*, which means swamps.

Arnold van Gennep “has called the ‘liminal phase’ [...] the rites that accompany any change of place, status, social position, and age [...] characterized by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, Latin for ‘threshold’), and aggregation.” (qtd. in Turner 101) In the detachment phase, the individual symbolically distances himself from the group either from a social or cultural point of view (Van Gennep qtd. in Turner 101). The characters in *The Willows* momentarily leave behind their bond with society to sail across the Danube, thus, in this case, this detachment would be from a social point of view. In the margin phase, the individual travels through “a cultural environment that has few, if any, of the attributes of the past or coming state.” (Van Gennep qtd. in Turner 101) The journey across the Danube takes the characters to an area that is ambiguous: the marshes with their flat willows, an ever-changing place. Finally, in the last phase, reincorporation, the passage of the individual has been consummated, therefore, “he is expected to behave according to certain norms dictated by custom and certain ethical principles binding on those who occupy social positions in a system of such positions;” (Van Gennep qtd. in Turner 102) the characters gain “new” knowledge that will undoubtedly make them rethink their position within society and their relationship with nature.

Liminal entities, as Turner calls them, are in a place and period of transition and this state of liminality is commonly compared “to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, loneliness, and solar or lunar eclipses,” (Turner 101) always in direct relation to the temporal. While the characters in the novella are in this place, they are not assigned a position, therefore, their link is always obscure, equivocal. This makes us wonder what they are doing there and what their purpose is.

Other characteristics of liminal entities are that “they can be represented as totally dispossessed beings [...] they have no status, properties, distinctions, [...] nor any position whatsoever. [...] Their behavior is usually passive or submissive” (Turner 102). This is how the characters in *The Willows* are portrayed and, as the story progresses, they are stripped of more elements and their condition: first, physical elements and then, of their self-control and reasoning. They are clear about their condition and accept their insignificance, making slow and calculated movements so as not to be perceived and to survive. They even “[...] accept any punishment that may be inflicted on them, however arbitrary, without the slightest complaint,” (Turner 102) which we will see represented in the protagonist's companion.

In the liminal phenomena we find the mixture of the humble with the sacred, offering a moment in and out of time, of the interior and exterior of the social structure, which shows a bond that has ceased to exist while in this liminal period, as an unstructured and relatively undifferentiated community (Turner 103), which provokes in the characters a sense of awe towards the alien agents, a certain inner reverence, as if it were a forgotten pact: we recognize their superiority, we feel overwhelmed and fear this power that is unknown to us. This pact, abandoned perhaps since ancient times, urges us and the protagonists to wonder: what is our place in this new structure?

Another of the characteristics of liminality “is obedience and silence” (Turner 110). In this space of uncertainty, the liminal entities have no defined condition, they are neither one nor the other and as they are in an unknown

territory they must submit to the “rules of the game” to overcome this state. The characters do not know, initially, the rules of this place, but they learn them and speak in whispers so as not to be perceived by exterior agents.

As Turner notes, “If liminality is considered as a time and place of departure from the normal procedures of social action, it can be contemplated as a period of exhaustive revision of the axioms and central values of the culture in which it occurs,” (171) which we could consider as a transitory state of “meditation” that, in the case of our corpus, will be a questioning of the structure of beliefs held by the narrator. For this reason, in this analysis liminality will be considered a period of internal controversy and between the characters faced with an extreme situation of disarray.

1.3.3 Cosmic Horror and Liminal Spaces

For American philosopher Eugene Thacker, writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, and Robert E. Howard created in their stories terrifying and sublime worlds and realms ruled by non-human agents and realities beyond our comprehension (1), works that appeared at the beginning of the 20th century in pulp magazines. As Thacker points out, the main premise in Lovecraft's stories is simple: the generally archaeological discovery of ancient ruins or artifacts (beyond the period of humanity) that challenge human knowledge of life as it is understood (2).

For him there are three forms of life: the first is our immediate reality, the world of the living and the non-living, seen from an anthropocentric view; the second would be what we pointed out in the previous paragraph, that is, the discovery of vestiges of intelligent beings prior to the appearance of humanity on Earth, which causes an immense doubt about our origins and the world as we know it; and, finally, the third is “the nameless thing that is living, with all the contradictions this implies” (2) because it breaks the ontological scheme of human reality. Then we discover that the characters in Lovecraft's stories are not mentally

unbalanced; on the contrary, the realization that the source of the horror is not the product of a hallucination or a nervous breakdown (Thacker 3) is enough to prove that it is not possible to rationally classify this third form of life.

In this sense, Thacker does not seek to define life or reflect on the ability to define it, rather he focuses on life's malleability, how forms may change depending on their relationship with various phenomena (4). Here, then, is the doubt that appears in *The Willows* when the characters are faced with the representation of the alien agents, an implausible conception, which also supposes the exponential representation of any other form of life.

So, the monsters are a creation that is outside the norm, an aberration to the order of things and their transgression of human laws (Thacker 23). For this reason, when trying to describe them, Lovecraft does not consciously succeed in satisfying that description of such entities (the writer's idea is to do it that way): his characters can generally only see them in a partial or diffused way, as if they were in a permanent liminal state, since they belong to a non-human dimension, albeit with the ability to appear in our reality distorted forms. These agents could also be considered liminal, since they are "passing through" our world and/or dimension, but unlike the discussion in the previous section, these agents live in liminality, therefore, they would not be transitory, as the characters of the novella.

Thacker states that for Lovecraft and other authors of the genre, "the weird is not the discovery of an aberration [...] rather, the weird is the discovery of an unhuman limit to thought, that is nevertheless foundational for thought" (23), if we cannot name it, define it, catalog it and adapt it to our concepts, it causes an identity crisis, but not to the individual, rather to the conceptual frame of our archetype of reality as it is understood. Lovecraft forces us, through his stories, to think outside the box and thus try to understand non-human realities.

"The life that is weird is the life according to the logic of an inaccessible real, a life 'out of space and time', and 'life of extra-dimensional biologies'," (Thacker 23) which causes us to question life as we understand it and the relationship with these creatures. Let us recall here the concept of posthumanism,

where human thought must accommodate the possibility/reality of other non-human existences in different universes, interspatial and/or spatiotemporal dimensions.

For this reason, Thacker invites us to consider supernatural horror as the paradigm for thinking about life today, more because it poses the question of logic and life, and the “weird” relationship between the two than because of how it places life in relation to the monster and the law or norm (24). In his analysis, supernatural horror is not limited to a mere representation of the unknown or the incomprehensible; rather, it becomes a space where the boundaries of what we understand as life are blurred and questioned. This approach foregrounds an existential crisis that challenges traditional conceptions of self, order and the rules that supposedly govern us. Ultimately, Thacker's proposal stands as an invitation to rethink the conditions of existence and the role of the “non-human” in our conceptions of the world.

As we have seen, cosmic horror contemplates the possibility of the incomprehension of the universe by humans due to its vastness, but mainly to the existence of other entities that go completely out of our sphere of understanding, to whom we do not care in the least, these entities being monstrous giants against the insignificance of humanity: it is the knowledge of these that will make us doubt our quality of human beings. Supernatural horror differs mainly in that it focuses on cultural or religious beliefs, always considering the aspect of the subject (man, woman), here we will find ghosts, demons, curses, etc., with a struggle between good and evil with the possibility of redemption.

In the Methodology Chapter, we will see that all these concepts are related to the analysis of cosmic horror in *The Willows*, since each of them contributes a characteristic to generate a complete sense of horror. All these characteristics give body to that particular atmosphere that is cosmic horror, where immensity, alienation, and madness lead to despair and incomprehension as part of the horror.

Chapter 2: Methodological Framework

2.1 Rhetorical Analysis

The rhetorical analysis in this study is to understand how the author uses language to generate fear in the reader through the use of rhetorical devices, thus revealing new ways of observing the world around us. We ask how the author organizes the discourse to provoke that feeling.

2.1.1 Isotopies of Death and Danger

Isotopy is a concept that refers to the repetition of certain semantic fields⁷¹ in a text, so it is a network of meanings that are associated with the same theme or area of meaning within a discourse. A. J. Greimas took the term from physics and chemistry, where “isotope” originated in the Greek *isos* (equal or same) and *topos* (place), but which, when transferred to semantic analysis, provides a specific function, summarized as “the iterativity of classemes⁷² that ensure the discourse-statement its homogeneity.” (Semiótica 230) Isotopies are fundamental for the description of a text; by means of a word, two different isotopies that oppose each other can be shown, which is easier to appreciate in humorous texts, double meanings, and puns (Greimas Semántica 108).

To understand isotopy, it is necessary to have information that the reader may or may not already know, but that is somehow given in the information provided by the text itself. In this sense, isotopy is directly related to coherence

⁷¹ Semantic fields are groups of words that share common links and characteristics in their meanings. They are not synonyms but share basic features that allow us to mentally represent a closeness between the meanings of the words as if it were a constellation or word cloud. Most of them are also determined by extra-linguistic factors (historical, cultural, contextual, etc.) (Farías par.1).

⁷² Classeme: Set of generic-connotative (for Pottier) or contextual (for Greimas) semes (Marchese and Forradellas 56). For example, “cat” can be described as a set of specific (different breeds, implying different sizes and patterns of coat color or other particular characteristics, etc.), generic (carnivorous mammal, curious and adventurous animal, born hunter even living with man more than 9,500 years ago, etc.), and connotative (object of worship, controller of pests, animals that have nine lives, etc.) semes.

and homogeneity, since it establishes links between elements of the text at a semantic level (Pozuelo 205), as all of them would reinforce this kind of isotopy.

Greimas points out that, “if the same epithets appear as redundant in other passages of the text and if they tend to be substituted for one another, such epithets make it possible to discover [...] new denominations [...] and a progressive way of establishing an isotopy could be elaborated.” (Semántica 142) Therefore, the identification of these epithets is essential to achieve a finished and correct deduction, since it would reaffirm the isotopy that has been chosen for the text.

For Greimas, isotopy has two dimensions: a cosmological one that relates to the knowledge of the external world and a noological one that constitutes the knowledge of the internal world (Semantics 183). The manifestation of each dimension is partial, for the cosmological dimension is a practical manifestation and the noological is a mythical manifestation (Greimas Semantics 184); therefore, the choice of the isotopy is not only based on the iterativity of certain lexemes,⁷³ but also involves questioning the author of the work. For example, the sense that such lexemes have for him or her or the meaning that he or she attributes to such lexemes (Greimas Semántica 343). The cosmological dimension is related to everything that is observable and physical in space and time, therefore this dimension deals with questions about the origin, structure, and fate of the universe, humans try to understand through observation, reasoning, and empirical investigation. Furthermore, the noological dimension indicates the scope of human consciousness: the inner experiences, values, ideas, beliefs and spiritual insights, the meaning and purpose, the understanding of self and the connection between human consciousness and reality.

From another point of view, Todorov, through the description of fantastic literature, also raises certain “recurrences” to be carried out or to be considered

⁷³ Lexeme: A minimal unit with lexical meaning that has no grammatical morphemes; e.g., sun, or that, possessing them, dispenses with them by a process of segmentation; e.g., 'terr' in enterráis (in Spanish). <https://dle.rae.es/lexema>. Also called 'root', it is the part of the word that does not vary and that contains its meaning.

in a text of this type. He does not call them isotopies in the style of Greimas and others, but rather defines the fantastic and the characteristics that these texts have by considering certain themes. He uses the idea of Caillois that everything fantastic breaks with the rules that govern our daily reality. This introduces elements that should not be there, according to the laws of the logical, the natural, or the possible (25) and adds a type of image that is located in the very heart of the fantastic, in an intermediate zone between what he has conceptualized as infinite images and closed images (29). Infinite images are those that seek incoherence and they are to open representations, full of ambiguity, which escape a definitive interpretation and allow for multiple readings. In contrast, closed images are characterized by a closed and self-referential structure, which tends to restrict meaning within more stable or predictable limits. (29).

