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“They’re something nightmares are from”: The Notion Club Papers and The Cabin in the Woods

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“They’re something nightmares are from”: *The Notion Club Papers* and *The Cabin in the Woods*

“A VERY LOVING HATE LETTER”

Imagine a world in which a secret organization of otherwise rational scientists attempts to control both the forces of nature and the wildly supernatural, including an ancient influence with the power to destroy the modern world. Sprinkle in invocations in ancient tongues, and add a healthy dollop of self-awareness and intertextual homage to other popular works in the genre. While this accurately summarizes Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard’s classic horror film *The Cabin in the Woods* (*CitW*), I argue that it is also a reasonable synopsis of J.R.R. Tolkien’s uncompleted mid-1940s time-travel tale *The Notion Club Papers* (*NCP*). While the latter work is often classified as science fiction (mainly due to its connection with Tolkien’s earlier and likewise unfinished time-travel tale *The Lost Road*), there are many aspects of the work that suggest that it would be more properly classified as a horror tale.

Whedon and Goddard’s film takes the stereotypical modern horror trope of otherwise intelligent college students making inexplicably bad (and usually fatal) decisions when faced with danger and turns it on its head. The titular cabin is revealed to be the tip of the proverbial iceberg, a maze-like science experiment in which the students are the rats whose self-preservation instincts are intentionally suppressed by scientists through chemical and psychological means. Their sexual exploits, torture, and eventual deaths are intended to provide entertainment for Lovecraftian “gods” called the “Ancient Ones” who literally hold the fate of the world in their hands. In Tolkien’s posthumously published incomplete novella, curiously set in 2012 (coincidentally the same year that *The Cabin in the Woods* was released) it is the secretive group of academics and scientists (a gentle parody of the Inklings) themselves who are intoxicated into foolish behavior, not by pheromones but by intellectual curiosity. They willingly put themselves in danger and (if the tale had been completed) in direct contact with the uncontrollable and earth-shattering might of ancient “gods” (Sauron and the Valar), leading to the destruction of the island nation of Númenor and the world as it once was (the loss of the Straight Road to the Blessed Lands).

But more interesting is the ultimate reason for the genesis of both works, a sense of frustration on the part of their respective authors that there was a dismaying lack of quality material in this genre available in their current culture. Whedon has called the film “a very loving hate letter” (Total Film) to a genre that he earnestly loved as a viewer, but which he felt had become frustratingly predictable and crude.

Similarly, in the 1930s C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien had become irritated that there was “too little of what we really like in stories” and as a result Lewis pushed Tolkien to “try and write some ourselves” (Tolkien, *Letters* 378). Lewis was tasked with the creation of a space-travel story, resulting in his famous Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet* [1938]; *Perelandra* [1943]; *That Hideous Strength* [1945]), while Tolkien was to try his hand at a time-travel tale, which he attempted twice (*The Lost Road* [1930s]; *The Notion Club Papers* [1940s]) and never completed.

There is certainly no evidence that *The Notion Club Papers* were a source of inspiration for *The Cabin in the Woods*, or that in some very strange twist of time travel that Tolkien was a Joss Whedon fan. However, there are many interesting parallels between the two works; if *The Cabin in the Woods* is the (admittedly satirical) exemplar of the modern horror film (Taylor, “Five Years Later”), then these parallels support the interpretation of Tolkien’s unfinished tale as a work of horror rather than science fiction. In reading *The Notion Club Papers* through the lens of the horror genre, and in particular in parallel with *The Cabin in the Woods*, we are led to a fresh appreciation of Tolkien’s abandoned time-travel adventure and mourn its permanently incomplete state.

HORROR, TOLKIEN, AND THE “POPULAR FANTASY TRIANGLE”

Common sources of childhood anxiety include “animals, darkness, storms, thunder, and strange events” (Taylor and Arnow 23). Upon reaching adulthood, our fear ‘triggers’ may shift, but we all still feel some level of anxiety, especially about aspects of the world that we cannot control (such as natural disasters, accidents, and death). Fear is a universally shared emotion, and in its “most extreme form it leads to fears of impending death or catastrophe” (Taylor and Arnow 1). This is not a new observation of our species; for example, in his seminal early twentieth-century essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” famed horror author H.P. Lovecraft observed that the “oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear” (21). On the surface, it may appear that the sole intent of horror fiction is to elicit an emotional, psychological, or physical response of fear in the reader/viewer. While this visceral reader response is undeniably important to successful horror, the genre also represents a type of speculative fiction and is closely related to science fiction and fantasy. As in science fiction and fantasy there can be supernatural aspects, as well as apocalyptic themes. Prohászková (134) highlights the connections between these modern genres by naming each of them as one “apex of the popular fantasy triangle.”

