

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The purpose of human existence has been a topic of dispute for many academics. Even if the only aim of human existence is to reproduce, much like animals, a human mind is intrinsically more complex than an animals' mind. Our ability to reason allows us to do tasks and meet needs that other species could never comprehend. According to Gibson, some of these examples are "causal understanding of mechanisms of tool use, tool-making, syntactical–grammatical language, consciousness, self-awareness, imitation, deception and theory of mind" (cited in Roth and Dicke 2005, 254). Because of this, it is clear that the reason for human existence cannot be compared to that of animals. We may presume that if a person has a passion in life, then pursuing that passion is their purpose in life, and fulfilling that desire gives their life a meaning. Several academics believe that rather than being given, the meaning and purpose of human existence must instead be sought after. Humans can still find meaning and purpose in any situation, even in the most impossible ones (Frankl 2006, 147). Perhaps, if not predetermined from birth, humans entered this world as blank canvases. They will discover the purpose of their lives as they progress through life.

Whether it is given or found, what would happen to us if we kept looking for the reason why we were born into this world, only to find that there is ultimately no purpose for us to continue living, and that the meaning of life we have been searching for with such enthusiasm is nowhere to be found? This is what Albert

Camus and Søren Kierkegaard define as absurdism, the clash between human's need to constantly search for the meaning of life with human's inability to find it (Kierkegaard 1983, 10; Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 2013, 7).

The word *absurd* itself, as defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary, means ridiculously unreasonable or has no rational relationship to human life. However, as a philosophical concept, absurdism refers to the belief that universe or life itself is absurd. Camus and Kierkegaard argued that absurdism is how the meaning of life is always out of humanity's reach, hence, it is absurd for humankind to keep searching for something that is nonexistent to them. Both scholars suggested that when encountering the absurd, there are three solutions: suicide, belief in a higher entity, being, or concept, and acceptance. Suicide is acceptance of the absurd at extreme, for suicide is a statement that life is too much for one (Camus 2013, 4). It is the most "basic" way out of the absurd, simply by bringing an end to oneself. On the other hand, Camus believed that by putting faith in a higher being than human in an attempt to reason with the lack of meaning in human's life is committing philosophical suicide. This happens when we perform a "leap of faith", suspending rationality. Committing philosophical suicide is to claim knowledge of things that go beyond rationality (Miiller and Treloar 2019). Camus rejects physical suicide and philosophical suicide as the solution to the absurd. Instead, he argues the one true solution to the absurd is acceptance; to continue to live despite the devoid of meaning in the universe. Because by living in spite of the absurd or even embracing it, one can truly achieve freedom and create a meaning for their own life.

Absurdism as a genre in literary work, or more well known as absurdist fiction, has been a recurring theme in the arts and literature. It became popular in the 1950s as a result of post-World War II discontentment and depression, which affected people's perspectives of the world. Characters in this literary work genre are confronted with experiences that evaluate their faith in their life purpose and the importance of their attempts to reason with it. In contrary to traditional humanism beliefs, absurdism denies the existence of the value of life or universe (Henderson and Brown 1997). Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Osamu Dazai, and Samuel Beckett are among the most well-known authors who have contributed to the absurdist fiction genre.

An author whose works raised similar themes as absurdism, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, was a science-fiction horror author and is well known for his writings in the cosmic horror genre that earned him the title of the father of cosmic horror. Among his most famous works are *The Call of Cthulhu*, *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, and *The Shadow Out of Time*. As one of the most influential writers in the 20th century, his writings have attracted attention from researchers who have discovered a certain topic that appears frequently in his literature: the insignificance of human life. While many literary works have a main character who serves as the main driving force of the plot, Lovecraft is known to create a pessimistic world that always attempts to bring down the main characters of the story, in which they helplessly succumb to. This shared universe of Lovecraftian horror is known as Cthulhu Mythos.

The authority that humans formerly held over the planet is frequently shifted to a more powerful creature in the universe in Lovecraft's literary writings—decentralizing human's position and challenges the philosophical belief of humans being the center of the universe, or anthropocentrism. Ralickas described Lovecraft's characters as being bound to a “cosmic horror”, a concept that humankind can never grasp, and facing this is a fate worse than death itself. In our death, even though we cease to exist, we can still find comfort in knowing that there is value in our cultural heritage and the community that we leave behind will survive longer than us (Ralickas 2008, 297-298). Unfortunately, this is not the case for Lovecraft's characters. The only thing that they will be facing upon death is the meaninglessness of the human condition, a cosmic horror (ibid). As they fail to find comfort in the bleak setting of Lovecraft's fictional universe, Lovecraft's characters become aware of how meaningless their life is and how powerless they are in the face of an unknown greater power. However, this does not only apply to the main character's fate, as every living human being in Cthulhu Mythos also experiences this helplessness.