Todorov points out that there must be three conditions for the fantastic in literature. The first is that the reader must believe that the world of the characters is real and oscillate between the normal explanation of the supernatural event presented and consider, at the same time, a supernatural explanation. The second condition is represented by the oscillation that the reader feels between the trust he or she places in the character, who presents the supernatural events, and that this vacillation is the subject of the work. Finally, the third condition is related to the attitude that the reader adopts towards the text, that is, the choice between various modes and levels of reading (30).

For Todorov, the details of the text should be studied from the point of view of each particular work and not within the genre, since not all works would possess exactly the same characteristics (64). Therefore, there are three structural aspects to consider. The first depends on the statement, whether exaggeration leads to the supernatural, whether there is a diachronic relationship (development or succession of events through time) or synchronic (coincidence of events in time). The fantastic finds its origin in rhetorical figures, and, therefore, the supernatural is born out of language (68).

The second aspect is related to enunciation, with a narrator who generally speaks in the first person. "Truth is a relation between words and the things designated by it." (Todorov 68) The test of truth is impossible in literary language, since the things designated in the text do not exist and only what is attributed to the author would escape the test of truth, unlike the words of the characters that may or may not be true (Todorov 69). Therefore, the narrator-character can lie, unlike the non-represented narrator, of whom we would not have to doubt if they were to narrate supernatural events (Todorov 69). We must consider that the fantastic urges our hesitation and doubt, so Todorov proposes that the reader "believe without truly believing." (69) It is easy for the reader to identify with the first-person narrator (narrator-character), since he or she must legitimize what is related without definitively accepting the supernatural. Therefore, this type of narrator has an inconsistent position in the text with respect to their discourse, which is very convenient for the fantastic (Todorov 71) to create that uncertainty described above.

Finally, Todorov discusses composition, which would come to be a syntactic aspect in the work. As Penzoldt observes, the ghost story is ideal, since "it can be represented by an ascending line, leading to the culminating point, which is the appearance of the specter." (Penzoldt qtd. in Todorov 71) Following in this line, Poe also pointed out that all the elements of the story should contribute to the singular effect provided at the end of the work in order to create the desired effect (Todorov 71). In this sense, supernatural events, according to Todorov, have to be related to other events that are not immediately continuous but distant in the chain of events, somehow linked, either by similarity or opposition (75), so that the reader can join them and achieve the desired effect.

In this sense, "in literature, what is said is as important as how it is said; the 'what' is as important as the 'how' and vice versa," (Todorov 77) so that form should not be separated from substance and the text should be considered in its totality and dynamic unity (Todorov 77). This point highlights one of the most recurrent themes in fantasy literature: the existence of supernatural beings whose

strength and power exceed the limits of human understanding and capabilities (Todorov 89). Thus, the themes in fantastic literature are interactions between the subject and the world (perception-consciousness), described as a particular chance, pandeterminism,⁷⁴ multiplication of personality, breaking the boundary between subject and object, and transformation of time and space (Todorov 111). We also find the themes that describe human relationship with the desire and therefore with the unconscious: sexual desire in general terms (the devil associated with the libido) and the socially strange (homosexuality,⁷⁵ love between two or more persons, pure cruelty) (Todorov 112). All these themes transgress in one way or another the law and hence their supernatural function, for not following the established norm.

2.1.2 Tropes of Similarity: Metaphor, Metonymy, and Synesthesia

According to A. Marchese and J. Forradellas, the trope is a “figure of semantic character (such as metaphor, metonymy, etc.) by which a word is made to take on a meaning that is not the proper meaning of that word” (414). In the same sense, José María Pozuelo points out that everyday language is full of tropes because “substitution is a procedure inherent to the very functioning of language,” (185) since in daily life human beings tend to compare one thing with another to better explain the world around them, such as those we use in the phrases “she has a golden heart,” “having nerves of steel,” “he is under the spotlight,” among others.

In metaphor, the relation between the terms is one of similarity, that is, one substitutes for the other, which implies a displacement of the meaning executed

⁷⁴ A view of humans that disdains their ability to take a stance in the face of all sorts of situations: “Man is not totally conditioned and determined; it is he who determines whether he is to surrender himself to situations or to face them. In other words, man ultimately determines himself. Man does not merely exist, but always decides what his existence will be and what he will be the next minute.” (Viktor Frankl qtd. in Filosofiaycineblog)

⁷⁵ It should be kept in mind that the book was originally published in 1970 and homosexuality was considered a mental illness at that time. Further information at <https://elordenmundial.com/hoy-en-la-historia/15-diciembre/15-de-diciembre-de-1973-la-homosexualidad-deja-de-ser-considerada-como-enfermedad-en-estados-unidos/>

by the reader from one signification to another (Pozuelo 187). I. A. Richards points out that, “when we use a metaphor, there are two ideas of different things acting together, contained in a single word or expression, and the meaning is the result of this interaction,” (qtd. in Todorov and Ducrot 316) which gives the structure a meaning, grasped by the reader, which it would not normally have, the same as that expressed by the sentences in the previous paragraph.

On the other hand, in metonymy there is also the substitution of one meaning for another, but unlike metaphor, the relationship between the terms is one of contiguity, as when we point out that “someone has a good head” and internally we understand that “head” is linked to intelligence. As Marchese and Forradellas clarify, in “metaphor, the relationship between the two paired terms is paradigmatic and external (they belong to different semantic fields); in metonymy, the relationship is syntagmatic and intrinsic.” (262)

Within this group, we also find synecdoche, which, like metonymy, “consists of the transfer of meaning from one word to another based on a relationship of contiguity, [...] in synecdoche the relation is one of inclusion, that is to say, that one of the members is of greater or lesser extension (or forms part of the implicit set) than the other,” (Marchese and Forradellas 383) which makes it different from metonymy in terms of relation since this can be “spatial, temporal, or causal.” (Marchese and Forradellas 383) Therefore, synecdoche expresses the part by the whole (and vice versa), the genus by the species (and vice versa), the plural by the singular (and vice versa), the matter by the object, the abstract by the specific.

Finally, we will mention synesthesia, related to metaphor, which “consists of the association of elements that come from different sensory domains,” (Marchese and Forradellas 385) that is, attributing a sensation to a concept that by nature does not correspond to it, for example, in the title of Bohumil Hrabal’s novel *Too Loud a Solitude*. The use of synesthesia is vital in narrative to evoke descriptions that connect the reader to the work by appealing to his or her senses. In this way one can link textures, smells, colors, sounds, and tastes to concepts

or images (usually a noun associated with an adjective) that belong to different sensory fields.

2.1.3 Chronography and Topography

Topography refers to the construction and description of the physical space within a narrative where the events of the story take place, coming from the Greek *topos*, meaning “place” and *graphia*, which is “description.” As Marie-Laure Ryan points out, “representations of space are not necessarily narratives—think of geographical maps, landscape paintings, etc.—but all narratives imply a world with spatial extension, even when spatial information is withheld.” (par. 1) In this spatial world, characters exist and events occur. She also defines the different types of space, for example, “spatial frames [are] the immediate surroundings of actual events, the various locations shown by the narrative discourse or by the image,” (Ryan par. 6) which also allow changing scenes or converging in other spaces: “they are hierarchically organized by relations of containment [...] and their boundaries may be either clear-cut [...] or fuzzy.” (Ryan par. 6) Other kinds of spaces include “the general socio-historical-geographical environment in which the action takes place;” (Ryan par. 7) the story space, which “consists of all the spatial frames plus all the locations mentioned by the text that are not the scene of actually occurring events;” (Ryan par. 8) the narrative world, which is “the story space completed by the reader’s imagination on the basis of cultural knowledge and real world experience;” (Ryan par. 9) and the narrative universe, which is “the world (in the spatio-temporal sense of the term) presented as actual by the text, plus all the counterfactual worlds constructed by characters as beliefs, wishes, fears, speculations, hypothetical thinking, dreams, and fantasies” (Ryan par.10). All of these spaces cover both the general setting and the specific scenarios where the events unfold.

Topography provides similarity and familiarity; in this way, the impact of the supernatural generates greater disturbance in the reader. Let us recall that the everyday is “invaded” by the supernatural in cosmic horror, making the characters

and, consequently, the reader aware of the insignificance of human beings in the universe. Generally, in this type of subgenre, the topography often suggests remote, desolate, or alien places, as we can appreciate in *The Willows*, where the marsh is far from everything we understand by the civilized world (conquered and organized by mankind), so much that the protagonists are warned not to follow as they could be trapped and die of starvation.

On the other hand, chronography (from the Greek *khronos*, “time,” and *graphein*, “study or representation”), is a figure of speech and the representation of time in narrative, that is, the detailed description of a temporal moment, such as a season of the year, a specific time, a moment of the day, a holiday, etc. (Giani, par. 3), thus creating the illusion of reality and greater understanding on the part of the reader. Chronography should not be confused with chronology, which deals with the study of time and has as its object “the arrangement of events, dates, etc. in the order of occurrence,”⁷⁶ which is very useful when it comes to studying history, since by placing the facts in the order of occurrence, the results of the actions are understood. If chronography is in charge of the description of a specific time, then applying it to cosmic horror suggests the existence not only of immeasurable spaces, but also of enormous time scales alien to human experience, which results in the temporal insignificance of human beings in the face of the cosmic vastness.

In narratives, we can distinguish two temporal levels that operate complementarily but with different functions: the time of the story and the time of the discourse. The first level refers to the chronological order of events as they happen in the narrative; therefore, it follows a logical and causal sequence, where each action or event depends on the previous one and leads to the next. It has a natural rhythm that, in some cases, can be constant, without alterations. On the other hand, the time of the discourse refers to the way the narrator organizes and presents these events. The author has the freedom to manipulate time, altering the chronology through flashbacks, flash-forwards, pauses, ellipses, or

⁷⁶ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/chronology>

summaries. This manipulation creates a different temporal dimension, which does not necessarily follow the natural rhythm of events, but rather responds to a specific narrative intention, such as increasing tension, providing more context, or playing with the reader's perception (Pozuelo 260).

The union of both rhetorical figures, chronography and topography, in the sense of the evocation of the terrors of the natural landscape, and the horrors that can emerge from centuries past, supply a backdrop of cosmic fear against which the characters in *The Willows* appear to struggle in vain. The rhetorical analysis reveals how meaning is not just encoded in content, but enacted through form, mirroring the uncanny itself.

2.2 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis studies how the narrative is constructed and organized. For this thesis, we will concentrate the analysis on how the narrator tells the story, specifically focusing on his point of view.

2.2.1 Type of Narrator

According to Marchese and Forradellas, the narrator is the one who delivers the information and regulates the modality (dialogue, pure narration, description) of the delivery. Therefore, there cannot be a narrative without a narrator, but this narrator does not necessarily represent the ideas of the actual writer (278). Todorov already pointed out that, in fantastic stories, the narrator speaks in the first person, as, for example, in "The Outsider" by H. P. Lovecraft, in which the narrator reflects, "I must have lived years in this place, but I cannot measure the time. Beings must have cared for my needs, yet I cannot recall any person except myself, or anything alive but the noiseless rats and bats and spiders," (449) where we can appreciate the use of "I" and its related forms (my, myself), which creates a certain closeness and complicity with the reader, as the latter understands that the events "must" be true to some extent.