While the career of Joss Whedon certainly demonstrates a natural flow between all three legs of the popular fantasy triangle, Tolkien is usually firmly relegated to the fantasy side of the house, to such an extent that many sources refer to him as the father of modern fantasy. In contrast, Verlyn Flieger’s detailed 1997

study of his two aborted time-travel tales seem to situate them both, but even more so *The Notion Club Papers*, within the genre of science fiction. Additionally, numerous Tolkien scholars have also explored the robust and original thread of horror in his Middle-earth tales (e.g. Benvenuto; Bergen; Cunningham; Stevenson; Stride). Tolkien himself was keenly aware of the importance of including horror in his tales. Speaking of Book I of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien wrote to Sir Stanley Unwin in 1947 that “Evidently I have managed to make the horror really horrible, and that is a great comfort; for every romance that takes things seriously must have a warp of fear and horror, if however remotely or representatively it is to resemble reality, and not be the merest escape” (*Letters* 120). But it was not only Tolkien’s talent as a writer that motivated him to include horror within his subcreated world. As numerous scholars have argued, Tolkien’s wartime experiences, especially what he described as the “carnage of the Somme” (*Letters* 53), are reflected in the horrors of his imaginary universe (Croft; Garth; Livingston).

Tolkien himself spoke reverently of another influential source of horror, *Beowulf*. As he argued in “*Beowulf* and the Critics” it is precisely the monstrous enemies that the hero faces in the poem that make the work “larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king’s fall. It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts... the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease” (Tolkien, *Beowulf* 33). The invocation of the “cosmic” brings to mind another famous essay, Lovecraft’s, in which he likewise noted that the “Scandinavian Eddas and Sagas thunder with cosmic horror, and shake with the stark fear of Ymir and his shapeless spawn; whilst our own Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and the later Continental *Nibelung* tales are full of eldritch weirdness” (25). Daniel Stride highlights a number of clear examples of cosmic horror in *The Lord of the Rings*, from the Balrog of Moria to the “nameless things” older than Sauron that dwell far below the deepest delving of the Dwarves” and the Watcher in the Water. Cosmic horror challenges our understanding of how the world works, and, as Stride points out, it “attacks the notion that scientific advances will grant us control of our universe.” As we shall discover, this painful reality is a central point of both the film and the time-travel tale.

“WEIGHT WITH A CAPITAL W”: HORRIFIC ASPECTS OF *THE NOTION CLUB PAPERS*

John Rateliff argues that much of the work on *The Notion Club Papers* was done between December 1944 and August 1946, the same period of time in which Tolkien had taken a break from writing *The Lord of the Rings* (213). This is bolstered by a letter dated December 18, 1944 from Tolkien to his son Christopher, noting that he had “been getting a lot of new ideas about Prehistory lately (via

Beowulf and other sources of which I may have written) and want to work them into the long-shelved time-travel story I began” (*Letters* 105). The uncompleted work, which, like most of Tolkien’s creations, exists in several versions, is naturally divided into two pieces, the fairly complete and coherent “The Ramblings of Ramer” and the more fragmentary and eventually abandoned “The Strange Case of Arundel Lowdham.” Verlyn Flieger describes the former as largely a discussion of “competing principles and techniques” setting up the theoretical framework by which time-travel would be accomplished in the latter (“Tolkien’s Experiment” 42). Both sections are written in the format of minutes of meetings of the mysterious academic group (loosely based on Tolkien’s literary group, the Inklings), documents that had been reportedly found in a basement at Oxford. Tolkien himself noted in his “Preface to the Inklings” that when they read this “fragment of an apocryphal Inklings’ Saga” they may find their “countenances distorted, and adorned maybe with noses (and other features) that are not your own, but belong to other members of the company—if to anybody” (*Sauron Defeated* [*SD*] 148-9). As Christopher Tolkien explains in his commentary, his father originally toyed with identifying himself, C.S. Lewis, and other Inklings with individual members of the Notion Club (for example himself as Michael Ramer) but quickly abandoned that, although Christopher does point out characteristics of individual Notion Club members that clearly (in his mind) derive from or are parodies of specific Inklings (*SD* 150-2).

