

A Study of Horror Elements in H. P. Lovecraft's Short Stories of the Cthulhu Mythos

Omeragić, Edin

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Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i
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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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Abstract

Howard Phillips Lovecraft is considered to be one of the most prominent innovators of the horror genre. By taking an analytical look at three short stories pertaining to his Cthulhu Mythos, namely “The Call of Cthulhu”, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” and “The Dunwich Horror”, one can easily see the lengths the author went to in order to facilitate the seemingly simple task of frightening his readership. By carefully rooting his stories in certain horror clichés and even Gothic traditions, as well as being readily aware of literary innovations of the time, such as Ann Radcliffe’s theory of horror and terror and Freud’s theories of the uncanny, Lovecraft seemingly made sure his stories would appeal to audiences both traditional and modern in taste. What made his works stand out from others of its era, however, was the prodigious amount of originality and personality he managed to imbue them with, in the process creating a universe wholly his own and thereby cementing once and for all his capability of combining multiple sources of inspiration in order to produce something truly unique and timeless.

Keywords: horror, Lovecraft, Cthulhu Mythos

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Introduction

Horror as a genre is believed by some to be as old as humanity itself, which is to be expected, given that it relies so heavily on fear as one of our most primal emotions in order to be effective. In the fledgling days of humankind, people were still vastly inexperienced with the surrounding world, not really understanding the principle behind various phenomena such as the weather, for example. They learned purely by experience, noting in particular the difference between pleasant and painful sensations. To the sources of the latter, they attributed various negative qualities intended to ward off, as well as educate, the generations that followed. Thus, they gave birth to the first horror stories which were, as is the case with other stories of the time, believed to be oral in form and mostly didactic in nature (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 21).

It was not until the eighteenth century that horror literature as we know it today got its start, with Horace Walpole’s “The Castle of Otranto” not only being hailed as the first Gothic novel, but also lending its influence to various horror stories that followed, especially in terms of atmosphere, various motifs and supernatural influences (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 27). The turn of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, saw major strides in the popularization of the genre, with a significant number of authors influencing its development. Of these, Howard Phillips Lovecraft was one of the most prominent, seeing how his horror stories preoccupy the minds of even contemporary readers.

It is Lovecraft and his stories that this paper will be focusing its attention on. In particular, its aim is to analyse and exemplify the horror elements which make up three of his short stories belonging to the so-called Cthulhu Mythos, namely “The Call of Cthulhu”, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” and “The Dunwich Horror”, in order to better understand what it is that makes them significant today. To begin with, certain common tropes pertaining to the horror genre will be listed, with special mention being given to the distinction between horror and terror, the uncanny, as well as the distinctive way in which Lovecraft utilises all of the above. Furthermore, elements specific to Lovecraft and his works will be analysed and exemplified, ending with a look at several Gothic elements which can readily be found throughout his works. All of this serves as a corroboration of the thesis that Lovecraft successfully employs several different types of horror elements in order to produce a brand of horror wholly unique to him, with his works having a lasting impact on readers both old and modern.

1. Common Horror Elements

To start with, Lovecraft's main goal over the course of his short stories, as well as the goal of horror fiction in general, is to elicit fear in its reader, which he himself claims is mankind's oldest and strongest emotion ("Supernatural Horror" 21). This is readily apparent from the way he employs various common horror tropes in the process of laying out his stories. First of all, the main source of the horror effect is usually either supernatural or non-supernatural (Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror" 34). Lovecraft flouts this rule by combining both, with the supernatural most often being represented by the existence of otherworldly creatures and the mundane taking place inside the protagonists' minds as they slowly lose their grip on reality. It is this exploration of the degradation of the human psyche that serves to instil fear into the reader. Examples of this can be found in all three aforementioned works. The protagonist of "The Call of Cthulhu", Francis Wayland Thurston, struggles with his own insanity and paranoia by the end of the story, knowing that he has seen and experienced things no mortal man should have:

That was the document I read, and now I have placed it in the tin box beside the bas-relief and the papers of Professor Angell. With it shall go this record of mine—this test of my own sanity, wherein is pieced together that which I hope may never be pieced together again. I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me. But I do not think my life will be long. As my uncle went, as poor Johansen went, so I shall go. I know too much, and the cult still lives. (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 169)

Similarly, the unnamed protagonist of "The Shadow over Innsmouth", later revealed to be named Robert Olmstead in Lovecraft's notes, experiences similar struggles, going so far as to suggest his horrific experiences were nothing but a dream:

I am not even yet willing to say whether what followed was a hideous actuality or only a nightmare hallucination. The later action of the government, after my frantic appeals, would tend to confirm it as a monstrous truth; but could not an hallucination have been repeated under the quasi-hypnotic spell of that ancient, haunted, and shadowed town? (...) Is it not possible that the germ of an actual contagious madness lurks in the depths of that shadow over Innsmouth? Who can be sure of reality after hearing things like the tale of old Zadok Allen? (...) Where

does madness leave off and reality begin? Is it possible that even my latest fear is sheer delusion? (Lovecraft, “Innsmouth” 326-327)

