

COSMIC HORROR, GOTHIC BODY AND THE TEXT: H. P. LOVECRAFT'S "THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH"¹

ABSTRACT: "The Shadow over Innsmouth", a tale in which the atmosphere of fateful dread figures as the motor that drives the readers further, stands as one of Lovecraft's greatest tales of degeneration, since horrible things afflict the Innsmouth citizens, as well as the narrator, all in accordance with the theory of gothic body drawn mostly from Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. The town of Innsmouth, historically grounded, decayed and in ruins and, in Freud's terms, uncanny, presents itself as a perfect dwelling place for the monstrous occurrences happening in it, thus creating a bleak and sinister vision of the world in which the insignificance and redundancy of human beings goes along with Lovecraft's concept and philosophy of cosmic horror.

Key words: Lovecraft, cosmic horror, gothic body, degeneration, gothic settings.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, even though largely unknown and unappreciated during his lifetime, today arguably is one of the most important writers of horror fiction and, according to Joyce Carol Oates, one of the writers who had the greatest impact on the "horror narrative since the writings of Edgar Allan Poe" (Snodgrass 2005: 214). During his lifetime, Lovecraft wrote for pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories* (Snodgrass 2005: 215), but even those magazines refused to publish some of his works which would later prove to be his seminal. His opus could be divided into two phases, whereas the first phase mainly consists of the very short stories with a surprising twist at the end, in which the making and the beginnings of a writer can be seen, while in the second phase of his writing his earlier baroque style, marked by an overbearing use of adjectives, became more controlled and sophisticated, and the stories themselves became longer and more complex, as well as more original (Ognjanović 2008a: 561). Throughout the entirety of his opus, Lovecraft was building his unique vision and his complex mythology, combining the postulates of the gothic genre with science fiction elements (Ognjanović 2008a: 561), in this way managing to give his writings a distinct and influential mark.

¹ A shortened version of the seminar paper of the same title written during the master studies under the mentorship of professor Ivana Đurić Paunović.

Atmosphere

According to Joyce Carol Oates, “Lovecraft’s most effective tales are those in which atmosphere is predominant and plot subordinate” (1996: 9), which is an opinion stated by Lovecraft himself in his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature”:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint...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 daemons of unplumbed space (2010b: 51).

He further emphasizes in the same essay that “Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of the plot but the creation of a given sensation”, as well as “whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers” (Lovecraft 2010b: 52). Lovecraft pays much attention to the atmosphere in his works, the pace of which is rather slow since the plot is not his main preoccupation. Furthermore, according to Oates, Lovecraft’s, maybe greatest, contribution to literature, and something he is nowadays mostly credited for, is:

... the development of a species of horror fantasy set in meticulously described, historically grounded places (predominantly...Providence, Rhode Island, Salem, Massachusetts, and a region in northern central Massachusetts to which he has given the name “the Miskatonic Valley”), in which a seemingly normal, intelligent scholar or professor, usually a celibate bachelor, pursues a mystery it would [be] wiser for him to flee (1996: 3).

And rightly so, the plot of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is fairly rudimentary. Namely, the narrator, a student celebrating his coming of age by starting out on an antiquarian and genealogical quest, eventually ends up in a New England seaport called Innsmouth, and later finds out from the stories Zadok Allen tells him that the town is populated by fish-frog hybrids, which, in a great twist, turn out to be his cousins, whom he decides to join in the shared immortality (Joshi 2001: 305), in an even bigger and more unpleasantly surprising twist at the end. Considering the fact that the plot can be explained in a sentence, it is not the plot that constantly drives the story forward and pushes the readers further, nor are the mutations and monsters the primary source of their fear; rather the atmosphere is the motor of the story, and it is the atmosphere that provokes the sense of dread or terror in readers (Mannikko 2002: 7).

