

“Terrifying Vistas of Reality and Our Frightful Position Therein”: Peering Into the Representations of Monstrosity in the Fiction of Howard Phillips Lovecraft

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Article Received: 02/6/2022,

Article Accepted: 10/06/2022,

Published online: 12/07/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.7.07

Abstract: H.P. Lovecraft, one of the best practitioners of horror fiction in twentieth-century America, is credited with popularizing and perfecting the 'weird tale.' Through his unique brand of 'cosmic horror,' Lovecraft succeeded in probing modernist questions regarding the meaninglessness of human life, fractured identity, and unstable human values in an essentially unfeeling and antagonistic cosmos, albeit from a darkly grotesque perspective. By introducing menacing otherworldly creatures, fictional grimoires, and sinister, devil-worshipping cults, Lovecraft conjures up a weirdly unsettling ambiance in which humanity finds its position diminished in the face of a profoundly strange universe containing immensely superior forces that often elude understanding. Therefore, the horror trope in Lovecraft's fiction is worth critical attention. This paper seeks to illuminate the plural dimensions of Lovecraft's vision of horror and thereby appreciate the craft of an underrated author who later went on to champion a subgenre and influenced a whole generation of enthusiastic followers. From a brief general introduction that distinguishes 'weird fiction' from science and speculative fiction, the paper moves towards an informative discussion of some of the significant concerns that run through Lovecraft's whole corpus. It then proceeds to engage critically with the myriad manifestations of Lovecraft an horror, which have lost nothing of their capacity to chill readers even a century later.

Keywords: Lovecraft, Monstrosity, Weird fiction, Cosmic horror, Cthulhu.

“We live on a placid island of ignorance amid black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far...some day the piecing together of dislocated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality and our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”

–H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’

These lines from the opening paragraph of Lovecraft's most representative tale of 'cosmic horror' effectively encapsulate the *raison d'etre* of the whole literary output of an author obsessed with demonstrating humanity's vulnerable place in an uncaring cosmos. This lifelong

endeavour earned him the posthumous status of "a dreamer and a visionary." Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) was a modernist American author who wrote horror fiction for pulp magazines and also served as a ghost-writer for many other contemporary writers. Although he never saw his works between commercially-printed hard covers and died in obscurity, he has inspired cult-like reverence among his countless followers since his death. His works dispense with the traditional gothic tropes (i.e., spectres, vampires, werewolves, reanimated corpses, etc.) and instead focus on encounters with the unknown and the unknowable. His works are now generally brought under the umbrella of 'weird fiction,' a subgenre of speculative fiction originating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his famous essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft provides an impressive overview of the supernatural literature in America and, regarding the element of 'the weird,' opines:

"The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or sheeted from clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present."

—*Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 108

Although it shares several key elements with dark fantasy and science fiction, weird fiction fundamentally attempts to highlight the impotence and insignificance of human beings within a much larger universe populated by often malign powers and forces that greatly exceed the human capacities to understand or control them. For example, a pretty reliable narrator (usually a highly learned academician/scientist) inadvertently comes across some meaningless object (as in Lovecraft's story 'The Haunter of the Dark') or finds some cryptic manuscript (as in Lovecraft's story 'The Call of Cthulhu'), and investigating further he makes several discoveries, leading to a series of unsettling revelations, the impact of which pushes him to the verge of his sanity. Many such characters discover that there are some alien entities from unknown dimensions of space and time, now lurking in unimaginable places of the earth, who have landed and ruled here billions of years ago and who are waiting for the right time to rise once again to reclaim the earth as their own. Suddenly, the discoverer finds his sense of humanity, culture, or human values so irrevocably shattered that his fragmented, delirious consciousness can find peace nowhere except in death. He gradually perishes away under the pressure of such overburdening truth of which, he finds, the whole of humanity (except he) is blissfully unaware. Any attempt to rationalize such occurrences is doomed to failure, thus suggesting the limits of human reason. It is precisely this failure that constitutes one of the major components of the weird. However, this is by no means the stale formula of all/much of weird horrors. Although the inclusion of trustworthy, intellectual individuals, alien encounters, and a rationalizing tendency may make it seem akin to science fiction, weird fiction resists all sorts of possible scientific explanations by evoking an "atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread" (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 108). Also, while tales of alien encounters often have peaceful and optimistic resolutions in science fiction, in weird literature, the result is always unpleasant and devastating to the narrator. Weird fiction tries to convey the metaphysical fear that the universe can suddenly become a strikingly mysterious and meaningless place, something far different from the mundane fear of being murdered or maimed, which is frequently experienced in mainstream horror literature.