Not even the characters of “The Dunwich Horror” are exempt from this rule, even though the story boasts one of the calmer and more collected protagonists when it comes to Lovecraft’s stories. Henry Armitage, who is introduced in the latter half of the story, visibly struggles to maintain his composure at the sight of the ancient and ominous writings of the Necronomicon. Still, it is the simple townsfolk of the backward Dunwich who, observing the battle between the protagonist and an otherworldly monster, best convey the horror and mental stress brought about by witnessing such an unnatural apparition:

Those without the telescope saw only an instant’s flash of grey cloud—a cloud about the size of a moderately large building—near the top of the mountain. Curtis, who had held the instrument, dropped it with a piercing shriek into the ankle-deep mud of the road. He reeled, and would have crumpled to the ground had not two or three others seized and steadied him. (...) Curtis was past all coherence, and even isolated replies were almost too much for him. (Lovecraft, “Dunwich” 41)

Continuing with the more common elements of horror fiction, in Lovecraft’s works there definitely exists a noticeable overlap of genres, to a degree. This can be seen in the way Inspector Legrasse's investigation resembles a work of detective fiction in “The Call of Cthulhu”, with him methodically gathering clues which eventually lead him to the whereabouts of a secretive cult, as well as the aforementioned introspection of the main character being reminiscent of a psychological study.

1.1. Terror and Horror

When it comes to the distinction between terror and horror, Ann Radcliffe defines the former as a dread taking place before an obscure, indeterminate event with an almost sublime quality. Horror is thus defined as a feeling of disgust after an unambiguous display of atrocity (Radcliffe 151). Again, Lovecraft uses his creative prowess to combine the two, with the characters in “The Call of Cthulhu” experiencing terror in regard to Cthulhu's eventual awakening, as well as recoiling in horror at the more mundane displays of human depravity:

Then the men, having reached a spot where the trees were thinner, came suddenly in sight of the spectacle itself. Four of them reeled, one fainted, and two were

shaken into a frantic cry which the mad cacophony of the orgy fortunately deadened. Legrasse dashed swamp water on the face of the fainting man, and all stood trembling and nearly hypnotised with horror. (Lovecraft, “Cthulhu” 152)

Similarly to the former characters’ terrified reaction to the looming threat of Cthulhu, in “The Dunwich Horror” we find Dr. Armitage increasingly distressed as he peruses the ancient Necronomicon in the hopes of uncovering the true horror that is yet to come:

Morning found Dr. Armitage in a cold sweat of terror and a frenzy of wakeful concentration. He had not left the manuscript all night, but sat at his table under the electric light turning page after page with shaking hands as fast as he could decipher the cryptic text. (...) Toward the middle of the next night he drowsed off in his chair, but soon woke out of a tangle of nightmares almost as hideous as the truths and menaces to man’s existence that he had uncovered. (Lovecraft, “Dunwich” 31-32)

At least part of the horror does eventually manifest itself in the story, two notable examples being the revolting display that is Wilbur Whateley’s corpse, as well as the revelation of the grotesque true form of his hitherto invisible sibling. In “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, the horror manifests itself through a malevolent and repugnant race of sea-dwelling creatures out to conquer the Earth, but it may be argued that the terror is even more pronounced over the course of the work. Throughout it, the protagonist is followed by an unexplainable sense of dread regarding his ancestry, a few side comments relating to his appearance elevating it to even greater heights. Only in the end is its cause revealed, culminating with the fact that Robert Olmstead himself is related to the creatures, him having been aware of it only subconsciously until that moment:

It was in going over the letters and pictures on the Orne side that I began to acquire a kind of terror of my own ancestry. As I have said, my grandmother and uncle Douglas had always disturbed me. Now, years after their passing, I gazed at their pictured faces with a measurably heightened feeling of repulsion and alienation. I could not at first understand the change, but gradually a horrible sort of comparison began to obtrude itself on my unconscious mind despite the steady refusal of my consciousness to admit even the least suspicion of it. (Lovecraft, “Innsmouth” 332)

1.2. The Uncanny

Both Sigmund Freud and Tzvetan Todorov put stress on the literary terror arising from the uncanny and the collapsing of boundaries between what is real and what is not, with Freud defining the uncanny as “that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud 220). Todorov adds to this, referring to “events [that] are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar” (Todorov 46). In “The Call of Cthulhu”, this collapse of our reality grows steadily more pronounced as the story goes on, culminating in the surreal depiction of the resurfacing city of R’lyeh:

