Racialist Nightmares

The Lovecraftian Fear of the Other

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1. Introduction

“Much horror literature is predicated upon feelings of insecurity brought about by cultural change, by the idea that our families and communities, our familiar beliefs and cultural forms, are increasingly under assault by forces beyond our control” (Timothy H. Evans 100).

Background

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island and his literary interests and abilities manifested themselves from early on. At the age of two he was reciting poetry, at the age of three he had developed the ability to read, and by the age of six or seven he was writing (S.T. Joshi). In 1897 Lovecraft wrote his earliest surviving work “The Poem of Ulysses” and in 1934 the author completed the last of his stories “The Shadow Out of Time”. During his lifetime, Lovecraft wrote for pulp magazines such as Weird Tales, but it was not until after his death in 1937 that his fiction was collected and published in binding (Neil Gaiman viii). Evans, asserts that, “in reaction to the limitations of traditional genres, Lovecraft created a new, hybrid genre that combined horror, science fiction, and regionalism” (127). According to Philip Smith, Lovecraft’s fiction has been characterized as “horror, Gothic horror, American Gothic, science fiction or (to use Lovecraft’s own terminology) ‘weird fiction’” (830). Smith himself thinks that it would be close to impossible to place the fiction of Lovecraft within an existing genre since all fiction unfolding itself in the Lovecraftian worlds could count as its own sub-genre of all the previously mentioned genres (Ibid). Long after his death Lovecraft has continued to inspire modern time horror fiction writers such as Steven King and Ramsey Campbell. His works has also influenced filmmaker Guillermo Del Toro and rock bands such as Metallica and Black Sabbath (Ibid 837), and this is one of the reasons that make him interesting to research so many years after his death.

Not only should Lovecraft be referred to as a writer of fiction and poetry, he was also an industrious letter writer and because of (or thanks to) these letters, it has been possible to map
out much of the authors inner and private life. Remarkable is the fact that, albeit leaving an extensive amount of fiction behind, Lovecraft never referred to himself as a professional writer. According to himself he was simply a “kind old gentleman from Providence” (Michel Houellebecq 39). In spite of this, Lovecraft’s works and letters display a considerable amount of xenophobia and racialism. This has been observed and commented on by numerous scholars, but this essay aims to show the role of the writer’s own nightmares as inspiration in creating his fiction. According to Brooks Hefner, “the modern weird tale emerged at a watershed moment of nativism in the United States” (654). This moment of nativism includes, amongst other things, the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915, and the anti-immigration Act of Johnson-Reed in 1924 where immigration from, first and foremost, Southern and Eastern Europe was restricted. “Debates about race, immigration, and ‘alien blood’ continued throughout the end of the 1920s” (Ibid). During Lovecraft’s lifetime, the United States went through great changes. According to Betsy L. Nies, immigration to America from southeastern and central Europe during the 1870s and 1880s made up 18.3 percent of total immigration (the remaining 81.7 percent were of Northern European origin). Between 1901 and 1910, immigration from the southeastern and central parts of Europe rose to 70.8 percent. Three quarters of the newcomers established themselves in the northeastern cities, which led to them “living in ethnic enclaves and developing foreign language presses” (7). This made their presence highly visible and reinforced the aspiration amongst eugenicists to keep the immigrants “biologically” separated from Anglo-Saxon Americans “before their differences in belief or custom merged more completely with what eugenicists considered an “old immigrant’ body politic” (Ibid). Lovecraft “saw recently arrived immigrants and independent African Americans as a threat and retained a lifelong concern about miscegenation” (Evans 109).

Lovecraft had strong eugenicist beliefs, which were reaffirmed after he spent two years
living in the largest of these Northeastern cities after marrying Sonia Green in 1924 (Houellebecq 97-99). The following text is an excerpt from a letter written by Lovecraft, during the later part of his time in New York, to his friend, Frank Belknap Long. The choice of words composing this letter captures Lovecraft’s loathing and aversion towards the immigrants living around him:

“The organic things – Italo-semitico-mongolid – inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call’d human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth’s corruption, and slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets or in and out of windows and doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities. They – or the degenerate gelatinous fermentation of which they were composed – seem’d to ooze, seep and trickle thro’ the gaping cracks in the horrible houses… and I thought of some avenue of Cyclopean and unwholesome vats, crammed to the vomiting-point with gangrenous vileness, and about to burst and inundate the world in one leprous cataclysm of semi-fluid rottenness.