The narrator is capable of expressing their reflections on the topic of the narration; moreover, they can anticipate events and suggest relationships (Marchese and Forradellas 279). It is, as Todorov and Ducrot point out, “an imaginary speaker, reconstituted from the verbal elements that refer to him” (368). In the case of *The Willows*, the narrator is part of the story he tells, making the work a homodiegetic narrative, as opposed to a heterodiegetic narrative, where the narrator is not part of the story (Pozuelo 248). Here the narrator is the one who speaks the character's words, therefore, he is the implicit author, as he is represented in the text; both are fused, the narrator as the implicit author (Todorov and Ducrot 370). In this case, he is one of the main characters because it is a first-person narrative, and his word is trustworthy or it seems so to the reader: the narrated events are supernatural, but the narrator is natural (Todorov 69). Given this context, we may ask whether the protagonist's perspective is reliable or mediated by his own limitations and subjectivities.

2.2.2. Type of Focus

Focalization or point of view has to do with the focus or angle of vision in which the narrator positions themselves to tell their story (Marchese and Forradellas 337). Gérard Genette notes that focalization is “the delegation made by the enunciator to a cognitive subject, called the observer, and its installation in the narrative discourse [...] thus allows for the apprehension, from the perspective of that mediator, either of the entire narrative or only some pragmatic programs.” (qtd. in Greimas and Courtés 179) In the case of a narrator, the way they describe what they see is also influenced by their own values and perspectives. The selection of what to show, how to describe it, and what to omit is guided by a peculiar worldview. The narrative then becomes a space where perspectives are not just perceptions of the world, but also interpretations laden with subjectivity and context.

For this reason, there are different “angles” of focalization, the first being a “behind” view, in which “the narrator knows everything about the personage (or the characters); he separates himself from it to see,” (Marchese and Forradellas

338) which for Genette would be non-focalized or zero focalization, that is, the omniscient narrator (Pozuelo 243). The second would be the “with” vision, that is, “the narrator knows the same as the characters and knows the event at the same time with them; he does not know in advance the explanation of the events,” (Marchese and Forradellas 338) which for Genette would be internal focalization (Pozuelo 243). This can also be from a character’s point of view; therefore, we assimilate the reality of the narrative through a character, or through several characters who recount the events, that is, the character-focalizer who only dominates a fragment of reality (Pozuelo 246). The third is the “outside” perspective where “the narrator knows less than the characters because he is limited to describing what he sees from the outside, being an eyewitness to the events,” (Marchese and Forradellas 338) which would have its equivalent in Genette as external focalization, since the focalizer sees the characters from the outside without accessing their consciousness (Pozuelo 244).

2.3 Psychoanalysis

With a psychoanalytical perspective, we seek to show how the characters, and especially the narrator, perceive their environment, and what the natural elements represent for the narrator and his companion. We aim to explore whether we can perceive any distortion of reality within the narrative universe. In the following subsections, we will discuss the methodologies used for this analysis.

2.3.1 Character Perception of the Surroundings

As we already indicated in the introduction, Algernon Blackwood was dissatisfied with his reality and the time he lived in, feeling a deep disdain for growing mechanization and what it implied in terms of humanity’s devastation of nature. In that sense, for Sigmund Freud, a literary work functions similarly to a daydream in that both serve as imaginative spaces where unconscious desires and unresolved conflicts find expression. Consequently, an author, consciously or

unconsciously, projects repressed desires into the narrative, shaping a world that compensates for the disappointments and constraints of real life (Freud qtd. in Hossain 43). Therefore, “writing is an attempt to bring out what is kept underground.” (Jelinek qtd. in Sandbæk 28)

Considering the aforementioned points, it is important to indicate that Blackwood felt a certain anguish towards industrialization in the early 19th century, which he perceived to distance society from nature. As Julia Kristeva points out, “fear and object are linked,” (49) and we can note that the unease (fear) towards industrialization (object) is represented in *The Willows* through the protagonist’s horror (fear) towards external agents (object) that cannot be defined within the conceptualizations of our reality. If fear is formed by the unnameable and the void (Kristeva 54), Blackwood uses this fear as his fetish, becoming “a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable,” (Kristeva 54) necessary to capture all those unresolved desires and conflicts (obviously, Blackwood cannot stop the advance of industrialization, but it can lessen the effect of his anguish).

Through the characters, the author projects his anguish, representing to some extent his actions and thoughts. As Kristeva points out, “the writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead, he comes to life again in signs.” (55) In this case, Blackwood cannot rid himself of his fear, but he can turn it into a catalytic tool through writing and consequently through the characters.

In his novella, Blackwood’s characters are afraid of external agents, of the willows and everything around them, so the phobic object (here the external agents) keeps them in indecision as much as possible (Kristeva 60) in order to control them and immobilize them within their fear.

The characters must choose between adaptation or abjection for their survival. The first option involves conforming to the social norm or else they will devolve into the second. The subjects perceive the object and respond to it through abjection, because it is the only logical response for them; in this case,

the abject is a human response to the horror that arises when “something” threatens the meaning between the self (or others, referring to the characters) and the other (the external agents) (Kristeva 66). Let us recall here that the abject is associated with the repulsive and the disturbing that threatens the human body’s integrity, thus, it penetrates and transgresses the codes that regulate reality.

2.3.2 Symbolic Representation of the Elements of Nature

Marchese and Forradellas point out that the image provides varied information simultaneously, which could not be expressed in any other way (206). On the other hand, Iser indicates that for empiricists, the image is the way in which reality (consisting of objects) is recorded within us (235), so permanent contact with our environment could add more specificity to that initial image imprinted on us. In contrast, for Bachelard, “the image is a product of pure imagination, not perception, and is a creator of language,” (qtd. in Marchese and Forradellas 206) which would give rise to the analysis of images represented in various cultures, ultimately developing a mental representation.

We will use Gilbert Durand’s conceptualizations to explain Blackwood’s imaginaries associated with the representation of the elements of nature. In this sense, he points out that imagination “is a dynamic power that distorts” (26) the information obtained through perception. The first element would be water, but not clear water, rather deep waters: “calm water means the opposite of violent water.” (Durand 31) The swamps that possess water in a somewhat murky sense “are growing and permanent [like the ominous shadow of a forest]” (Durand 89), difficult to cross. “The running water is a bitter invitation to the journey without return: one never bathes twice in the same river, and the streams never flow back to their source. The flowing water is the figure of the irrevocable.” (Durand 90) As always it moves forward, resembling evolution, the transformation of everything that flows ceaselessly. The future linked to water becomes uncertain and filled with terror (especially the unknown).

Another element of nature present in *The Willows* is fire, associated with the idea of purification, as it breaks “the twilight of mental confusion” (Durand 162) caused in moments of perplexity and unease. It is connected “to very different human gestures and tools [for its production] by percussion and by friction,” (Durand 163) but it is also an instrument for obtaining the soul’s immortality through incineration as opposed to inhumation, that is, the preservation of the body in the earth (Durand 163). Of course, the indeterminate nature of fire is not only associated with the aforementioned; it is also linked to the erotic, purification, and light, and we will also find it associated with the word, especially that of God and the prophets, in Christian terms (Durand 166). In the sense of light, the author adds that, “the use of fire marks the most important stage of the intellectualization of the cosmos and increasingly separates man from the animal condition,” (164) endowing it with an “apotropaic power” (164), clearing the paths of darkness and driving away evil.

The tree can represent a cross or staff, closely associated to snakes, and “is often imagined as the father of fire [...] especially because of its relationship with heating and cooking.” (Durand 315) We know that the protagonists of *The Willows* try to obtain wood from the willows for their fire, but they only get driftwood that they have to fetch from the shore. As Durand says, “the tree [...] seems to incite dreaming once again of a dramatic fate,” (323) like the premonition that the protagonists see, as their stay on the island prolongs, increasing the tension. “The tree is associated with fertilizing waters, it is the tree of life,” (Durand 323) which is presented in the story as a distorted image: the waters are dark and somehow fertilize agents that are beyond our understanding. “The tree tends to sublimate, to verticalize its symbolic message. The most archaic sacred places, Australian totemic centers, primitive Semitic and Greek temples, Hindu or pre-Hindu [...] are constituted by a tree or a wooden post associated with a betyl.”⁷⁷ (Durand 324) The connection of “the deity” with the earthly world occurs through the tree due to its upright posture directed towards the sky, associating it with temples and sacred

⁷⁷ It is the non-figurative story representation of the divinity: <https://betiloelpuerto.org/patrimonio/betilos-dioses-sin-rostro/>

places. And in this sense, “the tree is always a symbol of the totality of the cosmos in its genesis and in its becoming.” (Durand 325) The universe then focuses on a single place through the tree, and the energies (or agents) from “outside” are channeled and made present in our reality. If we think about it, “the tree does not sacrifice and does not imply any threat; it is sacrificed, firewood burned in the sacrifice, always beneficial even when it serves for torture.” (Durand 329) It is just an instrument for another purpose outside of what it could regularly be assigned, not even by humanity, but by external agents and can be offered to these entities that use them as a curtain to hide from unwanted visitors.

The last element Durand conceptualizes is air, for “it is through air, like through a thread, that this world and the other world and all beings are united.” (Durand 166) Air is the element that allows existence per se—we could temporarily do without the others, but we need air to breathe and stay alive. However, the air has transformed into wind, a force capable of bending everyone. It does not bring tranquility or purification (which would lead to ascension); on the contrary, in this case, it makes the protagonists kneel to avoid its constant howling. The air that resembles breath, being “a universal belief that places in the respiratory air the privileged and purified part of the person, the soul,” (Durand 167) but in the twisted reality of *The Willows*, this air rather resembles the breath of external agents.

The character-narrator not only describes what he sees but also what he interprets, feels, and fears, which transforms the environment into a symbolic representation of his inner anguish. As Kristeva puts it, the abject arises when the external (the object) becomes a threat to the coherence of the self, and this is clearly manifested in the narrator's progressive loss of certainty. Thus, the narrator is not simply a witness to events but also a distorted lens through which the repressed and the unknown are expressed.

We can appreciate that the elements here are distorted from how we generally associate them, like the inverted image in an artificial mirror. In

Blackwood's nature, humanity is at a loss and faces two choices: to try to survive or to surrender to the assimilation of consciousness.

Chapter 3: Literary Resources that Represent Cosmic Horror in *The Willows*

Cosmic horror is a powerful mixture of fear, moral repulsion (since it is beyond the comprehension of our reality) and awe, but cosmic horror also opens the door to that real possibility, as an intuition of the human being, of believing in what it posits: the existence of superior entities that are not bound by the rules of humanity. With this idea in mind, we will use literary resources to analyze, how Algernon Blackwood constructs cosmic horror in *The Willows*, initially creating this discomfort in the characters until the threat of exogenous agents towards them becomes evident.

When we think of isotopies, and in this case, specifically those of death and danger, the text delivers us in different instances, the idea of trespassing. This first appears in a subtle way, such as when the narrator comments “that we had, somewhat boldly, arrived without asking permission in a separate little realm of wonder and magic—a realm that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with unwritten warnings everywhere to intruders for those who had the imagination to discover them.” (Blackwood 59)

However, as the text progresses, the tension increases, forming “a world in which we were intruders, a world in which we were neither wanted nor invited to remain—where we ran grave risks perhaps!,” (Blackwood 64) or when a man in a boat passes by the narrator and the Swede, then they remember what a shopkeeper had told them that “no one disembarked here because it belonged to some kind of beings outside the world of man!,” (Blackwood 66) or “And we, in our temerity, had dared to trespass on it [the island], even to make use of it!” (Blackwood 69), or “We were trespassers, intruders; we were not welcome.” (Blackwood 70). These structures and the following, strategically crafted by the author, transmit the idea of not belonging to that place and that the characters are somehow breaking an unknown rule, which generates fear and anxiety for both

the characters and readers, who are actually the first ones to be actively aware of the situation: "We had strayed from a safe line somewhere" (Blackwood 89), and "At any rate, here was a place unpolluted by men, kept clean by the winds from coarse human influences," (Blackwood 90) or "Sheer folly! The river is overflowing, and we have only one paddle. Besides, we only go deeper into their country! For fifty miles there is nothing but willows, willows, willows!" (Blackwood 96) If we review these phrases, we will find key words that ensure the continuity of the idea of danger and death. The isotopy gives coherence to the text: "kingdom of wonder and magic," "trespassers," "intruders," "not wanted," "invade," "interlopers," "a place unpolluted by men," and "their country," with the idea of the outside human world, since the characters are the invaders in their world and not the exogenous agents in ours.