Without knowing what futurism is like, Johansen achieved something very close to it when he spoke of the city; for instead of describing any definite structure or building, he dwells only on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces—surfaces too great to belong to any thing right or proper for this earth, and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs. I mention his talk about angles because it suggests something Wilcox had told me of his awful dreams. He had said that the geometry of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours. Now an unlettered seaman felt the same thing whilst gazing at the terrible reality. (Lovecraft, “Cthulhu” 165-166)

This warping of one’s reality is even more readily apparent in “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, beginning with an uneasy and disturbing look at the town’s malformed, non-blinking residents and ending with the protagonist’s mind-shattering realisation that everything he had believed himself to be up to that point has been proven a lie, with an immensely old alien city lurking beneath the depths of the sea, full of other near-humans like him, awaiting his eventual arrival. Finally, the uncanny, in the form of the warped, eerie and incredible can also be found in “The Dunwich Horror”, starting with Wilbur’s abnormal and unnatural growth throughout his childhood and its peak being the point at which his true form is finally revealed. It turns out to be an amalgamation of shapes, all familiar, yet distorted and combined into one impossible being:

It would be trite and not wholly accurate to say that no human pen could describe it, but one may properly say that it could not be vividly visualised by anyone whose ideas of aspect and contour are too closely bound up with the common life-forms of this planet and of the three known dimensions. It was partly human, beyond a doubt, with very man-like hands and head, and the goatish, chinless face had the stamp of the Whateleys upon it. But the torso and lower parts of the body were teratologically fabulous, so that only generous clothing could ever have enabled it to walk on earth unchallenged or uneradicated. Above the waist it was semi-anthropomorphic; though its chest, where the dog's rending paws still rested watchfully, had the leathery, reticulated hide of a crocodile or alligator. The back was piebald with yellow and black, and dimly suggested the squamous covering of certain snakes. Below the waist, though, it was the worst; for here all human resemblance left off and sheer phantasy began. (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 21)

2. Lovecraftian horror

In addition to the more common characteristics of horror literature, Lovecraft utilises certain horror elements which have over time become a staple of his works. The most significant of these is the underlying philosophy of cosmicism, despite the fact that he was neither its originator, nor its sole proponent. It is comprised of several core tenets, the first of which being the lack of any recognizable divine presence (Rawlik). It is true that the protagonists of the three analysed short stories are left to their own devices when faced with unholy horrors and the fact is further reinforced by a quote from “The Shadow over Innsmouth”’s Zadok Allen, calling the people “sheep” who pray to a “Christian heaven as didn’t help ’em none” (Lovecraft, “Innsmouth” 299). The second tenet rests on the fact that the universe, as well as the forces within it, are predominantly indifferent towards humanity. And finally, the human race as a whole is depicted as largely insignificant in the grander scheme of universal existence, it being neither the first, the last, nor a particularly special species (Rawlik).

A crucial part of Lovecraft’s short stories, in particular the ones centered around the Cthulhu Mythos, is its pantheon of otherworldly godlike beings, often called the Old Ones. In the analysed stories, these include Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, Shub-Niggurath, as well as mentions of Dagon and an undescribed creature called a Shoggoth. Of particular note is the fact that their depictions are almost always left to the reader’s imagination. What little is discerned is most often unconventional from a human perspective and is often depicted as “ridiculous” and nonsensical:

“Bigger’n a barn...all made o’ squirmin’ ropes...hull thing sort o’ shaped like a hen’s egg bigger’n anything, with dozens o’ legs like hogsheads that haff shut up when they step... nothin’ solid abaout it—all like jelly, an’ made o’ sep’rit wrigglin’ ropes pushed clost together...great bulgin’ eyes all over it...ten or twenty maouths or trunks a-stickin’ aout all along the sides, big as stovepipes, an’ all a-tossin’ an’ openin’ an’ shuttin’... all grey, with kinder blue or purple rings...an’ Gawd in heaven—that haff face on top!...” (Lovecraft, “Dunwich” 41-42)

Therein lies the bulk of Lovecraftian horror, with the author providing only vague guidelines, leaving the monsters’ actual appearance open to interpretation. They are not meant to have an identifiable, physical form and in this way, a stronger sense of fear is presumed to be invoked. This is coupled with the fact that Lovecraftian horror lacks overt violence, as well as

the common depictions of blood and gore found in other horror works and in this way becomes mostly psychological in nature.

A noticeable trait among Lovecraft's brand of horror stories is his use of sophisticated language, sometimes even to his detriment, being overly complex at times. In a similar fashion, his protagonists are mostly archetypical, sharing sophisticated, well-educated and, above all, rational minds, often being detached from society as a result. It is this rationality that makes them increasingly susceptible to psychological harm throughout the course of the story, since most of them have a harder time coming to terms with something so utterly alien to their understanding of the universe (Rawlik):

And so numerous are the recorded troubles in insane asylums, that only a miracle can have stopped the medical fraternity from noting strange parallelisms and drawing mystified conclusions. A weird bunch of cuttings, all told; and I can at this date scarcely envisage the callous rationalism with which I set them aside. (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 146)

Additionally, mentions of the Necronomicon, the dark and evil secrets held within, various fictitious locations shared between the works, such as the Miskatonic University or Arkham, as well as the looming extraterrestrial threat all help tie these stories in with the overarching Lovecraftian mythos, further helping secure the reader's suspension of disbelief.