From that nightmare of perverse infection I could carry away the memory of any living face. The individually grotesque was lost in the collectively devastating; which left on the eye only the broad, phantasmal linements of the morbid mould of disintegration and decay… a yellow and leering mask with sour, sticky, acid ichors oozing at eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, and abnormally bubbling from monstrous and unbelievable sores at every point…” (Houellebecq 106-107)

From reading this letter, it stands clear that Lovecraft was concerned and disgusted about coming into contact with those perceived by him to be so very different and far from what he consider a proper human to be. According to Houellebecq, prior to living in New York, Lovecraft’s racist thinking did not go further than “what was acceptable within his social class” (105). He firmly believed that Anglo-Saxon Protestants stood higher in the social order than people of other origins, but it was during his second year in the big city that the racism
that so obviously permeates his works appears.

Method & Thesis

First of all there will be a summary of the previous research that has been of interest when finding the thesis statement for this essay. Following will be a section providing the terminology necessary for the reader to be able to follow the analysis. This will include explanations of terms such as racialism, atavism, othering and miscegenation or racial hybridity. Furthermore, this section will give some brief background on research considering dreams and nightmares. However, it might be of importance for the reader to note that albeit discussing dreams, this essay will not draw on psychoanalysis. The third section will be the analysis where first of all, Lovecraft’s own xenophobia will be explained followed by the reading of two Lovecraftian nightmares described by the author himself in letters. Personal letters would not normally count as literature, however, the manner in which these dreams are told is closely resembling Lovecraft’s fictional writing. Thus, I find it appropriate to approach them as one would approach fiction in an analysis. The section will after this continue with readings of the two Lovecraftian short stories, “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Horror at Red Hook” where the reader of this essay will find that features from the dreams are brought in to the narratives.

This essay will thus show that Lovecraft’s xenophobia and racialist believes manifested themselves in his dream worlds and nightmares and that those nightmares, with their exaggerated images, resonated in Lovecraft’s narratives, expressing his fears of the racialized Other.
Previous Research

There have been extensive amounts of research on H.P. Lovecraft and his works. There are periodicals and essays covering everything from semiotics, place names, motifs, uses of tradition, the life of the author, worlds created by the author, inanimate speech, racism, and eugenics. This wide range of research really shows the extent of Lovecraft’s influence on the genres within which he created his works. Some periodicals and dissertations proved to be particularly interesting since they touched on areas similar to that of this essay and could thus provide support for some of the arguments made for this thesis.

“Shadows over Lovecraft: Reactionary Fantasy and Immigrant Eugenics”, article published in *Extrapolation* in 1997 and written by Bennett Lovett-Graff. This article uses the Lovecraftian narrative “The Shadow over Innsmouth” to discuss the authors “attack” on immigration and intra-racial sexuality. The article discusses, not only Lovecraft’s obsession with racial purity, both his own and that of others, but also the author’s “dislike and fear of those immigrants whose racial stocks threatened the purer races of America” (Lovett-Graff 182).

“A last defense against the dark: Folklore, horror, and the uses of tradition in the works of H.P. Lovecraft”, published 2005 in the *Journal of Folklore Research* and written by Timothy H. Evans. This article sets out to examine the conservative Lovecraft’s fear of American culture being lost to scientific developments and extensive immigration. Evans uses Lovecraft’s antiquarian writings as a background when analyzing the author’s fictional writings to show that a desire to preserve “authentic” American traditions was a theme in several Lovecraftian narratives.

“A Thrill of Repulsion: Interpreting Cultural Ideologies in the Early Works of H.P. Lovecraft”, published in 1997 and written by William F. Burns is a dissertation focusing on the thesis that alien and monstrous cultures are represented in a way that reflects Lovecraft’s
own political, social and ideological notions of American society.

“Weird Investigations and Nativist Semiotics in H.P. Lovecraft and Dashiell Hammett” is an article written by Brooks E. Hefner, published in 2014. In this article, Hefner connects the nativist semiotics in Lovecraft’s narratives with contemporary movements of nativism and to the theories of the born criminal or the criminal body. Hefner argues that, “writers like Lovecraft transformed their own nativist sentiments into phantasmagoric nightmares” (657).

In the extensive essay “H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life” first published in 1991, Michel Houellebecq writes about the life of Lovecraft and how his mindset, views, and events taking place around him affected his works. Of particular interest to this essay is the section on Lovecraft’s racism where Houellebecq states that Lovecraft had always been a racist but it was not until he moved to New York “that his racist opinions tuned into a full-fledged racist neurosis” (105).

2. Terminology

The basics of racialism

Tzvetan Todorow describes the term racialism as a “movement of ideas” originating in Western Europe during a period from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century (64). Racialism affirms that there are races amongst the human species and that these can be divided into groupings based on shared characteristics. The idea of racialism also argues that there is “continuity between physical type and character” (Ibid 65). To clarify further racialism believes that there are genetic mental characteristics differentiating the races from each other. Furthermore, there is a hierarchal system placing some races in positions as superior to others. Todorow argues that this idea is contributing to the rejection of the entire human race being unified. He continues by stating that this has an ethnocentric origin which
that the person, scientist, or author presenting such values generally declares his or hers ethnic group as the one on top of the hierarchy (66). This counts for aesthetic features, moral, and intellectual qualities. From this the notion of white supremacy, i.e. placing the white/western cultures at the top of the hierarchy was developed.