Cosmic horror

Today, Lovecraft is remembered “as the greatest creator and inspirer of what is called ‘cosmic horror’” (Knopf 2001: 1). As Knopf states, “just as Poe once defined the most tragic event to be the death of a beautiful woman, Lovecraft defined the most horrible sort of fear as ‘cosmic fear’” (2001: 5). The things like murderers and dead bodies indeed are scary, but they are natural occurrences, and what is horror for Lovecraft is the exact opposite of that; horror for Lovecraft means “the breaking, or disturbance of cosmic law”, “things that are against nature, or at least nature as humans conceive it” (Knopf 2001: 5). Even in the very first sentence of his aforementioned essay he states: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (Lovecraft 2010b: 48). But not only fear of the unknown, but rather fear of the unknowable, fear of what we are not even supposed to know, for “if we knew what really went on in the universe, even in part, we’d either go mad as a society, or break down into a new dark age” (Knopf 2001: 4). In this manner, gods in Lovecraft’s mythology are not gods as we may think of them in any conceivable sense, but rather they are alien beings that existed long before man and that will continue to exist long after mankind became extinct, and “their very existence is destructive to our sanity” (Knopf 2001: 4). Importantly, his gods are not evil or malevolent, they simply *are*, and being stronger than us, they are the true impersonations of Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest’; they simply do not care about our species and they will destroy it if needs be (Ognjanović 2008b: 588). Furthermore, David E. Schultz called Lovecraft’s mythology “anti-mythology” (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 51), and Joyce Carol Oates defined it as “an ironic inversion of traditional religious faith” (1996: 8), seeing how the whole purpose of mythology is to “show how humanity connects to deity, how deity functions in society, and to explain how the world works”, and in Lovecraft’s atheistic universe God does not exist, and the beings that are being worshipped in his stead are wrongfully perceived as such, as they have “no true concern for humanity at all”, and will bring only “its destruction if summoned” (Knopf 2001: 6).

Lovecraft’s ken and philosophy was one of what Joshi calls “cosmic indifference” (Ognjanović 2008b: 588), or “mechanic determinism”, which is a belief that “there is no such thing as free will, since everything was determined from the first event when universe was created”, and that there is no “spirit, only matter”; the universe is not “heading in any grand direction under a governing deity”, and if the world is going anywhere at all, it is going to its own ‘scientifically plausible’ destruction when the sun died (Knopf 2001: 5). Hence, “there is no true freedom in his stories, only an awful inevitable chain of destiny, and our doom is preordained, if only we knew the full extent” (Knopf 2001: 6). So, in Lovecraft’s universe, humans are only passive bystanders with no significant agency in a cosmic power play of great forces, and the only thing they can do about it is to accept the fact that their existence has no true bearing in the universe; that the world

they consider to belong to them actually never was theirs to begin with; that they can only watch their doom play out before their eyes and become mentally destroyed by the sight and the knowledge. It is important to note that for Lovecraft this mythology of his was not a primary concern in his writing, but rather the background, and that he himself did not take it too seriously, as well as being inconsistent and vague (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 51).

In Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, a name given to his mature work by his disciples, "there are no 'gods' but only displaced extraterrestrial beings" (Oates 1996: 8), who used to rule the universe and have their bases on Earth, but something (that is not really explained) had made them retreat into different "spaces" (some state of hibernation), from which they expect to be awakened, when their followers on Earth make all the necessary preparations and when the stars finally align, so that they could once again rise and rule the entire universe (Ognjanović 2008b: 587). Humans mistakenly consider them to be gods because the nature of these creatures is so unfathomable that humans, in their limited minds, can only link their powers with those of a deity (Ognjanović 2008b: 587). In "The Shadow over Innsmouth", the central divinity worshiped is that of Dagon, and the cult is called The Esoteric Order of Dagon, a pagan religion of sorts that Obed Marsh imported from the South Seas (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 237). He made an arrangement with these creatures (who are half-fish half-frog hybrids) – they would provide plenty of fish and riches for the citizens, and Obed would offer them human sacrifices (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 237). The arrangement seems to work until the creatures ask to mate with humans, upon which a riot breaks out in Innsmouth and, as many citizens die, the ones remaining are made to take the Oath of Dagon thus professing their loyalty to the hybrids (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 237). The offspring of this type of breeding acquires the "Innsmouth look", a physical change that makes them resemble those creatures, but the mitigating circumstances of this bargain do exist, since after the change has been completed they do not die, but go to the sea and "back to Mother Hydra an' Father Dagon" (Lovecraft 2010a: 322), and acquire some sort of immortality (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 237).