Lovecraft has always attracted very little critical attention. Although he was earlier treated with a frown by the modernist priests of “high culture” owing to his association with pulp magazines and his works’ apparent lack of literary merit, he started receiving his critical due in the late twentieth century when there was a revival of interest, both famous and scholarly, in his fiction. He is now gradually proving to be a fertile ground for critical mining. Sun and Tryambak Joshi, the pioneering scholar of the field, is the first to highlight the richness and subtlety of Lovecraft's works and his 'cosmic' philosophy and has brought out book-length critical studies of many other weird authors. Joshi is the first scholar to point out the importance of Lovecraft’s works and attempt to establish a canon of weird literature. Joshi has also noted how Lovecraft became a premier technician of the short story by rigidly following Edgar Allan Poe’s strictures on the 'unity of effect.' In his seminal essay *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe advises that every element of a work of fiction should help create a single emotional impact. Accordingly, Lovecraft worked out his plots neatly so that their total potential was unlocked and the effect of horror achieved successfully. Some modern and postmodern writers consciously borrow elements from Lovecraft's fictional universe (not without Lovecraft's persistent encouragement) and continuously enrich and modify his mythos, thus actively participating in an intertextual engagement. This leads to the formation of what Lovecraft's protégé August Derleth terms the ‘Cthulhu Mythos,’ a shared fictional universe featuring the settings, tropes, cosmic beings, and lore that was earlier employed by Lovecraft and are now being re-treated with subtle variations by his successors. Lovecraft thus exemplifies what Michael Foucault has called a 'transdiscursive author' or 'founder of discursivity': an author who opens up the way to various re-writings and re-readings of his works through different means. This is one of the chief reasons his works are now being brought under the critical lenses of many significant critical theories, including post-structuralism, feminism, post colonialism, ecocriticism, race studies, and posthumanism. This paper considers the myriad implications of the human and nonhuman monstrosities envisioned by Lovecraft in some of his most famous tales.

As already noted, weird narratives are preoccupied with unprecedented events that suspend generally fixed laws of nature. Lovecraft’s work emphasizes themes of cosmic horror, forbidden and dangerous knowledge, madness, nonhuman influences on humanity, religion and superstition, fate and inevitability, and the risks associated with scientific discoveries. Lovecraft's unique brand of 'cosmic horror' in his tales refers to the epiphany moments the human characters experience when encountering monstrous, outlandish, extraterrestrial beings, which they often deem alien gods. As a result, the human characters grow aware of the insignificance of humanity in the universe. Lovecraft declares his anti-humanist stance and post-humanist ethos thus: "All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large" (*Selected Letters*, 150). In the words of Jed Mayer, Lovecraft’s work is “preoccupied with the nonhuman, vividly rendered in multifarious forms, which threaten to displace humanity from its self-proclaimed position of privilege” (Mayer, 117). By creating such monstrous beings who existed long before the arrival of humanity on earth and who will doubtless continue to remain here long after the extinction of the human species, Lovecraft also punctures anthropocentric hubris and offers an implicit challenge to human exceptionalism.

Lovecraft was capable of seeing undercurrents of horror in the most mundane and modern scenes. He addresses questions of time and space and interrogates the claim of any truthful representation of reality by revealing the cosmic nuances beneath seemingly ordinary events and things. Although he stayed outside the current of European modernism, he shared the modernists' belief that reality is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it. Because Lovecraft is fascinated with a weird cosmology, James Kneale is inclined to see him as "a displaced colonial gentleman with distinctly antiquarian obsessions" (Kneale, 45).