The racial or primitive Other

David Theo Goldberg declares that the racial or primitive Other was theorized as a binary opposition to the civilized order of the western societies. Furthermore, the Other, according to Zygmunt Bauman, “The repelling Other is represented as ill-willed or ‘objectively’ harmful in either case threatening to the well-being of the resenting group” (213-214). Leela Gandhi confirms these notions of the Other. She writes that modern rationality has ascribed dangerous Otherness to those deviant from the western norm. She continues by claiming that this fear of alterity, which has its origin in the Enlightenment, has often resulted in attempts to violently repress all signs of cultural otherness or alterity (40). Edward W. Said asserts that in most societies, there are “certain cultural forms” and ideas that hold the authoritative position and that are more influential than others (7). These cultural authorities or ideas are what is called the hegemony. In western societies, the European or white ideals are considered to be hegemonic, thus, the white west has been executing their “European superiority” over, what has been considered to be “Oriental backwardness” (Ibid).

Atavism

Lola Young analyzes how colonial discourse is manifested in texts from the late nineteenth century. She explains the notion of atavism as a white supremacist attitude believing that races such as the African “constituted an earlier stage of human development” (268). This led to them being viewed as more primitive and she continues by declaring that this was often portrayed in literature with references to primitive rituals and primeval swamps (Ibid). Furthermore, she argues that these texts draws on negative connotations of “dirtiness,
ignorance, [and] evil” (Ibid) when describing aspects of non-whiteness.

Xenophobia – The Fear of the Other

According to Thomas J. Curran, xenophobia is “the distrust of strangers because of the fear that they pose a threat to the culture of the natives” (12), and that there is a possibility of xenophobia occurring at any time or place where groups of different ethnicities come in contact with each other. Curran also argues that big changes usually caused distrust of foreigners in the “century of immigration” between 1820-1930, and this is due to xenophobes finding an explanation for all the disruptive changes in, what they considered to be, the threatening foreigners. Xenophobic movements during this period tried to restrict both numbers and nationalities of immigrants to the United States. Tabish Khair states that xenophobia is constructed from an amalgamation of the three elements: “fear, difference and contact/border” (14). Kahir compares the xenophobic fear to ideas of dirt as “matter out of place” (ibid 29), as contact with something that feels misplaced - and dirt such as strands of hair in food or dirty plasters floating in a pool creates feelings of discomfort. Thus, people being in places where they are not “supposed to be” could to some create the same feelings of discomfort.

Miscegenation or Racial Hybridity

As described, racialism builds on the notion that there are distinct species dividing humanity into different races. Justin D. Edwards, has researched racial ambiguities in the American gothic and writes that racist theories “depended on a binarized racial division, implying that whites could read the racial difference inscribed on black bodies” (7). Causing a problem with this binary categorization was hybrid bodies, i.e. humans of mixed race origin. The use of hybrid bodies in popular culture is likely a development from a strong fear of miscegenation and with that the loss of the “original American identity”. It may also be a reaction to the fear of the extinction of the white race, leaving the American population consisting of a mulatto
Dream interpretation is useful when trying to figure out what conceptions the dreamer has of him or herself, others, the world, and of surrounding problems and conflicts. Calvin S. Hall argues that “dreaming is a cognitive process” (273) and that “images of a dream are the embodiment of thoughts” (Ibid 274). He continues by asserting that dreaming could actually be defined simply as a kind of thinking during sleep. Thinking generates ideas and from those ideas conceptions are formed. This would mean that dreaming could be regarded as “the embodiment of conceptions” (Ibid 275). The invisible or abstract conception becomes visible, as images, in dreams. John E. Mack argues that dreams are free from the restrictions of logical thought; thus, they contain an abundance of symbolic expression (86). He continues by asserting that nightmares tend to capture “an individual’s feelings of helplessness in relation to forces within himself and in the outside world that threaten to overwhelm and destroy him” (86), and since the restrictions of logical thought fades during sleep, the things that are frightening in awake life might grow to monstrous hyperboles in the dream world. Nightmares occur for various reasons: however the most common causes are factors such as fears, threats or painful experiences. In the same way that fears are not always legitimate, threats can be insubstantial and still cause as much psychological disturbance for the individual experiencing the “threat” as if they were real.
3. Analysis