The narrator describes the willows as a silvery green sea, using this isotopy to point out the domain covered by the willows in that territory: "the wind sends waves up and down over the surface of the hole, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green waves like the sea, too, until the branches turn and rise and then silvery white as their underside turns toward the sun." (Blackwood 58) The coordinated movement of the leaves guided by the wind resembles the waves, even the river is lost here because of the vastness of the willows.

Nothing is still in this place; even the narrator will later indicate, "the furious movement of the willow bushes as the wind poured over them increased the curious illusion that the island itself actually moved." (Blackwood 63) If we can only perceive the sea of willows in constant bustle, we cannot avoid it, nor can the characters either, in considering the movement of a displacement, as when we are on the shore of a beach, the waves reach us, and as they retreat, we 'believe and feel' that they drag us out to sea.

The protagonist, as the text progresses, bestows us elements that confer weight to the environment. For example, he describes the wind "howling over our heads and shaking the willows around us like straws," (Blackwood 67) relating the pieces of island that fell into the water with "blows of immense power [...] the

sound of the planet must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space,” (Blackwood 67-68) considering that in space there is no sound.⁷⁸ Therefore, insinuating that planets have sound as they move through space is a way of delivering a characteristic of which there is no comparison and that depends exclusively on the reader's imagination, which gives dynamism to the text, creating a fluid narrative-image.

3.1 Representations of the Sinister

We have already pointed out in the theoretical framework the sense of the sinister, that which interrupts the everyday and familiar in a disconcerting way, which should remain hidden but manifests itself suddenly, adding to it the feeling of helplessness in the face of a threat.

The concepts of the sinister and the eerie, although not synonymous, are closely related; both refer to the sensation of the weird, frightening, or uncanny. Eeriness is found shortly after the beginning of the text: “the sense of remoteness from the world of humankind, the utter isolation, the fascination of this singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell upon us both.” (Blackwood 59) The sense of distance from the familiar (and human-controlled) world gives way to the vulnerability of being in a place that is not within the limits of human supervision, which generates anxiety, the helplessness we mentioned earlier.

The introduction of the sinister is glimpsed in the following sentence in a very subtle way:

Altogether it was an impressive scene, with its utter loneliness, its strange suggestiveness; and as I gazed upon it, long and curiously, a singular emotion began to stir deep within me. Midway in my delight of the wild

⁷⁸ For further information see: <https://www.space.com/sounds-in-space>

beauty, there crept, unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm. (Blackwood 63)

This is only an initial discomfort, strictly speaking, expressed in contrast to what will come later in the story. The atmosphere slowly becomes denser as the text progresses.

If the landscape in conjunction with the atmosphere exerts an impression on the protagonist, we might indicate that this passage reflects it: "When I reached the sandy point jutting out between the waves, the spell of the place descended upon me with a positive shock. No mere 'scenery' could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to alarm" (Blackwood 69). The sense of uneasiness, a few degrees greater than indicated in the previous text, gives a clear indication of the progressive advance of danger approaching.

For the protagonist, the transformation of quotidian objects, such as the willows, into agents with plans of their own is what renders the environment sinister and creepy, as reflected in the following passage: "and these bushes, huddled around us, assumed for me in the dark a strange grotesque aspect which gave them somehow the appearance of living and purposeful creatures. Their very ordinariness, I felt, masked what was malignant and hostile to us." (Blackwood 84) Behind that apparent familiarity, there is a hint of malice that the narrator and the reader can only vaguely sense which brings us to one of the characteristics of cosmic horror: the sinister, that which is familiar expressed in the word ordinariness. This is the nexus that produces the ambivalence between the ordinary and the sinister, without the latter manifesting itself clearly. The image is still blurred.

The sinister is an element present throughout the text: "The worst feature of the situation seemed to me that we did not know what to expect and could therefore make no sort of preparation by way of defense." (Blackwood 88) The feeling of not knowing what to do under constant threat and remaining in a state of alert in the face of exogenous agents that do not completely fit our paradigm of

reality produces horror and panic in the face of the unexpected, which is further reinforced by the feeling of eeriness in the atmosphere.

Along with the sinister, the eeriness of the place produces the longing for human contact: the noise, the landscape, the smells. As the narrator reflects, "The solitude of that Danube camping-place, can I ever forget it? The feeling of being utterly alone on an empty planet!" (Blackwood 89) Suddenly the emptiness of humanity is no longer pleasant, and the narrator needs to surround himself with peers again. That is why the character then provides descriptions of the activities performed by the people of the villages they had left behind to try to reach that connection with measurable reality, understanding it within human categorization.

In addition, the sinister can also be represented through rhetorical figures such as metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor, understood as the displacement of one meaning by another between elements that are closely related but belong to different semantic fields (e.g., river-life and sea-death), acquires a particular value here. In *The Willows*, we find metaphors that describe the Danube as a living entity, such as in the sentences "it [the river] had seemed to us like following the grown of some living creature" (Blackwood 60) and "[A]nd during the fight our canoe slipped down from its [the river's] shoulder to its breast, and had the time of its life among the struggling waves." (Blackwood 61) In both, the river appears personified, endowed with traits of a living being, almost animal. This attribution of qualities foreign to its physical nature allows it to be perceived as an entity with its own will, which subtly introduces a sinister nuance. Thus, the relationship between "the river" and "living creature" becomes metaphorically equivalent.

On the other hand, we have metonymy, which also uses the reference between two terms, but the relationship established between them is one of continuity, since it describes some characteristic. For the representation of the sinister, we have examples that also relate to the river as its main figure: "it [the river] became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being." (Blackwood 60), similar to the sentence indicated in the previous paragraph where we pointed out the metaphor, but here we can see that certain characteristics of

the river are already included, such as “soul” and “fluid being”. The river is a huge living being that contains other entities, like a reflection of the cosmos that houses other entities that the characters do not know (and as humanity neither) and, in addition, it has its own identity that we cannot even glimpse with the narrow understanding we have to understand reality. The following sentence reaffirms what we pointed out above, “while below [the surface of the river] there moved, concealed as by a silken mantle, a whole army of Undines [...],” (Blackwood 61) where the “silken mantle” is associated with humanity's capacity to understand what surrounds it, preventing it from knowing the nymphs (exogenous entities) that live below the surface (in another world and/or dimension).

Finally, when both characters realize that forces outside of them are trying to hunt them down, the river shows a more threatening face, where the protagonist even remarks “the river seemed to me to grow blacker [...].” (Blackwood 84) The fluid being I had described before, as night falls, takes on a more sinister face, as all things do when we look at them from the dark, “When the common objects in this way become charged with the suggestion of horror [...],” which gives this fluid being the capacity of self-will or it could also be the author trying to confuse us. Which makes us question whether what we see through the narrator's thoughts is really true.

3.1.1 Description of the Entities

Throughout the entire work, the willows are present; at first, the protagonist describes them as “a vast sea of low willow bushes,” (Blackwood 58) implying that they are not imposing plants and even adds, “these willows never attain to the dignity of trees; they have no rigid trunks; they remain humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses.” (Blackwood 58) There is a certain disdain in his description: initially they do not pose any threat, described without grace or anything that makes them stand out, except for their number, as they dominate as far as the eye (and beyond) can see.

In fact, in the paragraph following the one quoted above, the author again emphasizes the number of willows and the way they move, comparing them to a mass of water in constant agitation (recall that he also refers to the river as a fluid being). “For the wind sends waves rising and falling over the whole surface, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green swells like the sea” (Blackwood 58). The metaphor manifests itself in the association between the leaves moving in unison and the waves of the sea: the wind acts as a catalyst, giving the scene a fluid and undulating quality that reinforces the organic and dynamic character of the scenery, which also brings us closer to the sinister.

Slowly, the character begins to individualize this description of the bushes, as we pointed out in the previous paragraph, towards an exposition that we could indicate as disturbing:

the willows, which closed about it [the river] like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink. They made me think of gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves. They caused it to vanish from sight. They herded there together in such overpowering numbers. (Blackwood 63)

Here, the word “herd,” used in animals, expresses the idea of creatures that move along as a group, which clashes with the thought of plants moving on their own. Subtly, the protagonist makes us perceive the presence of the monsters as transgressors of the ontological property of our reality by referring to them as “monstrous antediluvian creatures” and “gigantic sponge-like growths,” conveying the idea of enormity in terms of size and vastness, referring to their extent.

Here we also find metaphor, the term “herd” associated with animals, applies equally to willows, as beings with their own will just like animals (we could not consider them human), in fact, the author reaffirms this condition by adding “monstrous antediluvian creatures” which gives the narrator an immediate rejection. In this context, the willows and “monstrous antediluvian creatures” are synonymous and both terms reinforce each other, generating in the narrator – and, by extension, in the reader – a sense of horror.

Moreover, what disturbs the protagonist is the massing of the willows, as seen in the following passage:

But my emotion [...] seemed to attach itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. (Blackwood 64)

Even the use of the verb “swarm,” associated with the movement of a large mass of small animals, especially insects, conveys a sense of rejection and displeasure, adding that this movement is teeming, like a great tide. The idea of massification, associated with a plague, is repeated later on: “if suddenly they should rise up, like a swarm of living creatures, marshaled by the gods whose territory we had invaded, sweep towards us off the vast swamps, booming overhead in the night—and then settle down!” (Blackwood 70) This expresses the fear of an unexpected attack not by one but by a legion of agents from an unknown place with no one to help the characters.

In this sentence the protagonist already considers the willows creatures with their own agency, a manifestation of the uncanny: “They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves” (Blackwood 69). The willows are familiar organisms but have adopted characteristics that are not their own and have been given a completely different meaning. Therefore, the author gradually introduces the idea of the sinister.

On several occasions, the protagonist describes the willows as entities endowed with autonomous movement. When the two travelers first arrive on the island, they are greeted by “an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of our efforts.” (Blackwood 60) In this passage, the “hands” metaphorically replace the leaves, which are animated by the wind to resemble an act of applause. This metaphor suggests a quality the willows do not

literally possess, yet one that evokes a vivid and unsettling likeness, reinforcing their uncanny, almost sentient presence.

For the narrator, the willows behave like a coordinated group, “they [the willows] went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing.” (Blackwood 69) Or displacing the leaves with hands and later silver spears, the polarization between those who encourage and later the aggressors: “There they stood in the moonlight, like a vast army surrounding our camp, shaking their innumerable silver spears defiantly, formed all ready for an attack.” (Blackwood 70) Metaphorically, the willows are an army, threatening the characters, stalking them closer and closer. On more than one occasion, the narrator conveys the fear of this threat, which he does not manage to see, always with the idea of being late to check the facts.

Observing the camp from a certain distance, he notices that the willows have come closer, “unnecessarily, unpleasantly close. They had moved nearer.” (Blackwood 77) Therefore, the horror is confirmed, and even later, the narrator wonders if the wind had not moved them or if they moved by themselves, once again confirming the ambiguity of the sinister: “The latter [the willows] too, kept up a sort of independent movement of their own, rustling among themselves when no wind stirred, and shaking oddly from the roots upwards.” (Blackwood 84) If the justification, in part, for the movement of the willows is understood by the wind, then there is no way to explain this except by accepting the existence of exogenous agents.