What distinguishes Lovecraft's works from those of his predecessors (like Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany, and Stephen King) is his skill at integrating core elements of his distinctive "cosmic" philosophy—based on atheistic materialism—into fiction that is inexhaustibly rich, complex, and vital. He exhibits an impressive array of outlandishly named creatures—Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath, Azathoth, etc.—and invests them with equally bizarre properties, chiefly rosy tentacles. These horrific externals mask a profound understanding of the psychology of fear and, most significantly, a deep seriousness of purpose in making horror fiction a legitimate contribution to literature. The noted Lovecraft scholar Stefan Dziemianowicz in his 'Foreword' to the anthology *Lovecraft's Monsters* suggests that the exact spelling of these names suggests the alien and the outré. The tortuous phonetics required to pronounce the creature's words equate "the unpronounceable with the unspeakable dread" the animals inspire in the human subject (Dziemianowicz, 12). Lovecraft deliberately downplays the role of human characters in his tales, displaying the brutal fact of humanity's insignificance and transience in an indifferent cosmos. There is no way to "justify the ways of God to man"—because there is "no benevolent god or gods, only menacing extraterrestrial monsters or 'dark gods' whose casual and accidental encounters with humanity are cataclysmic to ourselves but of vanishingly small interest to the entities who rule the universe" (S.T. Joshi, *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction*, 586). This is Lovecraft's vision of "cosmic indifferentism," comparable only to Gloucester's flash of cosmic horror in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.37-38). Here it is worth remarking that this line from Shakespeare's *King Lear* has brilliant contextual relevance in science fiction and fantasy tales wherein humans frequently encounter malevolent otherworldly species to their detriment. Lovecraft's complete bestiary includes abominable snowmen, human-amphibian hybrids, lumpen mountains of protoplasm called shoggoths, gore-gulping ghouls, bat-winged night gaunts, sentient fungi, and more. Some of his monsters exist only as consciousnesses in the human bodies that they serially appropriate and discard. Others have no stable form or substance and are perceptible only by their malign influence on the organic and inorganic matter in their vicinity.

Many of Lovecraft's most celebrated tales focus on the monster within humans. In the early story "Rats in the Walls," an unnamed narrator unearths the terrible secret that his family had long maintained an underground city where previous generations had not only fed on human flesh but raised humans like cattle for this purpose. Robert Olmstead, the protagonist of the story "The Shadow over Innsmouth," is initially repulsed by the residents of a cursed seaport town but gradually recognizes his kinship with them. He comes to know that the

residents of Insmouth have a long history of intermarriages with a race of aquatic beings referred to as the Deep Ones, whose blood endows humans with eternal life and the ability to live underwater. When Olmstead recognizes his family connection to these underwater creatures and that alien tradition may be as valid as New England traditions, he ultimately decides to join them in their underwater city. Lovecraft appears to follow in the footsteps of writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Henry James in transforming the aborigines of New England into veritable monsters and demons. As Faye Ringel argues, all of these writers "sought a proper setting to reflect the darkness within the human soul...[and] turned to Massachusetts's Puritan theocracy" (Ringel, 45). Lovecraft appears to have shared their obsession with Puritan diabolism in his identification of New England's Puritans with the Gothic. Lovecraft's horrors from outside (i.e., extraterrestrial entities) are often summoned into our world by necromancers who are descendants of the Puritan divines. Lovecraft seems to mythicize the Puritans, replacing their reliance upon the Bible and other religious texts with his characters' dependence on blasphemous and forbidden books of his invention, such as *The Necronomicon* by the "mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred. In several Lovecraft's stories, including 'The Hound,' 'The Nameless City,' and 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,' the book is rumoured to contain incantations that can summon otherworldly entities and dark gods and reanimate corpses. In Lovecraft's fictional universe, these invented texts represent survivals of medieval superstition transmitted to the New World by Puritans who, like Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth, have mastered forbidden arts. Thus, Lovecraft also managed to replace the haunted castle of European Gothic with the backwoods farmhouse and Europe's decadent aristocracy with the degenerate descendants of New England's Puritans.

A frequently ignored concern in Lovecraft scholarship is the author's demonization of human sexuality. The situation certainly merits mention in this discussion of Lovecraft's vision of horror. In the story "The Dunwich Horror," Lavinia Whateley's sexual liaison with the dark god Yog-Sothoth not only produces the monstrous Whateley twins (one of them being a dark, goatish-looking infant and the other an unseen and invisible creature) but also spurs their desire to summon their nonhuman father from the recesses of the underworld back to earth. Henry Armitage, the hero-librarian of the story, can barely contain his wild ravings when he learns about "some plan for the extirpation of the entire human race and all animal and vegetable life from the earth by some terrible elder race of beings from another dimension" (D.H.,234). Thus, it is precisely Lavinia's power of sexual reproduction that renders her a participant in a terrible union meant to trigger broad human destruction, marking her as a type of the "monstrous feminine." In her noted work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed, drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of *abjection*, conceptualizes the "monstrous-feminine" as a woman who threatens order and stability precisely because of her reproductive ability. Some of Lovecraft's monsters are clearly understood to be mothers or the horrific spawn of mothers. One of his most enigmatic of these creatures, mentioned in stories like "The Whisperer in Darkness," "The Dreams in the Witch House," and "The Thing on the Doorstep," is the infamous Shub-Niggurath or The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young. From its name to its function, Lovecraft implies that this creature's powers of reproduction are linked to her power to evoke horror and disgust. Such a monstrous vision of sexuality and motherhood appears to owe much to Lovecraft's reluctance towards sexuality, which he could

never fully understand or accept and believed people with a lofty cast of mind should always avoid.