The Lovecraftian Xenophobia

At one point, Lovecraft described people who must be assumed to be of mixed race origins as “greasy sneering half-casts” (Houellebecq 106). To say that something is greasy is to say that something is filthy, that it is something one would not like to touch or be close to. It is something that creates feelings of disgust. According to Houellebecq, people close to Lovecraft witnessed that when crossing paths “with members of other races Lovecraft grated his teeth and turned rather pale, but would keep calm” (106). In private correspondences through letters Lovecraft expresses discomfort, concern and disgust about coming into contact with those whom he perceived as genuinely different from him and from his notion of what a proper human should be, notions inevitably based on the western/Protestant white male. In August 1926, he writes to Frank Belknap Long: “The New York Mongoloid problem is beyond calm mention. The city is befouled and accursed—I come away from it with a sense of having been tainted by contact, and long for some solvent of oblivion to wash it out!” (Clark). Seeing and passing those “Mongoloids” on the streets of New York is enough to make him feel unclean and ill at ease. Lovecraft continues this letter by writing that:

“There is here a grave and mighty problem beside which the negro problem is a jest—for in this case we have to deal not with childlike half-gorillas, but with yellow, soulless enemies whose repulsive carcasses house dangerous mental machines warped culturelessly in the single direction of material gain at any cost. I hope the end will be warfare” (Djeli P. Clark).

As previously stated, Lovecraft had to more or less hide in order to regain his serenity as the stress of coping with the existence of these foreign races so geographically close to him
Two Lovecraftian Nightmares

The following material is excerpted from a letter written by Lovecraft to Donald Wandrei in November 1927, and describes one of the author’s nightmares. The dream described is located in “the tiny provincial town of Pompelo, at the foot of the Pyrenees in Hispania Citerior” (Joshi, et al 21) and set during the Roman Republican age. Lovecraft himself is a part of the dream as “a provincial quaestor named L. Caelius Rufus” (Ibid 22). The Romans have colonized the town of Pompelo and the Roman military leaders (Lovecraft included) have gathered at a conference to discuss “a horror that brooded on the hills” (Ibid).

As previously stated, Hall asserts that dreaming could be simplified as thinking during sleep and that “images of a dream are the embodiment of thoughts” (274). This implies that what is abstract and invisible when awake becomes visible and embodied in the dream world. Mack argues that dreams are free from the restrictions of logical thought and that this opens up for a rich symbolic expression (86). This would mean that a person with racialist thoughts, or xenophobic fears could, when dreaming, meet with imagery and embodiments confirming his or hers prejudices or fears. In this particular Lovecraftian nightmare, the white, American body has been exchanged for that of the Roman. There are also the Vascones who are the natives of Pompelo and who has been assimilated to the Roman culture and therefore are not marked as dangerous or evil. In the hills live “the very old folk” (Joshi, et al 22), a group of people who the Romans have not been able to assimilate, thus they are still considered primitive. In addition to this, the letter describing the dream labeled as “wild people” (Ibid 22). Furthermore, they embody the evil and dangerous Other:

“Every spring and autumn they [the very old folk] held the infamous rites on the peaks,
their howlings & altar-fires throwing terror in the villages [...] Townsfolk would disappear just before these nights, & never be heard of again [...] This year the horror was very great, for the people knew that the wrath of the very old folk was upon Pompelo. Three months previously five of the little squint-eyed traders had come down from the hills, & in a market brawl three of them had been killed. The remaining two had gone back wordlessly to their mountains – and this autumn not a single villager had disappeared [...] It was too good to be normal, & the villagers were afraid. For many nights there had been a hollow drumming on the hills’” (Ibid 22).

Young argues that atavism and primitivism are often portrayed with primitive rituals and negative connotations of ignorance and evil when aspects of non-whiteness are described (268). As shown in the quotation above, “the very old folk” are portrayed as atavistic in exactly this manner. They are performing some sort of ritual with, what must be interpreted as, elements of human sacrifice. Innocent villagers are being abducted from the town of Pompelo, never to be heard of again. Furthermore, they are not speaking the common language, but “a choppy language which the Vascones could not understand. One seldom saw them; but a few times a year they sent down little squint-eyed messengers [...] to trade with the merchants by means of gestures...” (Joshi, et al 22). Not only could this be interpreted as primitivism, but also as signs of ignorance. The very old folk seem to be dependent on the Vascones for some sort of trading and yet they have not developed the linguistic means to communicate with them.

Returning to the Roman conference previously mentioned, there is a discussion on whether the army should “stamp out the Sabbath” (Ibid) or not. “Balbutius had carelessly refused, on the ground that the villagers’ fears were empty, & that the loathsome rites of hill folk were of no concern to the Roman People unless our own citizens were menaced” (Ibid). Lovecraft’s Roman character argues that since he has studied the “black forbidden lore” (Ibid), he knows that the very old folk might visit and hurt any of them; eventually this leads to the Romans
deciding to climb the hills. However, “great difficulty was suffered in getting a native guide
to point out the paths up the mountain. Finally a young man named Vercellius, the son of pure
Roman parents, agreed to take us at least past the foothills” (Ibid 24). This implies that the
natives of Pompelo are not brave enough to help the Romans fight the very old folk. Even
though this young man had “lived all his life in that region” (Ibid) he is still of pure Roman
blood. This shows that it takes a man of this strong, superior bloodline to help solve the
dangerous problem of the primitive Other.