The adventure begins with philologist Michael Ramer reading an original story to his colleagues, which leads to a discussion and criticism of space-travel stories in general. In particular, they grumble about the mechanisms used in traversing space, including in C.S. Lewis’ stories and David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus*. Speaking of *Out of the Silent Planet* in a 1938 letter to Stanley Unwin, Tolkien explained

I know only too sadly from efforts to find anything to read even with an ‘on demand’ subscription at a library that my taste is not normal. I read ‘Voyage to Arcturus’ with avidity—the most comparable work, though it is both more powerful and more mythical (and less rational, and also less of a story—no one could read it merely as a thriller and without interest in philosophy religion and morals). (Tolkien, *Letters* 34)

There is much to unpack here. First, in the scaffolding mechanism of the story itself we see significant commonalities with Whedon and Goddard’s film. The unnamed Facility in the film is top secret, and its existence is on a strictly need-to-know basis. Similarly, in the Foreword to the *NCP* the editor, Howard Green, notes that “no such club appears ever to have existed” at Oxford (*SD* 155). While the members of the Notion Club are parodies of the Inklings to varying degrees, there

is no denying the parodic and stereotypical nature of the characters in *CitW*. On one hand we have the socially awkward nerdy scientists who take bets on which of the horrific creatures the college kids will unwittingly unleash upon themselves. Simultaneously, the five students themselves are described as fulfilling five archetypes of the demanded sacrifice—the Scholar, the Athlete, the Whore, the Fool, and the Virgin—although each character subverts the tropes (for example, by the Fool being wise and the Virgin being definitely experienced in the bedroom).

Second, intertextuality is clearly woven throughout Tolkien's work, not only in the parody of the Inklings but the seamless inclusion of primary world texts (both modern thrillers and medieval works such as *Crist 104* and *The Seafarer*) and, especially in Part 2, primary world myths and legends such as Atlantis and the death of Saint Brendan. Whedon is well-known for his masterful blending and transformation of genres and texts (Bussolini 1), but *CitW* is in a class of its own in this regard (Starr 1). It features a dizzying potpourri of mythical and fictional monsters in the bestiary of the lab, from classic creatures such as werewolves, vampires, and trolls, to beings that clearly pay homage to modern horror media, such as the “deadites” of the *Evil Dead* film series and Pinhead from the *Hellraiser* film series.

Third, it is telling that the specific texts that Tolkien's Notion Club members discuss by name, comparing the realism (or lack thereof) of their handling of space and time travel—Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*, C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*, and Olaf Stapledon's *The Last Men in London*—are science fiction works known for both their detailed internal mythology and cosmic horror elements (Bergen; Goodwin; Hume). As such, they are all excellent examples of works that embrace the totality of the popular fantasy triangle; with their detailed inclusion Tolkien is signaling to the reader that his work is to be considered in the same vein as these classics.

The fantastical, science fiction-based horror begins early in the text; when Ramer nervously reads a fanciful tale of travel to an alien world, his colleagues “felt some alarm” when Ramer claims to have literally visited the planet (*SD* 172). The unfolding of the secret knowledge of how Ramer accomplished this—travel through dreams—takes up a large part of this section of the tale, just as the secret knowledge of the scientists of the Facility unfolds over the course of the film. Ramer describes his experiences of travel through dreams, including experiencing the fall of a meteorite, as “painful often, and alarming” including “Weight with a capital W: very horrible” as well as experiences that were “very disturbing” (*SD* 182). Later Ramer shares his experiences with fragments of a memory of a “Green Wave... an omen or presage of catastrophe” (*SD* 194), the first ominous clue of the apocalypse that will eventually haunt first their dreams and later their waking moments. Ramer also describes traveling to ghastly alien worlds, “horrible” planets such as Mars and Venus that are utterly hostile to human life (*SD* 204), as well as

a “frightful... diseased world” that was apparently “inhabited by man-fly men in a sort of tumultuous mess” (*SD* 210).

The second part of the work shifts from the mechanisms of space and time travel to an exploration of myth and legend, as the members of the club seem to make connections with past lives. As Flieger notes, it is “here that the story takes on its gothic tinge. It becomes in this respect strongly reminiscent of the spiritual thrillers of Tolkien’s fellow Inkling Charles Williams, who had no hesitation in moving his characters in and out of alternative realities (Flieger, *Question* 151). The alternate realities in this case are the “present” of Oxford (which Tolkien set in his future) and the past of Númenor. In *CitW*, the alternate realities are most obviously the “upstairs” of the titular cabin and the “downstairs” of the subterranean lab. But just as there is an uneasy and dangerous connection between the Oxford of the Notion Club and Númenor that threatens to intertwine their fates, the literal fate of all parts of the world rests upon how the scientists and technicians in the Facility manipulate the hapless college students into causing their own deaths. Central to both works is the interplay between myth, science, and cosmic horror.