However, the reality is different; the willows are just a twisted masquerade that hides the “true” foreign agents. During the first night on the island, the narrator wakes up past midnight and describes his first encounter in the following manner:

but there, opposite and slightly above me, were shapes of some indeterminate sort among the willows, and as the branches swayed in the wind, they seemed to group themselves about these shapes, forming a series of monstrous outlines that shifted rapidly beneath

the moon. Close, about fifty feet in front of me, I saw these things.
(Blackwood 72)

Here, the weird manifests itself in indeterminate forms, alluding to what Harman refers to as the general outline of the whole. Not even the protagonist can clearly describe what he sees, only representing the generality of what is present before him. Therefore, it is the reader who interprets the events through information that the narrator-protagonist has provided, since the reader possesses a certain knowledge that has been structured as the text progresses.

Later, the protagonist provides more details that allow readers to add features to the entities and continue piecing together the puzzle:

They first became properly visible, these huge figures, just within the tops of the bushes—immense, bronze-colored, moving, and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches [...] they were very much larger than human, and indeed that something in their appearance proclaimed them to be not human at all. [...] They were interlaced one with another, making a great column, and I saw their limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other, forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally with the contortions of the wind-tossed trees. (Blackwood 72-73)

This description, which remains imprecise, gives us only an idea of the exogenous agents, and it is this vagueness in characterization that plunges both the protagonist and the reader into cosmic horror. The reader, just like the protagonist, is unable to visualize the objects. The concept is ambiguous, and the uncertainty it entails is what provokes such horror. The monstrous here is presented in forms that constantly change, that are not restricted to the categories of our reality; the fusion of forms is also a way of presenting the abnormal.

The observation of these figures, in addition to fear, generates in the protagonist a certain sublime feeling, such as in the following reflection: “yet the figures still rose from earth to heaven, silent, majestically, in a great spiral of grace

and strength that overwhelmed me at length with a genuine deep emotion of worship. I felt that I must fall down and worship—absolutely worship.” (Blackwood 73) Since the observation of the phenomenon causes a shift from horror to the eminent, even being aware of the danger it represents, he is willing to worship those creatures, who have moved him due to the transcendence it implies and the realization of the insignificance of human existence.

In the sentence “The figures still remained, still ascended into heaven from the heart of the night,”. (Blackwood 73) what we described in the previous paragraph is reaffirmed, “the dark of the night” metaphorically is the deepest and quietest moment of the night, where all creatures sleep except those that, by nature, inhabit the darkness. This liminal zone between the everyday and the strange, or between the visible and the hidden, is, therefore, when events that should have no witnesses, take place. The narrator bears witness to what he witnesses, but with the idea that he should not be there, he witnesses something forbidden. The night, as a metaphor, is a veil that hides what the narrator, and consequently, the reader, cannot understand.

The Swede, the narrator's travel companion, declares at one point that, “they have not found us—not 'located' us, as the Americans say” (Blackwood 92), referring to the way the agents pursue the organisms of their interest, a kind of echolocation⁷⁹ used by some mammals to navigate in dark places. And the Swede adds, “I think they feel us, but cannot actually see us. We must keep our minds quiet—it's our minds they feel. We must control our thoughts, or it's all up with us,” (Blackwood 92) which would corroborate the previous idea. This generates tension and escalates a sense of horror among both the characters and the reader. Here we encounter an instance of synesthesia in the phrase “it's our minds they feel”, where the verb feel, typically associated with physical sensation, is applied to the abstract concept of the mind. This fusion of sensory and cognitive

⁷⁹ Echolocation is a technique used by bats, dolphins and other animals to determine the location of objects using reflected sound. This allows the animals to move around in pitch darkness, so they can navigate, hunt, identify friends and enemies, and avoid obstacles. (Price par. 1) See more information at: <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/what-is-echolocation>

domains generates a profound sense of ambivalence in the reader. Rather than stating that the entities read the mind—a more conventional and precise expression—the use of *feel* suggests an intimate, almost invasive form of perception that defies logical explanation. It is precisely this displacement of meaning that contributes to the horror: the inability to categorize the phenomenon within the familiar framework of how reality is perceived. The suggestion that the mind can be felt introduces a breach in the boundary between subject and other, making the encounter not just uncanny, but existentially disturbing.

It is the Swede who makes a precise statement about the nature of the entities:

it is the spirit of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is—*neither*. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own. (Blackwood 93)

Although it is not specified in the text, we can extrapolate this as a reflection of the relationship we, as human beings, have with the nature that surrounds us, in that we use it at our pleasure, not to worship or sacrifice it, but rather to know it, subjugate it, possess it, and assimilate it in some way.

And now convinced of this, he adds what the protagonist has already witnessed during the first night: “It’s the willows, of course. The willows mask the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we’re lost, lost utterly,” (Blackwood 93) thus giving way to the sinister represented in the willows, and the monstrous and eerie through the exogenous entities. The monstrous arises from the amalgamation of figures that continuously change, and the eerie, because it is they who truly execute the actions, but whose secret motives we do not know. But here, the idea of echolocation is also reinforced, not as we normally understand it, since it does not point to the corporeal of the

“victims” but to their minds, to the thoughts they produce, which the exogenous agents perceive like a beacon in the dark. That is why they must keep them under control, as the Swede advises.

Even before this incident, the narrator hints at this characteristic of echolocation in the exogenous agents, becoming more repetitive as the story progresses. In phrases like, “The best thing you can do is to keep quiet and try to hold your mind as firm as possible,” (Blackwood 83) or “Our thoughts make spirals in their world. We must keep them out of our minds at all costs, if possible,” (Blackwood 93) or “The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire. It was shivery work!” (Blackwood 96) such telepathic powers help strengthen a sense of the sinister and cosmic horror takes shape.

Therefore, we wonder what the end of all this may be. Perhaps the answer is the assimilation of consciousness, as the Swede points out: “this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution—far worse than death, and not even annihilation.” (Blackwood 92) Or, as the narrator reflects, “a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die.” (Blackwood 96) The idea in both reflections is transcendence, but not as we normally understand it (especially as it was interpreted by Blackwood), rather as a possession of consciousness at a level different from engulfment, that is, the absolute disintegration of being.

Towards the end of the story, at the moment when the narrator goes out to look for his companion because the latter had left the tent at night, the former remarks that “[...] I plunged into a sort of torrent of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at once.” (Blackwood 99) This metaphor implies that the humming was perceived everywhere at once, but if we consider the heaven perceived as a place that has certain limits—the corners would indicate this characteristic—it is because the narrator is trying to break down the situation to make it understandable. Something that is too vast to

grasp in its entirety must be reduced to smaller parts that we can handle, which corresponds to a human quality. Metaphorically, the sky represents that knowledge that we cannot assimilate because we do not possess the capacity for it; the drone, the medium in which that information is transmitted. The characters and the reader do not know the purpose of these entities or why they are there; they just exist and we are (including the characters) incompetent to understand their purposes.

Chapter 4: Nature as a Threatening Environment

At the beginning of *The Willows* the narrator offers a detailed description of the Danube River, specifically a place that, as he points out, maps indicate with the German word *Sümpfe*, which means swamp. As he recounts, "After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Budapest, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes." (Blackwood 58) It is here where the novella develops and introduces the concepts of isolation and forlornness, qualities that will be reaffirmed as the text progresses.

If topography is the construction of the physical space where the narrated events take place, then we must understand that the author gives us here a fairly complete description of the journey that the protagonist and his companion make along the Danube. The part that narrates the text begins in Pressburg,⁸⁰ and they mention several places through which they pass, such as Vienna, Orth, Hainburg, Pertronell (Blackwood 58-59). Such a list of cities delivers the coordinates to locate the adventure in a real and terrestrial space, besides providing historical-geographical information.

The familiar places full of human activity (a human-controlled environment) are left behind and we enter spatial frames with changes of scenery that progressively introduce unease as the journey continues. The narrator reflects: "The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope⁸¹ pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest" (Blackwood 59). These places, while still retaining the familiar human

⁸⁰ Current Bratislava, capital of Slovakia. It was Pressburg until World War I with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Further information at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Slovakia>

⁸¹ Bioscope comes from the Greek *bios* (life) and *skopeein* (to look). Before the invention of cinema, the term referred to a "vision of life." "At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, it referred to a traveling show that combined film projections with live acts, within the context of fairs." (The Electric Palace par. 1) Further information at <https://medium.com/electricpalaceharwich/whats-a-bioscope-show-ed31f5b0363d>

touch, quickly cede to foreign landscapes that generate a sense of eeriness by altering the atmosphere. Remember that this is an important characteristic of cosmic horror.

Next, the narrator dedicates three extensive paragraphs to describe the Danube, which seems to come alive as the adventurers continue their journey: “losing itself among the deserted swamps, unobserved, unrestrained, it had seemed to us like following the growth of some living creature” (Blackwood 60). He initially depicts the river as friendly and benevolent, calling it a Great Personage (Blackwood 60), a sensation that extends even to the animals that feed along its course, including cormorants, grey crows, storks, hawks, swans and marsh birds, deer and fawns (Blackwood 62), a great variety of animals that provide a connection to the natural environment and, therefore, a sense of being in familiar territory.

However, everything changes for the characters when they pass Pressburg: “and the Danube became more serious. [...] It became suddenly grown up and claimed our respect.” (Blackwood 62) The following parts of the text treat the Danube as a being with its own conscience and behavior, claiming respect and awe from the two canoers. They even receive a warning not to continue, as the receding waters could strand them, but contrary to common sense, the characters buy more provisions in case they find themselves in such a situation. In other words, they do not fear the river (Blackwood 62). This attitude seems to reflect a sense of superiority over nature, without the characters suspecting the dangers that lurk around them. Happy is children, who believe the little grove behind the house is part of their yard, they persist in their journey.

The description of the island where the two protagonists become stranded also deserves mention, as this is the site where most of the novella takes place. The narrator describes it as a piece of land “less than an acre in extent, a mere sandy bank standing some two or three feet⁸² above the level of the river.” (Blackwood 62) But there are two characteristics that stand out: the first is its

⁸² 1 acre = 43.560 square feet = 43.047 square meters.

triangular form: “It was triangular in shape, with the apex up stream,” (Blackwood 62) a characteristic that is important if we consider that Blackwood was influenced by Buddhism, in which triangles represent knowledge/heaven/earth or birth/life/death⁸³, reflecting the universe’s cyclical nature. In the first trio, the characters will discover a new cognition of reality, perceive real life from another scope, which belongs to the sky (not in a religious sense) of the universe itself, beyond knowable borders and which, by chance for the protagonists, becomes present on the island where they are trapped. The land is the point where the exogenous agents make their presence known, where their reality touches ours, a small sample where the protagonists will have this encounter that will be decisive in terms of consciousness. The other characteristic is one that has been described before: the amount of willows. In fact, the narrator indicates that the rest of the island is so cluttered with these bushes that it makes the journey through the island unpleasant (Blackwood 63). It is important to remember that these willows are moved by the wind, giving the impression that the island is moving by itself. Moreover, for the narrator, their quantity is impressive; they concealed the river in some parts “as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky.” (Blackwood 64) Are the willows attempting to obtain something from the river? The exogenous agents use the willows as instruments to disguise themselves and avoid notice by unwanted eyes, hence their abundant quantity. Therefore, the willows are a fundamental part of the topography in the text, providing, in addition to the river, the representation of the sinister and eerie.

The falling pieces of the island may well represent the fragility of reality as we understand it, knowledge (Buddhism again) that will provide the characters with a new perspective on existence itself, “Everywhere the banks were crumbling as the rising flood tore at them and carried away great portions with a splash and a gurgle.” (Blackwood 65) Even the Swede at some point accurately adds, “The island's much smaller than when we landed.” (Blackwood 65) The island

⁸³ Further information at <https://bhaktimarga.ie/sacred-geometry-of-triangles/>

represents the limited and provisional human knowledge that the characters have of reality before contact with exogenous agents. As the river inexorably takes away pieces of the island, the similarity to the loss of sustenance on which the understanding of their surroundings is based crumbles and, in that sense, becomes smaller and smaller. The understanding that there are other forces beyond the control of humanity awakens the sinister in the characters; reality is no longer as familiar as they thought. Everything outside the island is depicted in the vastness of the universe, and the characters realize with horror that what they truly believe they understand is nothing compared to the infinite cosmos and the insignificance of the human race. As the text progresses, we learn through the characters that the island shrinks, "The wood and the island will finish tomorrow in a dead heat [...] but there's enough to last us till then." (Blackwood 78) The imminence of the end is near, both physical (the finiteness of the island) and mental (the knowledge beyond human reality).