As the brave men make their way upwards the hills:

“The air grew perceptibly colder, more suddenly so than is usual at November’s brink, & seemed stirred up by terrible undulations which I [Lovecraft] could not help connecting with the beating of huge wings […] And as the torches died out altogether, there remained above that stricken & shrieking cohort only the noxious & horrible altar-flames on the towering peaks; hellish & red, & now silhouetting the mad, leaping, & colossal forms of such nameless beasts as had never a Phrygian priest or Campanian grandam whispered of in the wildest of furtive tales” (Joshi, et al 24).

Lovecraft was worried about the “threat” of immigrants conquering and destroying the
white United States. His fear of and disbelief in those who are different is manifested in this
dream. This is most clearly visible from the monsters summoned by the very old folk in their
primitive ritual. The monsters are presumably brought out to attack and destroy Pompelo and
its residents. Lovett-Graff asserts that “Lovecraft entered the racial bull market to raise his
Saxon stock to an unassailable position of superiority” (177), and the Romans, who in this
dream are interchangeable with the white body, are the brave ones. What is also clear is that
the Romans care little about the natives of Pompelo. It is not until the Romans begin to fear
for the safety of their own race that they decide on trying to investigate the threat residing in
the mountains. The very old folk embodies the notion of the evil and dangerous Other.
Another nightmare is described in a letter written to Clark Ashton Smith in October 1933. In this dream, a creature or “thing” merges with a human being, creating a fearful hybrid body. The creature is described as a “black, rubbery Thing with bat-wings & a queer face like an owl’s – about the size of a large dog” (Joshi, et al 31). This Thing attacks the officer, who is sitting on his horse, and merges itself into him: “The officer gave one great cry – but the thing was on him. As it touched, It began to coalesce hideously with its victim, so that within a moment there bestrode that great black horse a nameless hybrid in the robe & cap of our leader, but with the accursed, owl-like black face of that malign spawn of the pit” (Ibid). The merging of two bodies so distinctively different from each other is an exaggerated and fearful symbolization of the act of miscegenation or the birth of a hybrid body. Evans asserts that, “(albeit horrified) fascination with hybrid forms indicates that he [Lovecraft] was being pulled reluctantly toward a recognition of cultural mixing in America” (125).

Mack writes in Nightmares and Human Conflict that: “It is possible that fear responses to threatening external stimuli may be based in part upon innate releasing mechanisms rather than upon any prior experience of the individual with the particular danger situation in question” (42). This would mean that Lovecraft would not have had to experience any actual threats from immigrants and non-whites in order for him to fear them. Mack continues by asserting that: “The intense fearfulness that occurs in nightmares may be the result of an exaggerated release of such innate fear responses in relation to dream representations of external threat situations whose potential danger cannot be estimated accurately during sleep” (42). In line with this, Lovecraft fears the Others and their impact on America in real life; this is manifests itself in his dreams, and he ultimately uses these nightmares, his own exaggerated fears, in his writing. In short, because of racialist beliefs combined with social and political movements contemporary to Lovecraft, his nightmares took this particular shape. These
nightmares are, as shown above, illustrations of the xenophobic and racialist worldviews prepossessed by the author. This is also, as now will be demonstrated, notions that Lovecraft brought into his creative process.

“The Call of Cthulhu”

Much in the same manner as in the Roman nightmare, there are in “The Call of Cthulhu” two kinds of non-whites. One category consists of those who are assimilated or somewhat assimilated into the dominant culture (the squatters), and there are those representing pure evil that have refused assimilation (the Chtulhu worshippers). Police Inspector John Raymond Legrasse and his men travel out to “the swamp and lagoon country” (Lovecraft 390) of New Orleans since “the squatters there, mostly primitive but good-natures descendants of Lafitte’s men, were in the grip of stark terror from an unknown thing which had stolen upon them in the night” (Ibid 390-391).

“So a body of twenty police, filling two carriages and an automobile, had set out in the late afternoon with the shivering squatter as a guide. At the end of the passable road they alighted, and for miles splashed on in silence through the terrible cypress woods where day never came. Ugly roots and malignant hanging nooses of Spanish moss beset them, and now and then a pile of dank stones or fragment of a rotting wall intensified by its hint of morbid habitation a depression which every malformed tree and every fungous islet combined create” (Ibid 391).