COSMIC HORROR REDUX: “THE DAIMONIC FORCE THAT THE GREAT MYTHS AND LEGENDS HAVE”

At the heart of Tolkien’s story is a recurring nightmare modelled after one the philologist himself had long endured. In a 1955 letter to W.H. Auden Tolkien describes his “Atlantis complex” as a “terrible recurrent dream (beginning with memory) of the Great Wave, towering up, and coming in ineluctably over the trees and green fields” (*Letters* 213). John Rosegrant describes this complex as symbolizing “Tolkien’s experience of passive surrender to overwhelming personal force” (139).¹ While Tolkien never completed *NCP*, the tale of the destruction of Númenor by the supernatural wave was subsumed into the legendarium as an important piece of its history, in “The Drowning of Anadûne” and later the “Akallabêth” section of *The Silmarillion*. Given the terrifying detail with which Tolkien paints the fall of the island state in these later narratives, we can reasonably guess what those scenes would have looked like in the completed *Notion Club Papers*, and it would be easy to call them the horrific stuff of nightmares. However, there is a much deeper level of horror at work here.

¹ In particular, Rosegrant argues that the complex was due to Tolkien’s “intrapsychic conflict over hubris that he developed in response to the trauma of his father’s death, such that he unconsciously inhibited his creativity so as not to threaten his relationship with father-figures” (150). While we will revisit the issue of hubris later in this paper, the larger issues involving father figures are well beyond the scope of this work, and have no apparent connection to *The Cabin in the Woods*.

In *CitW* new Security head Truman and seasoned technician Lin discuss the catalog of deadly and terrifying creatures at their disposal in the Facility, with Truman noting “They’re like something from a nightmare.” Lin corrects him: “No, they’re something nightmares are from.” In both *NCP* and *CitW* we are dealing with the ultimate archetypes, the source of our (well-founded) fears. The mythical monsters at the scientists’ disposal turn out to be far-too-real creatures from “another world” that have been intentionally brought into our reality to aid in the appeasement of the Ancient Ones, themselves considered “mythical” by those blissfully ignorant of the truth of the lab. The monstrous storm that infects 1987 Oxford bleeds into the present from the past, allowed to invade the present due to the investigations of the Notion Club members (some of whom are scientists). As Tolkien explained of the genesis of his foray into writing a time-travel tale in a 1938 letter to Stanley Unwin, he and C.S. Lewis “originally meant each to write an excursionary ‘Thriller’: a Space-journey and a Time-journey (mine) each discovering Myth” (*Letters* 29). John Rateliff explains the purpose of the friends’ challenge was to ultimately craft a tale in which the protagonist would discover “that some old myth or legend was actual fact—in Lewis’s case, the apocryphal legend of Lucifer’s rebellion; in Tolkien’s, the legend of the fall of Atlantis” (202). The formulaic trope of the Atlantis myth is turned into true history in Tolkien’s tale, with the experiences that the Notion Club members are tapping into the true original; the legends passed down through the centuries are merely echoes of the true cosmic horror. Similarly, what the college students experience in the cabin is “the true original, of which all our nightmares (and all our horror movies) are but mere copies” (Canavan 10).

Both works play with, and take to their supernatural extreme, the awesome power of myth. Ramer warns his colleagues

I don’t think any of us realize, the force, the daimonic force that the great myths and legends have... from the multiplication of them in many minds—and each mind, mark you, an engine of obscured but unmeasured energy. They are like an explosive: it may slowly yield a steady warmth to living minds, but if suddenly detonated, it might go off with a crash: yes: might produce a disturbance in the real primary world. (*SD* 228)

Ramer’s fears come to pass. On May 8, 1987 his colleague and fellow philologist Alwin Lowdham suddenly begins speaking in “an unknown tongue,” warning his compatriots about the coming of the “Eagles of the Lords of the West! They are coming over Numenōr!” (*SD* 231) As they see a large cloud coming out of the West, Ramer admits that he recognizes the name “Numenōr” and connects it with Atlantis (*SD* 232). This epiphany sets events into motion that cannot be derailed. On the fateful night of June 12, 1987 Lowdham shares a translation of a snippet about the

destruction of Númenor in the languages he calls Avallonian and Adunaic. Both describe the end of the world as the writers of the recovered document knew it, with the island falling down into a chasm (*SD* 247). As the academics pour through the translation, the weather outside becomes ominously stormier, and both Lowdham and escapism literature expert Wilfrid Jeremy go into a kind of trance and experience (relive) the catastrophic end of the island. The scholars feed off the energy of the storm, and the storm strangely seems to feed off the increasing intensity of their “memories,” similar to how the Ancient Ones feed off the fear and agony of the college students in *CitW*.