The writer has chosen one of H.P. Lovecraft's most known works, a science-fiction horror novella entitled *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936), as the object of the study in order to analyze how the absurdity of human's life is portrayed through the experience of the main character, Robert Olmstead, and how the absurd urged him to commit philosophical suicide, which then put an emphasis on humanity's position in the universe of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. Science-fiction horror is a subgenre of fiction works whose roots come from the science-fiction genre itself.

The subgenre deals with imaginary situations based on technological development in the future, environmental changes, or societal advances that are meant to incite a sense of dread or fear in its audience.

The Shadow Over Innsmouth is a first-person story told from the perspective of a young man called Robert Olmstead who traveled to a mysterious fishing town in New England. Through a local's legend of an ancient sea-dwelling species that interbred with humans and produced amphibian hybrids, he learned that the people of Innsmouth were not totally human. These monsters, referred to as the Deep Ones, were infamous for enjoying human flesh and they promised riches in exchange for human sacrifices. Forced to stay in the town that night, Olmstead was trapped in his hotel room by Innsmouth people. He attempted to escape the town in the middle of the night but encounters a group of the monster hybrids up close, witnessing their appearance on the way. Olmstead immediately faints from shock but wakes up the next day unharmed. Much later, after he managed to return safely, he learned from his genealogical notes that he is in fact a descendant of the Deep Ones hybrid. This revelation drives him insane and led to him acknowledging his ancestry as a monster.

Over the course of 91 years, prior research on H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* has been conducted, including a journal article by Jimmy Temples titled "The Shadow Over Lovecraft: Racism and Xenophobia in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*" (2017) which revealed racist undertones in the novella. Steffen Wöll explores the implications of fear of otherness and portrayal of the Orient as the increasingly diverse American society in the work in "The Horrors of the Oriental

Space and Language in H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth*" (2020). Margareta Lizon's "" That Innsmouth Look" A Study of First-Person Narration and the State of Ambiguity in H. P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* by H. P. Lovecraft" (2015) investigates how Lovecraft's use of narrative strategy in the novella succeeds in creating a state of uncertainty in its readers.

Additionally, the writer has chosen several studies on absurdism as a further reference, namely Kim Koltun's "Rick, Morty, and Absurdism: The Millennial Allure of Dark Humor" (2018), Mehmet Recep Taş' "Rereading Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* From the Viewpoint of Existential Philosophy and Camus' Absurdism" (2017), and "*The Trial* by Kafka: In the "Light of Existentialism and Absurdism"" by Disha Mondal (1964).

As prior studies on Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* were mostly made on the focus of the racial issues that are present in the novella and connects the findings with Lovecraft's background. In the present, however, there seems to be no research that has been done on *The Shadow over Innsmouth* in the perspective of absurdism by analyzing the lack of significance in human life in the novella. While analyzing a work of fiction alongside the author's background is an intriguing topic, this study will focus on the text itself to discover the theme revolving the insignificance of human life in the face of an absurd universe, which is why a New Criticism approach will be used to reveal the aspect of absurdity found in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*. In doing new critical research, the formal elements that form a literary work will be broken down and analyzed one by one. Robert Olmstead's change of attitude was reflected in his character development,

from how he seemed to be skeptical towards the folklore of Innsmouth to how he decided to discard his humanity to become one with the Deep Ones after discovering his ancestry. In turn, this development drove the plot of the story forward and emphasized the position of the human race the universe setting established by Lovecraft in the novel. As a result, characterization, plot, and setting will be the main points of the analysis.

Using New Criticism approach by employing formal elements in the novella namely plot, setting, and characterization of the main character, this study will be analyzing the insignificance of the human race that leads to the portrayal of absurdity found in *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936) in the writer's attempt to help the reader understand its theme.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

The writer formulated the statement of the problems as follows:

1. How is the absurdity of human existence portrayed through characterization, plot, and setting of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* from the experience of the main character?

1.3 Objective of the Study

Based on the statement of the problems, the objective of this study is to:

1. Identify the portrayal of absurdity of human existence through characterization, plot, and setting of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* from the experience of the main character.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study focuses on analyzing the aspect of absurdism found in the universe of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936) through the narrative and the experience of its main character. The writer hopes that this study will be able to give insight on understanding absurdism in literature, be it in fiction and real life. Additionally, this study will be made as a contribution to academic references for future researchers who are interested in conducting a literary study on H.P. Lovecraft's works, as well as for English Department students from Universitas Airlangga.

1.5 Definition of Key-Terms

Absurd:	ridiculously unreasonable, illogical, or extremely silly.
Absurdism:	humanity's efforts to discover the meaning and purpose of life will inevitably fail since no such meaning exists.
Absurd Hero:	a protagonist that accepts living without a purpose in their life and rejects suicide as a solution to the absurd.
Cthulhu Mythos:	a collaborative universe and theme, developed from H.P. Lovecraft's fictional world and expanded by other authors.
Cosmic Indifferentism:	a philosophy which holds the believe that the universe is unconcerned with human's affair and the

existence of the human race is insignificant in the larger scheme of intergalactic existence.