Gothic body

One other thing that Lovecraft, along with his shattering our idea of our own importance, in his systematic undermining of all conceivable basics of human existence, pays much attention to in his writings is the body (Ognjanović 2008b: 592). Some of the most unimaginable horrors afflict the physiognomies of many a Lovecraft character (Ognjanović 2008b: 592–3). Lovecraft sees the body as a prison, a receptacle of repulsive organic matter that is not of our choosing, and hence we do not have any kind of impact on it; a fragile shell susceptible to outside forces and influences, inside of which the spirit is forced to reside (Ognjanović 2008b: 594). That is why what happens to the material body is not the most important in his body horror, but rather the fact that the spirit will remain alive and

be aware of what is happening to the physical body but will still have to stay trapped within the confines of that rotting and degenerate prison (Ognjanović 2008b: 594). The greatest horror for Lovecraft is when the body we consider ours and ours alone becomes usurped, possessed, someone else's, changed, as is the case, for example, with mutation, which comes from the genetic code, from the inside, and carries the curse of our ancestors which cannot be escaped because it is embedded in our tissue (Ognjanović 2008b: 594). What happens to the narrator of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" is something he cannot escape from, because the blood that runs through his veins is the same one carrying the germs of mutation, carrying the curse of his ancestors, and turning him into something he was repulsed and disgusted by. But, the mutation itself is not as scary as is the narrator seeing and witnessing his own body change, and starting to welcome the idea.

In "The Shadow over Innsmouth", the most fascinatingly horrible things happen to the 'body' of Innsmouth citizens. Namely, the "cross-species adventuring" truly "generates a loathsome, defective breed" (Morgan 2002: 95). As the narrator travels to the infamous Innsmouth, and as he examines the bus driver, he is suddenly overcome by "a wave of spontaneous aversion which could be neither checked nor explained" (Lovecraft 2010a: 297). Namely, the bus driver is marked by something that the narrator will later call the "Innsmouth look", as he has "odd, deep creases in the sides of his neck", "bulging, watery blue eyes that never seemed to wink", "a flat nose" and "singularly undeveloped ears" (Lovecraft 2010a: 297). But the narrator will later witness that Innsmouth's "seemingly deserted streets" (Hurley 2007: 137) are filled with "uncouth, crouching shapes" (Lovecraft 2010a: 339) like that of the driver or much worse. The description of the creatures is truly phantasmagorical:

I think their predominant colour was a grayish-green, though they had white bellies. They were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly. Their forms vaguely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes that never closed. At the sides of their necks were palpitating gills, and their long paws were webbed. They hopped irregularly, sometimes on two legs and sometimes on four...Their croaking, baying voices, clearly used for articulate speech, held all the dark shades of expression which their staring faces lacked (Lovecraft 2010a: 345).

The narrator is stunned by "their crouching, shambling gait" which was also "abominably repellent" (Lovecraft 2010a: 335), and their horrible "fishy odour" (Lovecraft 2010a: 304). It appears that the Innsmouth citizens' "physical aberrations reflect the biological transgression involved in their begetting" (Morgan 2002: 96). Even as the narrator flees from his persecutors he seems more worried by "the irredeemable pollution" (Lovecraft 2010a: 343) of the "space they occupy" than for his own safety (Morgan 2002: 100). But in Lovecraft in general, the horror is usually more concerned with "the threat of repulsive contact with anomalous, proliferating biological *stuff* that falls short even of thingness" (Morgan 2002: 100)