The horrific truth revealed in the film of the periodic sacrifice required to appease the Ancient Ones finds a parallel in the details of the fall of Númenor. In *NCP* the college student John Jethro Rashbold is able to translate some of the mysterious document Lowdham’s father had possessed before his disappearance. It refers to Zigūr (who becomes Sauron in the later versions) who “led astray wellnigh all the (Numenore)ans with signs and wonders.... and they built a great temple in the midst of the town (of Arminalēth) on the high hill which before was undefiled but now became a heathen fane, and they there sacrificed unspeakable offerings on an unholy altar” (*SD* 258). This aspect of the tale is retained in “Akallabêth” where we read that when Sauron finally corrupted the king Ar-Pharazôn to the worship of Melkor “in that temple, with spilling of blood and torment and great wickedness, men made sacrifice to Melkor that he should release them from Death” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 273). It is clear that in both *NCP* and *CitW* the main characters are playing a part in something bigger, older, and more sinister than their everyday experience. When Dana and Marty, the sole survivors of the monsters’ attack on the cabin, discover that they are quite literally rats in a horrific maze and redouble their efforts to fight for their lives, the Director of the Facility (masterfully played by Sigourney Weaver) explains “What’s happening to you is part of something bigger. Something older than anything known. You’ve seen horrible things. An army of nightmare creatures. But they are nothing compared to what came before.”

For his part, Notion Club member Ramer seems to understand that he is on the threshold of something dangerous, perhaps even cosmically so. He explains to his colleagues that he invented the ruse of the fictional tale because he didn’t want to reveal how he really visited the world: “I didn’t want to discuss the way I came by it—at least not yet” (*SD* 175). But with this admission, arcane knowledge began to be revealed, slowly at first, and in the second part of the *NCP* at a ferocious pace, each step made by the academics simultaneously bringing them closer to solving the mystery while placing them in increasing danger.

In the film the college students find the old diary of a murdered girl and unwisely read the Latin (despite the warning of the uncharacteristically wise Fool, the stoner character Marty). Holden, the stereotypical scholar, suddenly recalls his

tenth grade Latin and is able to translate the invocation, but only after the damage had been done, for it is the reading of the words aloud that unleashes the “zombified, pain-worshipping, backwards idiots” who hunt down and kill the sacrificial students. Another arcane book poses a danger for the members of the Notion Club. Lowdham explains that as a child he went into his father’s study after his disappearance and discovered “a diary or notes in a queer script” (*SD* 235). He became interested in languages and started making up his own (or so he had thought). In reality, he began having visions in a strange unknown language—“ghost-words”—that he wrote down and puzzled through (*SD* 238). As previously noted, it is the realization that they are connected to the doomed island nation that sets the scholars on the path to their apparent doom. Ramer muses of these strange languages that “they taste of an Elder World” (*SD* 240). But as both the reader/viewer and the characters come to understand, the Elder World is fraught with danger in the creative minds of both Joss Whedon and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Finally, there exists a curious juxtaposition of science, myth, and the supernatural in both works, leading scientists to uncharacteristically embrace the clearly unscientific. Prohászková (133) describes the category of “marvelous horror” in which “seemingly irrational and incomprehensible phenomena can be explained only by accepting the second layer of reality—the supernatural while the story lasts. To explain the incomprehensible phenomena of the story we must accept ‘the new laws of nature’.” Both *CitW* and *NCP* seem to be set in our world, except that from their respective beginnings it is increasingly signaled to the viewer/reader that there is something seriously askew. In Tolkien’s tale, the editor of the papers, the “Clerk of the Schools” who had reportedly found and edited the *NCP*, tries to make logical scientific sense of the supernatural events contained in the mysterious documents. While the paper on which the minutes of the meetings are written and the language used suggest they were composed in the 1940s, there is the “puzzling fact that the Great Explosion of 1975 is referred to, and even more precisely, the Great Storm, which actually occurred on the night of Thursday, June 12th, 1987” (*SD* 157). In the end, rather than admit to the possibility of prescience, a logical scientific explanation is proposed that avoids the supernatural: “the Papers are a work of fiction; and it may well be that the predictions (notably of the Storm), though genuine and not coincidences, were unconscious: giving one more glimpse of the strange processes of so-called literary ‘invention’, with which the Papers are largely concerned” (*SD* 158).

While this explanation might be satisfactory to Mr. Green, there are nagging loose ends that are less easy to explain away. In particular, the address of the supposed meetings, a No. 100 Banbury Road, was known as the scene of “a remarkable display of poltergeist activity, between the years 2000 and 2003, which only ended when the house was demolished and a new building, attached to the Institute of National Nutrition, erected on the site” (*SD* 157). The reader’s interest

is masterfully piqued in this foreword—is the haunting the result of whatever it was that the Notion Club dabbled in? How is this possible if no such academic group ever existed, and the mysterious papers are merely a “work of fiction”? It is interesting to note that in a discussion between the Notion Club members, they accept it as a given that “All houses are haunted” (*SD* 179), something that is most certainly not a scientific fact in our primary world. Such is the nature of marvelous horror.