The novella provides certain measures of time, as, for example, "on the crest of a rising flood about mid-July" (Blackwood 58), produced by the melting of the ice. This also prevents the canoers from landing on the other islands they find on their way, because of the rising river and the winds. After the narrator's extensive description of the Danube, discussed above, when he points out, "This was many days back," (Blackwood 61) he goes on to portray the river in a new light, this time calling it "the great creature" (Blackwood 61) and referring to it with the feminine pronoun, treating it as a maternal figure. For harboring such diverse fauna, "we forgave her because of her friendliness to the birds and animals that haunted the shores;" (Blackwood 61) the flooding of the river allows an increase in the animal species that populate the place and fills its banks with sounds of all kinds.

Later on, the characters give us another temporal reference: "that he [the Swede] would rather have the heat, the ordinary July weather, than this 'diabolical wind'," (Blackwood 71) considering that they were in the middle of the European summer, another chronographic reference, which also adds a sinister nuance,

since this wind would not be appropriate for this time of the year, returning us to the idea that the familiar (the wind) becomes strange. During the first night, the evening before they had arrived on the island, the narrator wakes up and provides information about the time: "it was past twelve o'clock—the threshold of a new day—and I had therefore slept a couple of hours" (Blackwood 72) and with this, we get the idea of the temporal movement of the narration. Furthermore, the expression "the threshold of a new day" symbolizes the idea of liminality, passing from one day to the next, and having survived. Therefore, time here, in addition to being linear, also grants a symbolic sense. The protagonist is affected by the eeriness of the place to some extent.

We cannot know for certain how much time has passed since this phenomenon started, and since we cannot measure time in human terms, the horror that reflects the insignificance of humanity in the face of the vastness of the cosmos appears: "I only know that great column of figures ascended darkly into the sky for what seemed a very long period of time, and with a very complete measure of reality as most men are accustomed to gauge reality. Then suddenly they were gone!" (Blackwood 74). Subsequent to this, we have another description of the futility of measuring time: "I remember that it was a long time before I fell again into a troubled and restless sleep." (Blackwood 74) After the narrator's first awakening, falling asleep again "feels" like an eternity, but it is unclear. The imprecision in the information generates a certain anxiety and fear in both the narrator and the reader.

Again, the ambiguity in the measurement of time causes the narrator and consequently the reader to fall into a feeling of unease. As the narrator reflects, "Several hours must have passed since I stood there before watching the ascending figures." (Blackwood 75) Even the wind that torments them since their arrival strangely ceases at this point of the story: "The weather kept brilliantly fine till about four o'clock, and then for the first time for three days the wind showed signs of abating." (Blackwood 84) After the uncertainty of the weather, this phrase offers a respite for the narrator. However, although the specificity of time helps to

establish temporal boundaries, it can also act in the opposite sense, such as when the narrator points out that, “Yet the silence that came about five o’clock with its sudden cessation was in a manner quite as oppressive” (Blackwood 84), because nothing is as certain as it seems. When the ambiguity of time confronts its precision and the roles of uncertainty/certainty change, the boundary between the natural and the supernatural becomes more evident. Even the narrator, to keep calm, engages in domestic activities: “from five o’clock onwards I busied myself with the stew-pot and preparations for dinner, it being my turn to cook that night.” (Blackwood 85)

4.1 Symbology of Natural Elements

Algernon Blackwood saw nature as sacred, unknown, and sometimes frightening, so his natural landscapes are not merely physical, but spiritual and symbolic, full of invisible presences. As the narrator of *The Willows* reflects,

Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt. (Blackwood 64)

In this sense, natural elements play a particular role in his work. Our analysis will focus on four major elements: fire, water, wind, and earth. In the case of the latter, the discussion will revolve around the willows as terrestrial components of earth. We will begin the analysis with fire, which in *The Willows* represents stability, illumination, and a moment of tranquility: “We lay on the sandy patch beside the fire, smoking, listening to the noises of the night round us, and talking happily of the journey we had already made, and of our plans ahead.” (Blackwood 68) The characters can smoke with the light provided by the campfire and see each other's faces. However, due to the wind, they have to look for driftwood more often to

keep the fire alive: “the scarcity of wood made it a business to keep the fire going, for the wind, that drove the smoke in our faces wherever we sat, helped at the same time to make a forced draught.” (Blackwood 68) So, they spend a good amount of time alone, as they take turns searching for firewood. Moving away from the fire makes the author wander in his thoughts and feelings that he does not share with his companion, the Swede: “We lay there, tending the fire, talking in desultory fashion, peering about us into the dense willow bushes, and listening to the thunder of wind and river.” (Blackwood 68) The safety provided by the firelight allows them to continue as if nothing strange were happening, but both are attentive to the sounds of the wind and the river, which increasingly constrict the island they find themselves on.

The contact with fire, besides illuminating their campsite, is like a lighthouse in a dark sea: it stabilizes the narrator’s reality. As he reflects, “something more than the power of its mystery stirred in me as I lay on the sand, feet to fire, and peered up through the leaves at the stars.” (Blackwood 69) And he can observe the sky without being overwhelmed by it, as long as he has a place where he feels safe or at least represents that safety in the face of a crumbling reality. However, in this case, the fire provides safety, as when the narrator “raked the fire together to prevent the darkness having everything its own way.” (Blackwood 93) The same occurs when “The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire.” (Blackwood 96) The fire drives away the darkness that arises from mental confusion. It also provides a parameter of ordinariness, which helps to maintain emotional balance with common activities, as can be observed in the following scene in which the two characters are preparing food: “I dashed back to my fire, warned by the sound of bubbling that the stew was in danger.” (Blackwood 86)

The second element is water, primarily represented by the river. Here, the water is active, indeed destructive: “a rising river, perhaps, always suggests something of the ominous; many of the little islands I saw before me would probably have been swept away by the morning; this resistless, thundering flood

of water touched the sense of awe.” (Blackwood 63) Through the water comes the otter, which the travelers initially mistake for the body of a man: “It was an otter, alive, and out on the hunt; yet it had looked exactly like the body of a drowned man turning helplessly in the current;” (Blackwood 66) or a man in a raft, for “it seemed, however, to be a man standing upright in a sort of flat-bottomed boat, steering with a long oar, and being carried down the opposite shore at a tremendous pace.” (Blackwood 66) In both cases the water is an enemy to the intruders—both are lost in the distance and never heard from again. The text seeds doubt as to what the characters actually see.

The water tears pieces of the island apart from time to time, shrinking it more and more: “this island will be under water in two days if it goes on.” (Blackwood 67) The water is cold and turbulent, never calm, and the threat to the characters is evident, even hissing at them. Furthermore, water is the vessel used by the exogenous agents to take what they desire; the Swede experiences this when he is “possessed” and mutters phrases like, “taking the way of the water and the wind,” (Blackwood 100) just at the moment when he almost falls into the water and risks being assimilated by the creatures.

Finally, however, the water claims a different victim: “he [the Swede] was pointing with his stick at a large black object that lay half in the water and half on the sand. It appeared to be caught by some twisted willow roots so that the river could not sweep it away. A few hours before, the spot must have been under water.” (Blackwood 101) Despite the characters' efforts to try to give the dead person a dignified burial, the water claims the corpse for its own and carries it downstream, “turning over and over on the waves like an otter.” (Blackwood 102) This description introduces doubt as to whether the supposed otter seen before was really an otter or another corpse. Again, the uncertainty in this ending provokes the sensation of horror.

The third element is wind, which is present throughout much of the novella. Here the wind does not purify, as air does, but rather, it confuses, exhausts, and masks other things. We can observe this characteristic in the following examples:

“the ceaseless buffetings of a most tempestuous wind made us feel weary” (Blackwood 59) and “the officer’s prophecy held true, and the wind, blowing down a perfectly clear sky, increased steadily till it reached the dignity of a westerly gale.” (Blackwood 62) The wind also functions to hide the words of the man on the raft: “the wind drowned it so that no single word was audible.” (Blackwood 66) This omnipresent only intensifies throughout the story: “Contrary to our expectations, the wind did not go down with the sun. It seemed to increase with the darkness.” (Blackwood 67) And, furthermore, it often represents a threat, as when the narrator buries his head “as deeply as possible beneath the blankets to deaden the sound of the terrifying wind.” (Blackwood 74)

However, in other parts, the wind has a positive aspect, such as when “the wind was simply enjoying itself, for nothing rose out of the flat landscape to stop it, and I was conscious of sharing its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement.” (Blackwood 63) On another occasion, the same wind frees the narrator from the enchantment as he gazes spellbound at the monolith of bronzed figures ascending to the sky, for a gust pushes him, almost making him fall, which breaks the enchantment (Blackwood 73).

If the air, transfigured into wind, is represented as an entity endowed with an apparent consciousness, its function reveals itself as concealing the true horror: under its relentless presence, there persists “something like the humming of a distant gong.” (Blackwood 86) Even the narrator provides us with more characteristics that bring us closer to cosmic horror, such as, “the very vagueness of its origin distressed me” (Blackwood 88), or “It is unknown. Only one thing describes it really: it is a nonhuman sound” (Blackwood 89), or “That gong-like humming came down very close over our heads as I spoke, but it was my friend’s scared face that really stopped my mouth” (Blackwood 93) and “It’s the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us.” (Blackwood 94) Here the wind is not just a natural element, but a symbolic manifestation of the unknown and the immeasurable, revealing the mechanism through which exogenous agents—those entities

foreign to the human world—manage to interact, in a veiled but effective manner, with terrestrial beings.

The last element is earth, but our analysis will focus on the terrestrial component of the tree and, specifically, the willows. The narrator mentions them from the beginning and throughout the text, always highlighting the massification of the willows and their link with the exogenous agents. When the narrator witnesses the bronze monolith with the intertwined figures ascending towards the sky (Blackwood 72-73), in this case a connection with a non-terrestrial deity, he is about to kneel down to venerate them. The willows are instruments for another purpose than the one for which they were conceived, here as a mask that hides the true beings. We suspect, through the narrator, the consciousness of the willows; we are never absolutely certain of their movement but see the results: “outside there was a sound of multitudinous little patterings,” (Blackwood 74) although once the narrator leaves the tent, looking for a logical explanation, he finds nothing strange. Or when the narrator notices that the willows have moved closer to the tent (Blackwood 77), generating a wave of panic: “there was a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility, and it terrified me into a sort of rigidity;” (Blackwood 77) at some point he thinks of running away, but it is not possible in the situation they find themselves in.

The massification of willows is a recurring theme throughout the text. As the narrator observes, they envelop everything, “the willows, those endless, shaking willows.” (Blackwood 75) In other words, there is no place where they are not found. “With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different, I felt. Some essence emanated from them that besieged the heart.” (Blackwood 64) These trees harbor no life other than their own and the beings they camouflage; in this area, we do not find other animal species, except for the humans who, unfortunately, are trapped here. An idea contrary to what a tree symbolizes as a life conserver, in this case, it attracts life to itself but for the

purpose of assimilation, so its action is the image of an inverted mirror: it neither grants nor conserves life, but takes and assimilates it for others.