than with the threat directed toward the physical existence. Near the end of the story the narrator, who was so repulsed and horrified by the creatures he saw in Innsmouth, is revealed as a distant relative of theirs who also has Innsmouth blood in his veins, and he starts to mutate and acquire the “Innsmouth look” himself. It is interesting to see that the narrator does not find this prospect to be scary or repulsive, but he rather rejoices in the face of the coming change, as he starts to look at it with fascination. Arguably, the narrator’s “spectacular conversion at the end – where he not only becomes reconciled to his fate as a nameless hybrid but actually welcomes it – is the most controversial point of the tale” (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 240). Raising the question seems inevitable, according to Joshi and Schulz. Namely, did Lovecraft wish “to transform the Deep Ones from objects of horror to objects of sympathy or identification”, or is the narrator’s change of heart supposed to be perceived as “an augmentation of the horror” (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 240)? Joshi and Schulz believe that Lovecraft intended the latter, since there is “no gradual ‘reformation’ of the Deep Ones” and “our revulsion at their physical hideousness is not mollified or tempered by any subsequent appreciation of their intelligence, courage, or nobility”, so the narrator’s change of heart should be taken as the climax of the “horrific scenario”, namely that not only his body but rather his mind as well has been irreversibly corrupted (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 240).

But, above all, Lovecraft’s body is ‘grotesque’. It is grotesque in Bakhtinian sense of the word, meaning that it “involves an act of degradation” (Hurley 2007: 138), “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” to “the material level” (Bakhtin 1984: 19). Furthermore, “Bakhtin associates the grotesque with the human body in all its coarse, clumsy earthiness and changeful mortality, focusing on the material *thingness* of the human subject rather than intellect or spirit” (Hurley 2007: 138), as seen in the narrator’s acceptance of his mutation into a fish-frog hybrid, which suggests the disintegration of his moral and intellectual faculties that further leads to his rejoicing at the prospect of physical mutation. Lovecraft’s body is also ‘abject’ according to Kristeva, by which she means the body that is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”, that “disturbs identity, system, order” and that “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 1982: 4), as seen in the impossibility of defining the creatures, since they are neither entirely frogs, nor fish, nor human, but all of the above and none of the above at the same time. What both Bakhtin and Kristeva have in common is their emphasis on “gross materiality” (Hurley 2007: 138), as they both write about “waste”, “dung”, “cesspool”, “wound with blood and puss”, “acrid smell of sweat, of decay” (Kristeva 1982: 2–3), copulation, defecation, urination (Bakhtin 1984: 319), and the like, just as Lovecraft focuses on the unbearable smells the creatures emit and how the narrator finds even the mere thought of how they came into being simply unbearable and nauseating.

Moreover, for “Bakhtin this grotesque body is a richly comic body”, one not “attempting to transcend the flesh” and so it is “invigorated and renewed by its embrace of the earthly”, while for “Kristeva the grotesque-abject body is a body of

fear, but fear tempered with fascination” (Hurley 2007: 138), which represent the two opposing attitudes and reactions we witness in the story (the narrator’s joyous acceptance of his destiny, and his cousins’ mental decline in the face of the same circumstances).