Similarly, first time viewers of *CitW* are often confused by its opening scenes, showing stereotypical scientists reporting for work in what initially seems to be your standard (albeit secret) lab. While the scientists’ surveillance of the college students can be considered creepy, it is the rambling speech of Mordecai the “Harbinger” that alerts the viewers that they have truly crossed the threshold into another reality. He describes the college students as sacrificial “lambs” who have “passed through the gate” and entered the “killing floor.... Their blind eyes see nothing of the horrors to come” (Whedon and Goddard). The scientists initially laugh at his melodramatic pronouncement, but as the ominous music swells in the background, they momentarily become visibly uneasy at his discussion that the “Ancient Ones see everything.” The viewers increasingly understand that the scientists of the Facility invoke science and technology to control and explain the supernatural tropes of horror films (such as using chemicals to cause the otherwise smart college students to do very dumb things that run counter to their self-preservation). By the end of the film we have made the transition from science to the supernatural; a similar shift occurs in the *NCP*. In the central event before the tale is abandoned, “the greatest storm in the memory of any living man roared over us: the terrible storm of June 12th, 1987, that slew more men, felled more trees, and cast down more towers, bridges and other works of Man than a hundred years of wild weather” (*SD* 252). An editorial footnote by the club reporter notes

The centre of its greatest fury seems to have been out in the Atlantic, but its whole course and progress has been something of a puzzle to meteorologists—as far as can be discovered from accounts it seems to have proceeded more like blasts of an explosion, rushing eastward and slowly diminishing in force as it went. (*SD* 252)

This is the warning to Notion Club, their harbinger event, and like the college students in the film, Tolkien’s academics appear to ignore their instinctual trepidations, and plunge ahead in their travels into the unknown, towards ruin.

Ruinous hubris is therefore the final thread that ties these works together with a horrific bow. Not only are the Notion Club members literally playing with fire, but the story of the downfall of Númenor itself is one of Tolkien’s clearest cautionary tales in this regard (others including the tale of Túrin Turambar and *The*

Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son [Dunai 2]). Indeed, as Charles Nelson observes, pride and possessiveness are the cause of the downfall of many of Tolkien's most tragic characters (84). The fatal "pride" of the Númenóreans, especially of their last king, Ar-Pharazôn, was stoked by Sauron until it exploded in an ill-fated plan to wrest immortality from the hands of the Valar (Tolkien, *Letters* 155; 205). They ignore the final warning from the Blessed Lands in the form of Manwë's eagles (Tolkien, *Sil.* 277) and instead push on, to their annihilation and the near destruction of the entire world in its rounding (and the removal of the Blessed Lands from it). Recall that it is Lowdham's warning about the coming of the "Eagles of the Lords of the West! They are coming over Numenōr!" that sets into motion the near destruction of the Notion Club in the Great Storm (*SD* 231).

In the case of *The Cabin in the Woods*, one expects college-aged youth to act with a sense of what Allie Gemmill refers to here as "blissful hubris" (a stereotypical sense of invincibility), but in the case of scientists it is normally only formulaic Frankensteins—the truly mad scientists—who succumb to such blind weaknesses. Of the seven typecasts of media depictions of scientists noted by Roslynn Haynes (244)—the "mad scientist"; the "evil alchemist" who works in secret labs on illegal experiments; the heroic "noble scientist"; the absent-minded genius or "foolish scientist"; the "inhuman researcher" who has sacrificed relationships, emotions, and all vestiges of humanity in the name of science; the Indiana Jones-like "scientist as adventurer"; and the "helpless scientist" who has no malicious intent, but whose experiment simply runs out of control and threatens the world—both the Notion Club members and the technocrats of the Facility best fit in the last category (in as much as they can be classified at all).

As Nussbaum observes, the warnings issued by Mordecai the Harbinger of "looming disaster are aimed as much at his colleagues as they are at the campers." When Mordecai reminds the smugly complacent Hadley, Sitterson and the rest not to "take this lightly" because "the Fool nearly derailed the invocation with his insolence," he is met with laughter rather than respect, as they make fun of his serious pronouncements by broadcasting them on speakerphone against his wishes (Whedon and Goddard). In the end, Mordecai's warnings are seen as prescient, as it is the Fool, Marty, who discovers the existence of the Facility and brings about the deaths the staff of the Facility and the end of the world.

CONCLUSION: THE PERSISTENCE OF "PHANTASMAL SHAPES"

In her essay "Elements of Aversion: What Makes Horror Horrifying," Elizabeth Barrette explains that

the best horror intends to rattle our cages and shake us out of our complacency. It makes us think, forces us to confront ideas we might rather

ignore, and challenges preconceptions of all kinds. Horror reminds us that the world is not always as safe as it seems, which exercises our mental muscles and reminds us to keep a little healthy caution close at hand.