3. Gothic Elements

Finally, Lovecraft also uses several Gothic elements in order to amplify the horror effect. Among these is the so-called “false” realism, noteworthy examples of which include the way the author tries to pass the text off as real, seen in the form of a subtitle to “The Call of Cthulhu”, named “Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston”, as well as “The Shadow over Innsmouth” being written in a form akin to that of a diary, with the first person narrator specifying particular dates and quoting newspapers and government officials:

During the winter of 1927–28 officials of the Federal government made a strange and secret investigation of certain conditions in the ancient Massachusetts seaport of Innsmouth. The public first learned of it in February, when a vast series of raids and arrests occurred, followed by the deliberate burning and dynamiting—under suitable precautions—of an enormous number of crumbling, worm-eaten, and supposedly empty houses along the abandoned waterfront. Uninquiring souls let this occurrence pass as one of the major clashes in a spasmodic war on liquor. (Lovecraft, “Innsmouth” 268)

While not strictly Gothic elements, intertextuality and intermediality also add to the realism, noteworthy mentions including William Scott-Elliot’s *Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria*, James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and Margaret Murray’s *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Actual locations such as Boston, Massachusetts, Ipswich, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island also serve to heighten Lovecraft's credibility, even if it is contrary to the author's usual formula.

Usually found in Gothic novels and taken full advantage of by Lovecraft is an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. All three analysed works are pervaded by a threatening feeling, enhanced by the unknown. Characters often see only glimpses of whatever evil-intentioned presence is encroaching upon our domain, exemplified here by a passage from “The Dunwich Horror”: “Now he seemed to sense the close presence of some terrible part of the intruding horror, and to glimpse a hellish advance in the black dominion of the ancient and once passive nightmare” (Lovecraft, “Dunwich” 18). Adding to the Gothic horror atmosphere are the many mysterious deaths and disappearances mentioned throughout each text, with people either being targeted by the Cthulhu cult in “The Call of Cthulhu”, disappearing and then dying in ways that defy explanation after the Dunwich Horror is set loose, or being just one of many vanishing visitors to Innsmouth:

After a time I seemed to hear the stairs and corridors creak at intervals as if with footsteps, and wondered if the other rooms were beginning to fill up. There were no voices, however, and it struck me that there was something subtly furtive about the creaking. I did not like it, and debated whether I had better try to sleep at all. This town had some queer people, and there had undoubtedly been several disappearances. Was this one of those inns where travellers were slain for their money? (Lovecraft, "Innsmouth" 310-311)

Faithful to the Gothic tradition, over the course of the stories both ours and the characters' perceptions are often distorted, especially when faced with the re-emerging city of R'lyeh in "The Call of Cthulhu" or the invisible terror in "The Dunwich Horror". In that way, both the city and the monster's true natures are left ambiguous. Additionally, motifs of darkness, madness, death and decay also permeate the texts and what's more, one can even discern the motif of an ancient prophecy in the form of Wilbur's mother, Lavinia:

Lavinia Whateley had no known husband, but according to the custom of the region made no attempt to disavow the child; concerning the other side of whose ancestry the country folk might—and did—speculate as widely as they chose. On the contrary, she seemed strangely proud of the dark, goatish-looking infant who formed such a contrast to her own sickly and pink-eyed albinism, and was heard to mutter many curious prophecies about its unusual powers and tremendous future. (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 6)

The Old Ones themselves, as well as what is initially considered to be a hereditary disease in "The Shadow over Innsmouth", can be seen to represent a foreboding evil from the past, all examples of common Gothic elements (Harris).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can certainly be said that Lovecraft successfully takes advantage of various elements to the benefit of the effect of horror in all three analysed stories of the Cthulhu Mythos. From general horror trappings, to terror, the uncanny and even the Gothic, coupled with several horror elements of his own making, Lovecraft proved himself time and again as the master of the horror genre, producing a vast array of works that are undoubtedly greater than the sum of their parts. His themes may be considered contemporary even today, since his particular brand of horror unmistakably evokes a certain kind of primal fear which we all seem to carry in the deepest recesses of our minds. Additionally, Lovecraft cleverly chose to deal with realms still left unexplored and foreboding to this day as his subject matter, namely the depths of the sea, space and the human mind, an important and necessary factor in creating the horror effect. After all, in his own words, “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (“Supernatural Horror” 21).

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