Actually, Lovecraft’s sinister vision of the degeneration of the human body could be placed into and seen in a wider context of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwin’s theory, when it was first published, shattered the human belief of their ‘divine origins’, as well as it destroyed the basic distinctions between human and animal, male and female, nature and culture (Hurley 1996: 55). It also presented an exceptional challenge to the view of “human centrality in the universe”, and replaced it with “one of human ephemerality, relativity, and potential ‘degradation’” (Hurley 1996: 56). Lovecraft’s cosmic horror captures and illustrates this cognition very vividly, presenting the readers with a vast universe where humans are insignificant and unimportant, where the belief of our own grandeur is simply a delusion, as well as with the universe where forces much more powerful than us exist, the forces we are not even aware of. Furthermore, Darwinist sciences brought forth the fear that if the process of human evolution is constant, then we are possibly still not “fully evolved” or “fully human”, or even worse – that the process itself could be reversible, that “the human race might ultimately retrogress into a sordid animalism rather than progress towards a telos of intellectual and moral perfection” (Hurley 1996: 56). Moreover, the human race “had come into existence through a random combination of natural processes”, and “Nature was ethically neutral and under no compulsion to privilege the human species”, so that the possibility of human race regressing into “lower” forms is as equally possible as its progressing or evolving into “higher” ones, or even its complete disappearance from the face of the earth (Hurley 1996: 57). This regression, or “degenerationism”, represents “a terrible downward spiral into madness, chaos, and extinction”, where heredity is not “the vehicle of progress”, but rather “an invisible source of contamination, with the infection jumping across bodies, across the generations, and manifesting itself in visible physical deformity” (Hurley 1996: 66). The narrator of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” suffers precisely this fate, as he regresses into some kind of a hybrid amphibian being, being the carrier of his ancestors’ curse and genes that cannot be escaped or ignored. But the most frightening thing of all is that whereas the evolution from animal to human took billions of years, the degeneration is “rapid and fatal” and takes up “hardly more than a human lifetime” (Hurley 1996: 66).

As S. T. Joshi writes in his *A Dreamer and a Visionary*, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” “is Lovecraft’s greatest tale of degeneration” (2001: 305). The physical changes and mutations are meticulously described, and the atmosphere of fateful dread and terror can only be paralleled by a few of his best stories. But, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is also a tale that undeniably forewarns about the dangers of miscegenation, “or the sexual union of different races” (Joshi 2001: 305). Throughout the story, the narrator is repulsed and disgusted by the “physical

grotesqueness of the Innsmouth people”, and he expects us to share and agree with his position and attitude; he constantly makes comments regarding their physical appearance, in the same manner that Lovecraft himself often commented “on the ‘peculiar’ appearance of all races but his own” (Joshi 2001: 305–6).

Gothic loci

In gothic writings, the haunted houses and castles and otherwise sinister places have always been in abundance (Morgan 2002: 179–83). Houses, buildings, apartments, interiors, or places of living in general, denote our belonging, our safe zone, our shelter (Morgan 2002: 183). Furthermore, our “house defines our safe, familiar space; it is *heimlich*” (Morgan 2002: 183). Freud has dealt with this German word in his essay “The Uncanny”, and noted that the word literally means “belonging to the house” (Freud 2003: 126), having no proper equivalent in the English language. The opposite of *heimlich* is *unheimlich*, meaning “unhomely”, which is usually translated into English as “uncanny” (Freud 2003: 124), the word carrying the properties of being “disturbing, somehow wrong, freakish, and anomalous”; it belongs to the realm of things unfamiliar to us, things we are not at home with (Morgan 2002: 183). Following this logic, a house is a signifier of everything that is “right and normal”, something which, when violated, provokes our “primitive anxieties” (Morgan 2002: 183). Furthermore, it is argued “that all human expression reflects our physiological nature”, and that consequently “any building that can create the illusion of ... a ‘place’ articulated by the imprint of human life, must seem organic, like a living form” (Morgan 2002: 184). In “gothic framework, deteriorating place speaks emphatically of organic deterioration in general” and images “expressive of the dissolution of architecture, infrastructure, and spatial ordering, resonate in our psycho-physical imaginations, eliciting a sense of a generally dissolving integrity” (Morgan 2002: 184).

From the very beginning of the story, Innsmouth provokes the feeling of terror in the readers, since the narrator sees “signs of both physical and moral decay” everywhere around him (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 258). Most of the houses seem unpopulated, empty, and in ruins. But ultimately the narrator finds out that Innsmouth is the place of interracial breeding between the Deep Ones and humans, which creates a degenerate race of humanoid creatures marked by the so-called Innsmouth look, thus actually presenting itself as a perfect dwelling place for such monstrous occurrences, and the place’s degeneracy only reflects the degeneracy of its inhabitants.