The boxed quotation above clearly corresponds with Young’s observation on atavism in racialist texts, drawing on connotations of dirtiness and evil when portraying what is

1 French born smuggler who settled in New Orleans in the early twentieth century (Encyklopaedia Britannica)
considered to be primitive non-white civilizations (268). The dirtiness is in the splashing through swamps, the ugly roots, the fungus, and rotting walls creates an imagery of an inhospitable, wet, tenacious, and due to the rot, presumably even odorous environment. The evil is in the habitation being described as morbid with malignant, deadly snares of Spanish moss hanging from the threes. There is even a sense of depression resting over these lands as the police officers make their way through the primeval swamps, towards the evil. When Legrasse and his officers find what they are searching for in the swamps they see and hear the voodoo priests chanting with “vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; and it is terrible to hear the one when the source should yield the other” (Lovecraft 392).

“Animal fury and orgiastic licence here whipped themselves to daemoniac heights by howls and squawking ecstasies that tore and reverberated through those nighted woods like pestilential tempests from the gulf of hell […] the ring of worshippers jumped and roared, the general direction of the mass motion being from left to right in the endless Bacchanal between the ring of bodies and the ring of fire” (Ibid 392).

As shown, the primitive rituals in the Roman nightmare corresponded with Young’s theories on the manifestation of atavism (268). Lovecraft brings his frightful experience from his nightmare into “The Call of Cthulhu”. According to Adam M. McGee, the reason for primitive rituals being used as a symbol of primitivism is that voodoo is an imagined religion loosely based on “African-derived religious practices in the Americas” (238), and that serves “as a venue for the expression of more-or-less undiluted racial anxieties” (232). There is an undeniable sense of primal, animalistic prodigy to the description of the participants of this rite where “void of clothing, this hybrid spawn were braying, bellowing, and writhing about a monstrous ring-shaped bonfire” (Lovecraft 392). George L. Mosse asserts that, “likening the so-called inferior races to animals put them low in the chain of being and, by analogy, robbed
them of their humanity (197). By using an animalistic imagery, Lovecraft fortifies the sense of primitivism surrounding the voodoo priests. Furthermore, the animalistic imagery makes the distinction between the white man and the Other even sharper. Lovett-Graff writes that, to Lovecraft, the immigrants “served as the perfect post-Darwinian symbol of the thin line dividing human being from animal” (184).

Found at the raid on the voodoo ceremony is a statuette that raises the attention of some scientists. The main figure on the sculpture is a hideous monster, but more interesting are the characters on the base of the figurine.

“The characters along the base were equally baffling; and no member present, despite a representation of half the world’s expert learning in this field, could form the least notion of even their remotest linguistic kinship. They, like the subject and material, belonged to something horribly remote and distinct from mankind as we know it; something frightfully suggestive of old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conception have no part” (Lovecraft 389).

None of the “assembled men of science” (Ibid 388) gathered at the annual meeting held by the American Archaeological Society could figure out what the statuette pictured, this despite the group consisting of “a representation of half the world’s expert learning in this field”. It is stated in the story that “No recognised school of sculpture had animated this terrible object” (Ibid). The event is, as previously stated, hosted by the American Archaeological Society and is held in the town of St. Louis, Missouri, i.e. the western world. Only two of the men present at the investigation of the statuette are mentioned by name. Those are: “George Gammel Angell, Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages in Brown University” (Ibid 382), who is also the late uncle of the narrator, and “William Channing Webb, Professor of Anthropology in Princeton University” (Ibid 389). However, it is most likely that the other men present were westerners as well. This can be expected since it has been stated that “it seemed self-evident
to [Lovecraft] that Anglo-Saxon Protestants were entitled to the highest positions within the social order; as to other races […] he only felt a distant and benevolent disdain towards them”, this is what later, as previously mentioned, led to “hatred, disgust, and fear” (Houellebecq 105). The notion of what is the world in this particular circumstance, as illustrated, differs from what is usually meant when using the term. In Lovecraft’s narrative, the world is the narrow concept of the white western civilization and the collected knowledge at the annual meeting held by the American Archaeological Society is the collected knowledge of what is affecting the white western societies. As stated by Said, in most societies, there are “certain cultural forms” and ideas that hold the authoritative position and that are more influential than others (7). The statuette and its baffling characters along the base belong to some other culture and therefore they are unclassifiable by any sort of western classification. “They, like the subject and material, belonged to something horribly remote and distinct from mankind as we know it” (Lovecraft, 389). Furthermore, this corresponds to what is meant by “no recognised school of sculpture”. Similar to this, there is in the Lovecraftian narrative “Dagon”, the finding of a monolith with strange and confusing inscriptions. Burns, who analyzes this story, finds that the inscriptions are confusing to the protagonist of “Dagon” since they “represent wholly different patterns of life and communication … he cannot ‘read’ the cultural significance behind the characters because they do not have the same ideological place in his environment that they do in the environment in which the artifact was produced” (25). Thus, “no recognised school of sculpture” simply means no school of sculpture recognized and categorized by western culture. This means that it is categorized as Other, and that makes it frightening.
“The Horror at Red Hook”