Both the doomed college students of *CitW* and the college dons of *NCP* apparently learned this lesson far too late. The genesis of both works is well known, in both cases as a love-hate letter to the world of popular culture. The fact that both works embrace a palpable sense of cosmic horror is no accident. Lovecraft (22) wrote that the subgenre

has always existed, and always will exist; and no better evidence of its tenacious vigour can be cited than the impulse which now and then drives writers of totally opposite leanings to try their hands at it in isolated tales, as it to discharge from their minds certain phantasmal shapes which would otherwise haunt them.

This certainly applies to Tolkien and his previously noted self-described “Atlantis complex.” As he noted in this 1955 letter to W.H. Auden, he hadn’t remembered having the dream since putting to paper “the ‘Downfall of Númenor’ as the last of the legends of the First and Second Age” (Tolkien, *Letters* 213). But while he was apparently able to successfully discharge this particular “phantasmal shape” from his mind, there was another that haunted Tolkien as well, albeit perhaps subconsciously—the mushroom cloud.

Tolkien himself rejected a connection. For example, in a 1960 letter to Professor L.W. Forster he wrote

The Lord of the Rings was actually begun as a separate thing, about 1937, and had reached the inn at Bree, before the shadow of the second war. Personally I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding. (*Letters* 303)

Then Tolkien wavers, adding “Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches up to Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme” (*Letters* 303). But this is the same Tolkien who famously wrote “I dislike Allegory—the conscious and intentional allegory” despite the undisputed fact that he did write allegorically (*Letters* 145). In the case of the atom bomb, I am certainly willing to accept that there was no direct influence on *The Lord of the Rings*. In the case of *The Notion Club Papers*, the evidence suggests otherwise.

First, recall that John Rateliff dates the main part of the writing of the tale to December 1944 – August 1946. In an August 9, 1945 letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien famously opined

The news today about ‘Atomic bombs’ is so horrifying one is stunned. The utter folly of these lunatic physicists to consent to do such work for war-purposes: calmly plotting the destruction of the world! Such explosives in men’s hands while their moral and intellectual status is declining, is about as useful as giving out firearms to all inmates. (*Letters* 116)

Secondly, in the wake of the first use of nuclear weapons there was a flurry of newspaper articles and popular-level books explaining the science behind the atom bomb, along with a sizable dose of speculation as to the promise of atomic energy as a panacea to the world’s energy needs. Similar claims had been made for decades, nearly since the original discovery of radioactivity and nuclear fission. For example, English radiochemist Frederick Soddy predicted in 1909 that “the energy in a ton of uranium would be sufficient to light London for a year” (Hilgartner et al. 12). H.G. Wells, one of the authors invoked by the Notion Club, also speculated on the potential benefits and dangers of unleashing the power of the atomic nucleus in his 1914 novel *The World Set Free*. Wells’ novel predicted the invention and use of atomic bombs by the 1950s (eerily close to the actual timing), leading in his imagined world to a global nuclear war. Tolkien similarly demonstrated discomfiting foresight in predicting a nuclear disaster, “the explosion in the Atomic Reservation in the seventies, which blew the Black Hole in the States” (*SD* 186). Christopher notes that one of his father’s versions of the tale dates the incident to the sixties, but the exact timing is not important. The general sentiment is certainly in keeping with Tolkien’s suspicion of technology and the “machine,” especially connected to war (Tolkien, *Letters* 88; 105; 111) and speaks directly to his often-quoted 1956 draft letter to Joanna de Bortadano concerning *The Lord of the Rings*: “Of course my story is not an allegory of Atomic power, but of Power (exerted for Domination). Nuclear physics can be used for that purpose. But they need not be. They need not be used at all” (Tolkien, *Letters* 246). Was Tolkien not only prescient in his prediction of the real Great Storm of October 1987 (as Christopher noted, only off by four months), but in predicting Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima?

If Tolkien was subconsciously channeling his nuclear anxieties through *The Notion Club Papers*, it provides yet another connection with *The Cabin in the Woods*. In an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, *Cabin* co-creator Drew Goddard revealed that the film’s secret unnamed Facility was “very much influenced” by his hometown of Los Alamos, New Mexico, the home of the atom bomb. As he reminisced, “you have this suburban group of people, and all anyone does for a

living is make weapons for the government. I wanted to capture that vibe” (Schoenbrun). A.V. Lee-A-Yong directly connects the desensitization of those who participate in the construction of nuclear weapons (the “lunatic physicists” of Tolkien’s letter) with the general attitude of the staff of *CitW*’s Facility, especially their lack of empathy for the pain and suffering their technology inflicts upon the unsuspecting college students. In the case of both Los Alamos and the Facility the scientists clearly accept that the ends justify the means. But when technician Wendy Lin explains to Facility newbie Daniel Truman “You get used to it,” Truman tellingly offers “Should you?” (Whedon and Goddard). Tolkien’s answer would have been a resounding “No.”