4.1.1 The Representation of Liminal Space

Blackwood frequently situates his stories in liminal landscapes—rivers, islands, deserts, mountains—spaces that function as symbolic thresholds between the known world and that which escapes reason: “The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer, especially, camps have their ‘note’ either of welcome or rejection.” (Blackwood 70) At all times the travelers feel that they are not welcome in this place: they have “a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night.” (Blackwood 64) This feeling never leaves them, the insignificance of feeling helpless in the face of what they cannot understand, not even glimpse. It is recurrent and becomes evident “where the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us,” (Blackwood 89) in such a way as to transmit the same feeling to the reader: helplessness faced with forces superior in quantity and quality.

In the text, the liminal space is represented by the feeling of being in a place where the characters are not welcome; they long for the familiar spaces full of human activity: “I would have given my soul [...] for the ‘feel’ of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score.” (Blackwood 89) Such contact brings us closer to human reality: “The whole experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all. It was a new order of experience, and in the true sense of the word unearthly.” (Blackwood 90) There is a physical space as we understand it, but it is rather related to the feeling that something unfamiliar has become present in a familiar space.

In cosmic horror, the sinister is present in liminality: “the division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow,” (Blackwood 94) when they enter this part of the Danube, they feel the change from one side to the other, the same idea that

Van Gennep points out, which he calls the liminal phase, where the characters do not represent the top of the food chain, but have become part of the prey. Here, we are not talking about the appearance of a door in the middle of nature (which would also be strange), but rather about an overlapping of two realities that share common elements.

Let us recall that the sinister is the irruption of discordant elements within a familiar or everyday environment: “we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders.” (Blackwood 64) One may wonder, then, what is alien? Atmosphere also plays a fundamental role in the sinister and, consequently, in liminality.

This is a representation of a reality absolutely different from our reality, as seen in Escher's engravings,⁸⁴ where the image, when viewed from different perspectives, shows different aspects to different participants. The narrator reflects: “Untrodden by man, almost unknown to man, it lay there beneath the moon, remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows” (Blackwood 69). Here comes into play the eeriness, places that remain untouched by human presence, the relationship between harrowing and unsettling, the characters (and the reader) are strangers in their own world, something feels odd. For humanity, this would be an example of non-places, as pointed out by Bauman (110), since they resist colonization or domestication by humans.

Even the perception of the entities occurs in a liminal space, for it is never entirely clear. There are elements that blur the images, because they cannot be perceived sharply in a reality that is not their origin: “I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theatre—hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together.” (Blackwood 96-97) The characters, and consequently the reader, are unaware of

⁸⁴ Ernst, Bruno. “Relatividad”, *El Espejo Mágico de M.C. Escher*. Köln, Taschen, 2007, pp. 51.

the purpose of the entities. Is it to study them or to prey on them? Or do they have some other purpose that we do not know?

Liminality generates ambiguity because one moment you are “here” and the next “there” and vice versa. The objects and forms are veiled to the human observer. In the case of exogenous agents, the characters perceive them by their humming, but they are invisible to the human eye:

at the moment we touched the body there, rose from its surface the loud sound of humming—the sound of several hummings—which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work.
(Blackwood 102)

The interweaving of realities, the human and the exogenous, only partially allows for awareness of the presence of species in one reality or another. Liminality is represented in a unique space, but with different scopes that only coincide in how some objects are presented within the realities and others are not. Therefore, when the entities emerge from the drowned person's body, the characters can only hear them, but not properly see them. The suggestion that liminality grants us is what consequently produces cosmic horror.

Chapter 5: Perceptions of Reality

In *The Willows*, Algernon Blackwood explores the fragility of human perception in the face of the unknown and the ineffable. Through a first-person narrative, the story posits a progressive blurring between the real and the hallucinatory, suggesting that reality is not an objective fact but a subjective and unstable construct. This chapter examines how the perception of reality in the characters, especially in the homodiegetic narrator, is altered by the experience of the numinous and the supernatural in the environment around him. As the narrator reflects, “We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented” (Blackwood 70), expressing a sense of rejection from nature and extrapolating the feeling Blackwood himself felt for the industrialization of his time.

5.1 What Do the Characters See and How Do They See Reality?

In *The Willows*, the characters question reality itself and their realization that entities beyond our comprehension exist is the discovery that horrifies them. A metamorphosis occurs, not on a physical level, but rather on a psychological and ontological one.

We must ask ourselves if the choice of the path taken by the narrator and his companion would have influenced the subsequent development of the events. The answer is probably that it does, since “the choice of the path means the choice of the path of life,” (Bakhtin 273) because even when they are warned not to continue on their journey, for the river is unpredictable and there is a high probability of them being trapped without food or rescue, they decide to push on. The sense of adventure into the unknown, without being fully aware of it, is what drives them to keep going and, in their case, the additional measure is to stock up more in case they are stranded in the marsh.

When the characters see the man on the raft sailing downstream and he crosses himself in their presence, besides questioning the possible reason for his

passing through that place, a certain uneasiness invades them that they dissimulate among themselves. "The Swede's tone of voice was not convincing, and his manner lacked something that was usually there. I noted the change instantly while he talked, though without being able to label it precisely." (Blackwood 67) The uneasiness pervades their minds, slowly destabilizing them.

Although the homodiegetic narrator detects this action in his companion, he also does not give it too much importance: "Moreover, just then I remember feeling distinctly glad that we were not imaginative; his stolid, practical nature suddenly seemed to me welcome and comforting" (Blackwood 67). Then the tension that had been produced drops for a moment, as he realizes that he may have misinterpreted the tone in which his companion had spoken. To the homodiegetic narrator, the Swede is practical-minded and simple-minded and never means anything more than what he actually says (Blackwood 67).

If nature seems ominous to us, we act according to the situation, just as the characters do. "The loneliness of the place had entered our very bones, and silence seemed natural, for after a bit the sound of our voices became a trifle unreal and forced." (Blackwood 68) Human insignificance becomes evident, they feel like invaders and respect the place, something in the atmosphere makes them doubt. The attitude that humanity should have towards nature is a reflection of Blackwood's thoughts and beliefs (Joshi 395), and humankind should not try to subject the nature to pleasure, because nature is not there to satisfy our needs but to forge a mystical bond in such a way as to expand our consciousness. According to Joshi, this was one of Blackwood's goals (390), so that humanity could reach a purpose higher than materiality.

In the text, we can also find, besides the tense moments, spaces of calm, one of them is shown through a synesthesia, when the narrator points out "I remembered as sleep came down and covered all with its soft and delicious forgetfulness," (Blackwood 71) after having arrived at the island and the impressions that arose from that instant of restless suspicion, sleep presented itself granting them both a small, warm respite for what hours later would present

itself. The fact of momentarily forgetting, what we could usually point out as disconnecting from reality, is what leads us to rest. In the same vein as what Charles Baudelaire pointed out “Concerning sleep, the sinister adventure of every night, it can be said that men fall asleep daily with an audacity that would seem incomprehensible if we did not know that it is the result of ignorance of danger.” (Literariedad par 6)⁸⁵, in which humanity surrenders itself completely to sleep without suspecting what lies beyond, a soft and delicious forgetfulness.

This is the same feeling that the homodiegetic narrator describes when he finds himself in front of the monolith of figures contorting towards the sky during the first night: “I was possessed with a sense of awe and wonder such as I have never known. I seemed to be gazing at the personified elemental forces or this haunted and primeval region.” (Blackwood 73) This quotation evokes the sensation of feeling diminutive and helpless in the face of forces beyond human understanding—the sinister and the sublime intertwine as the figures he observes produce fear and adoration.

Insecurity is a constant throughout the text. Again, the narrator reflects, “But this second time I jumped up with a genuine start of terror. It was neither the wind nor the river that woke me, but the slow approach of something that caused the sleeping portion of me to grow smaller and smaller till at last it vanished altogether, and I found myself sitting bolt upright—listening.” (Blackwood 74) Subreptitiously the threat of exogenous agents becomes palpable to the point of entering the unconscious, causing destabilization and fear.

One of the responses to fear is the narrator’s shivering and sweating, which, despite the heat, he feels when he hears “a sound of multitudinous little patterings” (Blackwood 74) outside the tent, as a sign of imminent danger. “Yet nowhere did I discover the slightest evidence of anything to cause alarm. This deep, prolonged disturbance in my heart remained wholly unaccounted for,”

⁸⁵ <https://literariedad.co/2020/07/12/diarios-baudelaire/>

(Blackwood 75) but his failure to find the origin of this fear causes uncertainty and unease, for he is unable to comprehend the events.

The atmosphere/reality becomes oppressive and threat lingers around the corner. The “indefinable emotion of distress seized upon me again as I saw the endless sea of bushes stretching to the horizon, looking ghostly and unreal in the wan light of dawn.” (Blackwood 76) The willows’ intimidation makes the narrator and his companion constantly alert, and dawn helps little to dispel the sinister aspect of the image.

The Swede changes and is perceptibly different from the previous day, noticeable in the homodiegetic narrator’s following comment: “He [the Swede] had changed somehow since the evening before. His manner was different—a trifle excited, a trifle shy, with a sort of suspicion about his voice and gestures.” (Blackwood 78) After so many adventures together, it is impossible not to notice the change the narrator’s companion undergoes, raising further suspicions. At one point, he even thinks that the missing objects are the Swede’s doing, but he finds this idea as absurd as if the natural elements had conspired against him (Blackwood 81). This raises, however, the need to hold onto the logical aspects of an illogical situation and thus not fall into abjection.

The narrative tension progressively intensifies as the text progresses; however, at some point it must find an escape route. The narrator explicitly mentions “a growing fear,” (Blackwood 87) indicating the accumulation of an underlying anguish. This sustained horror finds a turning point when Swede breaks into laughter after discovering that the bread had disappeared: a seemingly insignificant event, but one that highlights the futility of the attempt to preserve a semblance of normalcy in the midst of chaos. Laughter, in this context, functions as an escape valve, as expressed in the metaphor “it [the laughter] was a temporary safety-valve.” (Blackwood 87) Thus, the metaphor establishes a direct relationship between accumulated emotional pressure and the need for a sudden release. Laughter, therefore, appears not as a sign of true relief but as a

momentary manifestation of collapse in the face of absurdity, a form of hilarity that contains, paradoxically, despair.

If language creates reality, then in the text we find representations of such an affirmation. Several examples allude to this idea: "'Lucky if we get away without disaster!' he shouted, or words to that effect; and I remember feeling half angry with him for putting the thought into words, for it was exactly what I felt myself" (Blackwood 71), or "we are wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one thinks finds expression in words, and what one says, happens" (Blackwood 83), or "To name is to reveal: it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us." (Blackwood 93) But reality does not simply come into being by thought. On the contrary, these examples suggest that our mind or consciousness creates it. In the reality created by Blackwood, this is possible, through what is called a hyperobject.

In general terms, hyperobjects are, according to Worth, the entities or processes that appear in *The Willows* beyond the human sphere of comprehension, so they cannot be fully assimilated by human understanding; their manifestation is partial, something that readers perceive through the perplexity of the characters (xxxii). However, we can categorize them into three characteristics: 1) they are related to scale, which in the case of *The Willows*, would be the extrapolated universe in the *Sümpfe*; 2) they influence perspective or how the characters perceive the exogenous agents and vice versa; and 3) they are large in proportion, seen through the great number of willows that the homodiegetic narrator mentions throughout the text, which becomes intimidating (Worth xxxii). Blackwood's idea through these hyperobjects is to generate an impact on the reader, to make him or her aware of his insignificance among nature and, consequently, before the universe by removing him from the safety conferred by the individual's understanding of reality.