“‘Oh friend and companion of night, thou who rejoicest in the baying of dogs and spilt blood, who wanderest in the midst of shades among the tombs, who longest for blood and bringest terror to mortals, Gorgo, Mormo, thousand-faced moon, look favourably on our sacrifices!’” (Lovecraft 354)

This Lovecraftian short story is enacted in “the Red Hook section of Brooklyn” (Lovecraft 336), New York which has been infected by “a horror beyond all human conception – a horror of houses and blocks and cities leprous and cancerous with evil dragged from elder worlds” (Ibid). The horror seems to have been evoked by the immigrants “flooding Red Hook in increasing numbers; entering through some marine conspiracy unreached by revenue officers and harbour police, overrunning Parker Place and rapidly spreading up the hill, and welcomed with curious fraternalism by the other assorted denizens of the region” (Ibid 342).

“The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another” (Ibid 338). What was once a place “with clear-eyed mariners on the lower streets and homes of taste and substance where the larger houses line the hill” (Ibid) is now a district “of old brick slums and seas of dark, subtle faces a thing of nightmare and eldritch portent” (Ibid 337), where buildings are mysteriously falling apart and strange noises and screams are to be heard coming from the area. This is a clear allusion to the increased immigration as described by Nies in the introduction of this essay. Evans argues that there is a link “between urban decay and immigration, and by implication between historic preservation and anti-immigrant sentiment, runs through Lovecraft’s writings” (109).

Much in the same manner as in the first nightmare presented, the portrayal of the Other in “The Horror at Red Hook” is corresponding to the theory presented by Bauman, arguing that “the repelling Other is represented as ill-willed or ‘objectively’ harmful in either case threatening to the well-being of the resenting group” (213-214). Furthermore, the notions
presented by Gandhi about dangerous Otherness ascribed from those nonconforming to the white western norm. The Others (the immigrants) of this narrative are presented as ill-willed, harmful, and dangerous since they are on a mission to conquer the western (white) societies. Lovett-Graff writes that, “Lovecraft cannot conceal […] his clear dislike and fear of those immigrants whose racial stocks threatened the purer races of America” (182). The Others are ill-willed, harmful, and dangerous since they stop at nothing to reach their goals.

As recognized from the previously described nightmare and from “The Call of Cthulhu”, the Others of this short story are worshippers of alternative Gods (in this particular case it is the Devil). There are rituals with “strange cries and chants and prancing of feet filtering out from these nocturnal rites” (Lovecraft 341). The immigrants are explained to be “the heirs of some shocking and primordial tradition; the sharers of debased and broken scraps from cults and ceremonies older than mankind. Their coherence and definiteness suggested it, and it shewed in the singular suspicion of order which lurked behind their squalid disorder” (339). They “descended from dark religions antedating the Aryan world” (339).

“Here cosmic sin had entered, and festered by unhallowed rites had commenced the grinning march of dead that was to rot us all to fungous abnormalities too hideous for the grave’s holding. “Satan here held his Babylonish court, and in the blood of stainless childhood the leprous limbs of phosphorescent Lilith were laved. Incubi and succubae howled praise to Hecate, and headless mooncalves bleated to the Magna Mater. Goats leaped to the sound of thin accursed flutes, and aegipans chased endlessly after misshapen fauns over rocks twisted like swollen toads. Moloch and Ashtaroth were not absent; for in this quintessence of all damnation the bounds of consciousness were let down, and man’s fancy lay open to vistas of every realm of horror and every forbidden dimension of that evil had power to mould. The world and Nature were helpless against such assaults from unsealed wells of night, nor could any sign or prayer check the Walpurgis-riot of horror which ad come when sage with the hateful key had stumbled on a horde with the locked and brimming coffer of transmitted deamon-lore” (349).
What is of interest to this aspect from the long boxed quotation above is, not only the fact that it is a presentation of a ritual, but the mentioning of the demons Incubi and Succubae. According to clinical psychologist and sleep researcher John Cline, Incubi (Incubus) and succubae (Succubus) are both nocturnal demons that impregnate their female victims whilst they are sleeping, this causing a woman “to give birth to a demonic child” (Cline). This is an intelligible symbolization of miscegenation or racial hybridity, which is made even more evident further into the story where following finding is made.

“The walls were lined with small cells, in seventeen of which — hideous to relate — solitary prisoners in a state of complete idiocy were found chained, including four mothers with infants of disturbingly strange appearance. These infants died soon after exposure to the light; a circumstance which the doctors thought rather merciful” (Lovecraft 352).