Tolkien’s direct experiences in World War I, along with his astute observations of humanity’s potential for inhumanity and his understanding as a Catholic of the fallen nature of humankind, undoubtedly fed into his belief that there “cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall” (*Letters* 147). As he described in detail in his final versions of the fate of Númenor, the destruction of the once beautiful island state was in direct response to the moral fall of its people into sin and hubris. We already catch important glimpses of this in *The Notion Club Papers*, for example in Rashbold’s translation of the ancient writing. Not only did the Númenóreans fall into human sacrifice and the worship of evil, but their king wished to “conquer Avallōni with a host” (*SD* 258). The details are later fleshed out in the “Akallabêth” and Tolkien refers to the importance of this seminal event in a number of his letters. For example, in a 1951 missive to Milton Waldman he explains how the “Downfall of Númenor... brings on the catastrophic end, not only of the Second Age, but of the Old World, the primeval world of legend” (*Letters* 154). The deserved downfall of a corrupt humanity is also central to the ending of *CitW*. When the Director of the Facility warns Marty that if he does not die before sunrise “the world will end,” Marty retorts “Maybe that’s the way it should be. If you’ve got to kill all my friends to survive... maybe it’s time for a change.” In the end Dana agrees with Marty, offering of humankind “It’s time to give someone else a chance” (Whedon and Goddard). As the sun rises and it is revealed to the Ancient Ones that the sacrifice has failed, their violent tantrum heralds the destruction of our planet. In the final scene we witness a literal hand of doom that spells the end of the world as we know it. While the destruction of Númenor at the hand of Ilúvatar is arguably more logically motivated than the apparently capricious whims of the Ancient Ones, the result is remarkably similar.

As Stevenson (93) argues, Tolkien’s writings generally offer “serious and uniquely historical exploration of evil, fear, and suffering in the universe and in the human experience... The result is a world crackling with terror and heavy with heartbreak, but triumphantly defying despair and meaningless.” For example, Rosegrant notes that the survival of a small band of Númenóreans (Elendil and his family) “introduces hope where the dream presented only hopeless surrender”

(140). *The Cabin in the Woods* utterly and openly rejects a Tolkienian eucatastrophe—the “sudden and miraculous grace” that occurs at the darkest hour—and instead openly embraces the apocalypse (Tolkien, *OFS* 76). Verlyn Flieger warns us of *The Lost Road* that its role as “‘a new version of the Atlantis legend’ suggests that he did not set out to write a story with a happy ending. *The Lost Road* is not a hopeful story. Wrath and ruin and the wreckage of a high civilization are in the offing as the narrative gathers momentum” (*Question* 64). Likewise given how different *The Notion Club Papers* is from Tolkien’s other works, and how deeply rooted in horror our analysis suggests it is, the standard Tolkienian eucatastrophic twist surely would have been an unrealistic hope. It is only in the later transition of the tale of Númenor’s downfall to the legendarium at large that a much-delayed eucatastrophe is made possible, in the person of Aragorn and the ultimate destruction of Sauron. Christopher Tolkien lamented that he did not know why his father ultimately left the *NCP* uncompleted, offering that it “may be that he felt that the work had lost all unity, that ‘Atlantis’ had broken apart the frame in which it had been set” (Tolkien, *SD* 152). What is certain is that in reading Tolkien’s aborted time-travel tale—his aborted *horror* tale—we come to appreciate a different side of the master author’s prodigious talent. As David Bratman argued of *NCP* and *The Lost Road*, “if Tolkien had finished and published either of these works, he would certainly be viewed very differently as a writer than he is today” (81).

H.P. Lovecraft explained in “Supernatural Horror in Literature” that “men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs between the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse” (22). The authors of *The Cabin in the Woods* and *The Notion Club Papers* are certainly to be numbered among the “moonstruck.” Tolkien was a mythologist and a philologist; his subcreation of Middle-earth was carefully crafted as “a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed” (Tolkien, *OFS* 52). The same is true of the universe of Tolkien’s hapless Notion Club. Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard likewise created an alternate reality that blends and blurs the modern and the mythic, with a seemingly consistent set of physical and supernatural laws governing and defining the marvelous horror. In the end, the admonishing tagline of *The Cabin in the Woods* aptly fits Tolkien’s Atlantean tale as well:

“You think you know the story....”

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