Gothic locations are also usually remote, isolated and neglected “where things twisted and repulsive may take place”, and such “bad places...map not only the despair but the corruption and depravity of its inhabitants” (Morgan 2002: 188). Innsmouth itself is “badly cut off from the rest of the country by marshes and creeks” (Lovecraft 2010a: 290).

Furthermore, as Edmund Burke wrote, "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger...a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Everyone will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger" (Burke 2005: 133). During the day, the narrator seems to get around without any serious difficulty, but after the night falls on Innsmouth, the narrator is persecuted by the fish-frog hybrids. Finally, the narrator manages to run away from his persecutors, but what he cannot escape from is his gene-pool, and his destiny to become a fish-frog hybrid himself.

According to Morgan, "Lovecraft had the good fortune, given his gothic disposition, to be born in what was a decadent milieu by American standards – a traditional New England in decline and thus conducive to a nocturnal imagination" (2002: 122). Innsmouth is a fictional town invented by Lovecraft, and it appears several times in his writings (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 127). It is believed "that it was inspired by his revisiting of the decaying town of Newburyport" (Joshi and Schulz 2001: 127). Arguably, the superiority of this story among Lovecraft's others lies in his situating the uncanny "in a context of a fairly realistic rendering of the Massachusetts north shore area of the 1920s and 1930s" (Morgan 2002: 217). The actual existing towns of Newburyport, Rowley and Plum Island are mentioned in the story, and the ways of getting to Innsmouth in relation to these towns are meticulously described (Morgan 2002: 217). The realism of the surroundings only "serves to make the story's dissolution into madness all the more disturbing" (Morgan 2002: 217).

Conclusion

Lovecraft's bleak vision of human insignificance and utter helplessness in the face of the unfathomable powerful forces that be, and the atmosphere of dread and terror, present his trademarks. Among some of his best tales, "The Shadow over Innsmouth" stands as his greatest tale of degeneration. The monstrous mutations that afflict the citizens of Innsmouth truly are phantasmagorical, horrible, grotesque and abject, but still the terror in this story, despite the monsters, comes from the narrator's moral decline and acceptance of his hybridity, thus the ending of the story features as the most negatively climactic event possible in the given circumstances. Furthermore, Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth" stands as an excellent portrayal of that fear that sprung from Darwin's theory of evolution, namely that the human race might possibly regress into some lower stadiums of being over a very short period of time, and the fact that the human race is not the privileged one in this vast universe, and that its disappearance from the face of the earth would not mean the end of every life on this planet, but that it would be as insignificant to those greater powers as crushing a fly is to us.

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KOSMIČKI HOROR, GOTSKO TELO I TEKST: H. F. LAVKRAFTOVA
„SENKA NAD INSMUTOM”

Sažetak

„Senka nad Insmutom“, priča u kojoj atmosfera sudbonosne strave funkcioniše kao motor koji goni čitaoce dalje, jedna je od Lavkraftovih najznačajnijih priča o degeneraciji, pošto se užasne stvari dešavaju stanovnicima Insmuta, kao i naratoru, sve u saglasnosti sa teorijom o gotskom telu, najvećim delom zasnovanoj na delima Mihaila Bahtina i Julije Kristeve. Gradić Insmut, koji je istorijski zasnovan, trošan i u ruševinama i po Frojdu protivprirodan, predstavlja savršeno mesto za monstruozne pojave koje se u njemu dešavaju, pa tako stvara sumornu i zlokobnu viziju sveta u kome je nevažnost i suvišnost ljudskih bića u skladu sa Lavkraftovim konceptom i filozofijom kosmičkog horora.

Ključne reči: Lavkraft, kosmički horor, gotsko telo, degeneracija, gotске lokacije.