Despite the first impression that the narrator provides of the Swede, as the text progresses, he shows how his travel companion gradually changes: "For an unimaginative man, I thought that night he seemed unusually recreational,

unusually open to suggestion of things other than sensory" (Blackwood 69), or "But there was something in his tone, and also a certain look on his face, that conveyed more to me than his words [...]. It was because the spell of the place had penetrated his soul too, and he did not like to be alone," (Blackwood 71) or "that there had been some curious alteration in his mind: that he was nervous, shy, suspicious, conscious of things he did not talk about," (Blackwood 81) or "He knew it from the first, apparently," (Blackwood 83) or "All my life [...] I have been strangely and vividly aware of another region, not far removed from our own world in one sense, but totally different in kind." (Blackwood 92) In each case, we see the progression from a man who the narrator initially portrays as practical and straightforward to a person who has a rather more elaborate worldview, openly considering the existence of other realities that relate to our own.

As the situation progresses, Swede begins to crack, his apparent calmness and self-control, are affected by the situation in which they find themselves, "his voice betrayed his huge excitement by its unnatural calmness." (Blackwood 91), the excitement he shows is not well disguised under his calmness, here the metaphor is presented between the terms excitement and calmness, where the voice slips from the former to show the real in the latter term. In such a situation, it is not possible to remain calm, that is, what more disproportionate than facing exogenous entities beyond human comprehension?

Between the two extremes, there is a sign that he is not immune to the atmosphere around him and, like the homodiegetic narrator, he is seriously affected by it. The Swede comes to conclusions before the narrator, in terms of what Thacker (23) describes as trying to understand the possibility of other worlds that lie on different planes of perception.

We are aware that the reality presented in *The Willows* is the one we perceive through the homodiegetic narrator, who is the protagonist and, therefore, we accept that the events narrated should be true to some extent, but we must also consider that the reality he delivers is loaded with the character's own

subjectivities so it may not be a completely faithful representation of the materiality of the world. The encounter with the otter is an example:

A black thing, turning over and over in the foaming waves, swept rapidly past. It kept disappearing and coming up to the surface again. It was about twenty feet from the shore, and just as it was opposite to where we stood it lurched round and looked straight at us. We saw its eyes reflecting the sunset, and gleaming an odd yellow as the body turned over. Then it gave a swift, gulping plunge, and dived out of sight in a flash.

“An otter, by gad!” we exclaimed in the same breath, laughing.
(Blackwood 65)

Despite how extraordinary this encounter might seem, it is not mentioned that night by the fire, but appears the next day when the Swede expresses his thoughts about it: “Queer thing, [...] Queer thing, I mean about the otter last night [...] I mean—do you think—did you think it really was an otter? [...] You know, I saw it, before you did, and at first it seemed—so much bigger than an otter.” (Blackwood 82) The narrator, through his companion, presents us with this hesitation mentioned by Todorov (24) and we doubt what he has described at first, presenting us with reality as he perceives it. At the end of the novel, the body that allows the survival of the characters is on the shore of the island, barely held by the roots of the willows. They try to give it a dignified burial but the river claims it for itself and “the body had been swept away into the midstream [...] turning over and over on the waves like an otter.” (Blackwood 102) Therefore, the answer is never entirely clear: the cycle repeats itself and the doubt remains until the end of the novella.

Another example is how the characters catch the attention of the man in the boat just after the otter incident:

Then, too, just as we turned around, with our arms full of driftwood, something else happened that brought us back to the riverbank. This time it was really a man, and what was more, a man in a boat. Now

a small boat on the Danube was an unusual sight at any time, but here, in this deserted region, and at the hour of the flood, it was so unexpected as to constitute a real event. (Blackwood 66)

The distance, the light at that hour of the afternoon, and the speed at which he is gliding makes it difficult for the duo to fix their eyes on him. They could see him gesticulating and shouting at them, but they do not understand his words. At one point, they both notice that the man is persigning before them. “He’s crossing himself!” he shouted. Look, he’s crossing himself. ‘I believe you’re right,’ the Swede said.” (Blackwood 66). Both then attribute these actions to a lost peasant who mistakes them for some supernatural beings in the region. The matter goes no further and they continued with their labors. However, the Swede mentions the incident while repairing the canoe: “what that thing in the boat was. I remember thinking at the time that it was not a man. The whole thing seemed to rise suddenly out of the water.” (Blackwood 83) However, the same image for both is perceived differently: for the narrator it is a man in a boat, but for the Swede it is a “thing.” He cannot even make the distinction between a physical being or entity and a supernatural “something.”

We can interpret the Swede’s fear in the light of what Julia Kristeva describes regarding fear in relation to the abject: not being something specific (object or subject), it threatens to destabilize the order of the understanding of reality (59). The panic becomes apparent at the moment when the Swede realizes that he cannot name what he has seen in the boat; his fear does not come from a specific threat, but from the conceptual void that opens up in the face of the impossibility of integrating that “thing” into the system of interpretation that structures his reality. By remaining outside any referential framework, the abject emerges as the unnameable, radically disrupting his perception of the world.

When horror overtakes them and they manage to see an indeterminate figure near the campfire, Swede loses control of himself and the narrator remarks, “I knew what it was to hear tears of terror in a human voice.” (Blackwood 96). Here we can find metonymy and synesthesia at the same time. The metonymy is

evident because the fear is transferred to the tears that, in addition, are reinforced by the word terror (in the Introduction we mentioned that it could be used as a synonym, however, we have also made a difference between horror and terror), the impossibility of holding back in front of a spectacle beyond comprehension, where both the narrator and his companion, are witnesses of the event. In synesthesia, the relationship between the verb hear and the feeling of horror is what makes it possible. The author deliberately mixes a sensation with a feeling that does not belong to him, but which gives strength and meaning to the image that is being represented and connects the characters with the reader from a psychological point of view.

Another example that shows the differences that exist between the characters when evaluating and/or describing the same situation is when they are confronted with exogenous agents. "To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses two or three, moving slowly. [...] for he [the Swede] thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface- 'coiling upon itself like smoke'" (Blackwood 97). In general terms, both characters share a similar vision regarding the notion of group: for the homodiegetic narrator, it is animals grouped like a herd, while for the Swede it is a clump of willow bushes (like a grove). If we consider the narrator as a projection of Blackwood himself, we can understand that his relationship with reality is always expressed through nature—we know of his rejection of the mechanization of humanity. We could say that Blackwood, through the narrator, is a producer of culture (Kristeva 64), in relation to the above-mentioned rejection and reconstruction of language to make us expand our consciousness (we understand it as opening us to new possibilities and incorporating other non-human beings to the understanding of reality). From this perspective, what the narrator perceives is that which humanity is losing by depredating the natural world, as if nature itself were vanishing in the face of our negligence. By contrast, for the Swede, the willows are more like a collection of trees acting independently, reflecting a view of nature as functional, a utilitarian resource subordinated to human needs for survival.

According to the description given by the narrator, we know that the island has become smaller with the passage of time and the force of the river, the island is not a safe place, surrounded as it is by willows, therefore, the only thing they have left is the tent, "But in the end I managed to get him into the comparative safety of the tent." (Blackwood 100) In this sentence a metonymy is manifested: the tent is not only a physical element, but it is the last bastion controlled by humanity and represents order in the face of the uncontrollable chaos that surrounds them. Unlike the canoe, which represents the fragility of human means in the face of nature and which at some point fails them, the tent, which has remained faithful in its position, is the place where the narrator takes Swede when he tries to throw himself into the water in an attempt at pseudo-suicide or surrender in the face of the incomprehensible. Reality may crumble around them, but having a refuge to turn to that is unaffected is what gives them calm, a piece of reality gives meaning in the face of the inability to understand what is presented to them.

We trust what the homodiegetic narrator transmits to us because we have no other source of information to refute his account. In this way, we accept the reality that he transiently presents, especially in those parts where the division between the real and the supernatural overlap, allowing for the appearance of the hesitation that Todorov discusses when facing the fantastic. Moreover, this vacillation provokes fear—and consequently would derive in the abject—due to the inability to name that which is not within our sphere of reality, creating a break before that which cannot be properly identified. The characters, and therefore the reader, cross the threshold of what we humanly understand as reality and what would be abject without being able to clearly distinguish when the characters are on one side or the other. There is a mixture of insignificance in the face of the vastness of the universe.

Conclusions

In this thesis we have tried to provide an answer to the hypothesis raised about the representation of cosmic horror in Algernon Blackwood's novella, *The Willows*. The author, contrary to all industrialization of humanity, raises not only in this work but in others as well, a possible response if nature wanted to rise up against humanity to counter the destruction that is constantly carried out against it, and therefore, the impact that humanity has made against nature. This is in line with what has come to be informally called the Anthropocene.⁸⁶

In the novel, the natural elements present a threat to humanity that we usually consider utilitarian for our own benefit, where they give way to entities outside our sphere of comprehension. In this way, the sinister and the eerie, two important concepts within cosmic horror, fill the atmosphere of the text, which gives way to the insignificance of humanity in front of the vastness of the unknown universe.

As *The Willows* is a text narrated in the first person through a homodiegetic narrator, there is always an ambiguity and suspicion as to whether or not the background that the text provides is presented objectively or subject to the narrator's subjectivity. As the story progresses, the ambiguity increases and the sinister becomes more evident, but never fully defined. The beliefs, fears and opinions that the narrator may possess permeate his subconscious, and since we have no other view than his, we have no access to any other source of information. Therefore, the disorientation that the narrator presents is also transferred to the reader, denying him a stable frame of reference to be able to understand the supernatural, since he only offers us a totally subjective vision of the facts.

⁸⁶ The Anthropocene is a term that is increasingly used to define a new planetary era: one in which humans have become the dominant force shaping Earth's bio-geophysical composition and processes (Chua and Fair par. 1).

By means of rhetorical devices, such as the isotopies described and the tropes of similarity, the author subtly introduces us into the atmosphere that will become more and more oppressive as the text progresses. The isotopies create networks that project images, in this case of the sinister, and incubate in the reader the image that what was once familiar is gradually being torn down. In the case of tropes, they grant and reinforce the uncertainty of the entities, they are shown through similarities that do not become concrete, the image that the text projects is obscure and equivocal, so there is no certainty of the reality presented and it is not possible to categorize them within the paradigm of our reality. Of course, the sinister is also present here and this contributes even more to the deepening of the cosmic horror.

The relationship to the threshold chronotope is clearly shown here: an island in the Danube where the natural and the supernatural are mutually intertwined. It is not possible to clearly mark the border between one and the other, for time and space lose their stability. The island where they meet is the threshold between our reality and that of exogenous agents, not only physically, but also mentally, altering our world in all its aspects. We already indicated before that this territory and the area surrounding it is a place that has yet to be conquered by humanity: somehow it has remained out of sight, but always in contact with our reality as a threshold.

We also mentioned the representation of natural elements, two of which are especially important for the implications of this thesis: the willows and the river. Both elements act as intermediaries between our reality and that of exogenous agents. The willows have their own movement and consciousness (although the narrator never observes them directly in this manner), encouraged by entities that do not belong to the Earth's biology. The river is the element that traps them in that territory and its incessant waters erode the island little by little, indicating its power to shape the environment. Nothing is static and everything is a constant flow where river and willows form a conscious whole against humanity.

The narrator's mind is constantly affected by his immediate surroundings. Fear is a feeling that never leaves him. Anxiety will appear later when he finds himself defenseless against forces he cannot fully understand and realizes the insignificance of the human being in front of the immensity of the cosmos. The reader identifies with the emotions experienced by the characters, further intensifying the cosmic horror because both character and reader assume the destabilization of reality as we understand it.

Finally, *The Willows* shows the relationship between humans and non-humans, which makes us question our own reality and how we perceive it on a daily basis, taking for granted knowledge and norms that perhaps should be questioned. It is necessary to consider the possibility that what is normal to us, such as our environment, could at any moment be fractured, making us question the pillars on which we base our understanding of reality. Through nature, Blackwood shows us another possibility to look at our surroundings and to consider the viability of this exogenous other's existence, bursting into our reality.

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