In several of Lovecraft's best stories—among them "The Shadow Out of Time" and "The Haunter of the Dark"—the monstrous is expressed as a force or influence that takes possession of human consciousness or dispossesses a person of his body. In "The Shadow Out of Time," the narrator Nathaniel Wingate Peasley acquires a richer understanding and even an awed admiration of the alien race whose form he somehow temporarily occupies, noting behavioral parallels between his species and the great race of Yith. The locus of horror in the story is in an alternative embodiment. Yet, this transbodily experience also imagines possibilities for alternative states of being, transcending the limitations of a human being. In "The Haunter of the Dark," Lovecraft's last published short story, the protagonist Robert Blake's death is revealed as a consequence of the lightning that struck outside his window. Only later do we learn that Blake died of fright due to what he saw suddenly illuminated by the bright light - the 'Haunter of the Dark, a creature from another dimension of space that can only exist in darkness. It wants to move from one dark universe to another, and its passage is blocked by our universe of light (*Selected Stories*, 202). It needs a "transistor" to facilitate the journey. Blake, in gazing into the crystal-like object 'Shining Trapezohedron' (a sort of window looking into other universes) which he had discovered at the dark church at Federal Hill, unwittingly becomes this transistor. As Nicholaus Clements points out, "Blake's whimsical peering into the object [thus] involves the merging of his identity with the Haunter and then a shift into another dimension of space" (Clemens, 100). The intelligence of Blake, though ripped from his body, is most likely still awake and eternally subjected to cosmic horror as he and the Haunter perpetually move through hideous and ineffable planets where light becomes darkness and darkness becomes light.

In most of Lovecraft's fiction, certain human cultists are in direct collaboration with the monsters, and his narrators often learn of a far more sinister kinship between humanity and monstrosity. In the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), a group of scientists (affiliated with the fictional Miskatonic University) embark upon a disastrous expedition to Antarctica where they uncover the frozen bodies of barrel-shaped extraterrestrials called the "Great Old Ones," the remnants of an alien civilization older than the human race. This is followed by the nightmarish discovery that these creatures, aside from building a giant stone city in the Antarctic, created all life forms on earth as jest or mistake. Thus, challenging the established theories of evolution, humanity is shown to be nothing but an accidental by-product of some heinous biological experiment conducted by alien entities thousands of years ago. In this connection, Robert Waugh rightly observes, "the Old Ones, impersonating the god of evolution, also made that vaguely simian creature from which humanity has evolved; we are as it were half-brothers and half-sisters to these monsters." (Waugh, 102). In "The Call of Cthulhu," the best-known of Lovecraft's tales, Lovecraft depicts the underwater deity Cthulhu as an apocalyptic sea-monster dragon, with the significant addition of the human figure: "If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing" (CC, 100). This admixture of human and nonhuman traits in an alien entity serves a definite purpose.

Cthulhu represents a paradoxical admixture of the chthonic and the cosmic, the local and the foreign. It is delineated as something as alien as any extraterrestrial visitor from across the unfathomable distances of deep space, yet as human as ourselves. Since Lovecraft stresses Cthulhu's deep connection to the human body rather than to the intellect, we must never forget that his horrors are as many horrors of time and space as of feeling and flesh: "I now felt gnawing at my vitals that dark terror which will never leave me till I, too, am at rest" (CC, 127). Cthulhu and his kin treat humans brutally and uncompromisingly as humans treat other inferior beings. Therefore, these monsters also provide a fractured mirror, albeit on a grotesquely exaggerated scale, for humanity itself.

Thus, as the preceding discussion shows, Lovecraft's engagement with human and nonhuman monstrosities is rich with implications. His cosmic horror is something that compels the neurasthenic characters into recognizing humanity's insignificance before some silent yet invincible preternatural forces, of which the whole of society is blissfully unaware. The horrors Lovecraft inflicted upon his characters go far beyond those that menaced the heroines of traditional Gothic novels, nor are the supernatural agents confined to the shapes inherited from the European Middle Ages—ghost, werewolf, vampire, witch. Instead, as we have seen, Lovecraft devises a new cosmology in which human evil and traditional monsters are made to seem almost comforting in comparison to the infinite spaces of a profoundly unknowable, hostile universe.

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