The evil and dangerous Others of Red Hook have been abducting the women impregnated by Incubi and kept them alive in cells to nurture the demonic children. The purpose of this is not disclosed in the story but it is, as stated, likely that they symbolize the result of inter-racial breeding between pure whites women and evil non-whites. Edwards asserts that it was a common belief that children of miscegenation were believed to suffer “from more sickness and disease than a product of pure racial stock” (6), which also could mean being born with deformations. Nor did the infants survive when exposed to the sun, which also indicates that they were sickly in some way. In any case, this is clearly a manifestation of the notion that the blood of “whites” and “non-whites” should not be unified, which is also seen in the second nightmare described. Lovecraft’s fear of miscegenation and what this might do to his America finds an outlet in his nightmares and narratives in the form of half human – half monster, or non-human – non-beast constellations. They are evil, deformed and savage creatures with monstrous dangerosity and some of them have semi-human features. Evans asserts that
Lovecraft’s research and “fiction grew out of his horror at the disintegration of American culture in the face of moral, racial, and scientific chaos (100)”. In addition to this, “what could he tell the prosaic of the antique witcheries and grotesque marvels discernible to sensitive eyes amidst the poison cauldron where all the varied dregs of unwholesome ages mix their venom and perpetuate their obscene terrors?” (Lovecraft 337). It stands clear that the “varied dregs” mixing their venom also refers to miscegenation where the “obscene terrors” refers to the hybrid children coming out of this.

Lovecraft exaggerated “the threatening image of the Other while fantasizing his own beleaguered but heroic position if the fight for racial and cultural purity” (Lovett-Graff 179). Finally, Burns argues that, “it is through the Other, a perceived inferior race and culture, that the dominant culture (European/American white male generally) can define its authority, significance, and power through repression and domination” (24). He continues by asserting that this is one of the reasons for Lovecraft’s usage of the racial or cultural other in his narratives.

4. Summary & Conclusion

Lovecraft lived and operated midst the century of immigration, a time of political and social movements working to restrict the immigration to the United States. The author himself as made clear by this essay, held xenophobic and racialist views. Throughout history, the white western societies have held the cultural hegemony. Thus, what is not considered as belonging within that narrow framework is considered to be strange or Other. Lovecraft did fear the Others and their impact on America; this manifested itself in his dreams, and he ultimately uses these nightmares, his own exaggerated fears, in his writing. In short, because of xenophobic and racialist beliefs combined with social and political movements contemporary
to Lovecraft, his nightmares took this particular shape. These nightmares are, as shown above, illustrations of the xenophobic and racialist worldviews prepossessed by the author.

As stated on numerous occasions throughout this essay, during the two-year stay in New York between the years of 1924-1926, Lovecraft’s xenophobia became almost frantic. This is not only clearly visible through his private letters from which it stands clear that the author struggles with feelings of discomfort, concern and disgust about coming into contact with those perceived by him to be so very different and far from what he considers a proper human to be. Those notions are inevitably based solely on the western/protestant white male being the measure or norm. All of this manifested itself in Lovecraft’s dream worlds as exaggerated xenophobic images of frightening monstrosity where the “Other” is trying to conquer the western world. Lovecraft’s Other is purely evil, a coward, or merges its body onto innocent people. This essay has shown that Lovecraft’s xenophobia manifested itself in his dream worlds and nightmares and that those nightmares, with their exaggerated images, resonated in Lovecraft’s narratives, expressing his fear of the Other.

In the Lovecraftian short story “The Call of Cthulhu” are two categories of non-whites to be found. There are those who have allowed themselves to be assimilated and there are those who have resisted the influences of the western world. This can be directly connected to the Vascones and the very old folk of the Roman nightmare. The conclusion of this is that those who resist assimilation are considered to be, or portrayed as dangerous and evil. However, this connection can merely be drawn to “The Horror at Red Hook” where all non-whites and immigrants are portrayed as evil. Young argues that primitive rituals are common when portraying atavism or primitivism. Lovecraft’s Roman nightmare contains this and so are both of the analyzed short stories. The second nightmare described seems to deal with miscegenation, which reoccur in “The horror at Red Hook” with the nocturnal demons Incubi and Succubae and the demonic and deformed infants.
As shown, Lovecraft’s xenophobia and racialist beliefs manifested themselves in his dream worlds and nightmares and that those nightmares, with their exaggerated images, resonated in Lovecraft’s narratives, expressing his fears of the racialized Other.

The most challenging part when writing this essay was to sort out the enormous amounts of sources available on the subject of race. There was always a new book or article addressing a new angle that seemed useful and this made it difficult to limit the aspects for this research. Another thing that proved itself challenging was to find an aspect somewhat neglected by previous researchers since the subject has been written about so many times. By connecting Lovecraft’s work to his nightmares this essay could provide some new ideas to the field of study. For future research one could go even deeper into Lovecraft’s dream worlds collecting a more extensive amount of letters where the nightmares are written down using psychoanalysis. Other areas that might be of interest to continue with might be Lovecraft’s hatred of liberated women.
5. Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


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