



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Fully Human

Gender Conflict in Two Tales by H.P. Lovecraft

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í Ensku

Sindri Eldon

Maí 2012

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Leiðbeinandi: Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir**Maí 2012****Overview**

An analysis of gender conflict and the opposing natures of the female and the male in two important works by Howard Phillips Lovecraft, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and “The Thing on the Doorstep.”

A brief summation of Lovecraft and his views on several pertinent topics, namely religion, society and women, the paper then delves into the two stories in a piecemeal fashion. Examined with particular interest are the parallels between how culture suppresses nature and how male society represses female identity; examples of both can be found in both tales. Also included are discussions on cognitive dissonance, the nature of the foreign and the alien in Lovecraft’s stories, misogyny, animals, feminism and atavism, all of which have roles to play in Lovecraft’s horror.

The conclusions expand the above into broader categorizations of Lovecraft’s work, and further clarify and discuss the overarching themes of the main body.

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Introduction

She wanted to be a man – to be fully human – that was why she got hold of him.

She had sensed the mixture of fine-wrought brain and weak will in him. Some day she would crowd him out and disappear with his body – disappear to become a great magician like her father and leave him marooned in that female shell that wasn't even quite human. (636)

Granted, the above quote is taken slightly out of context, but the significance still carries through: Howard Phillips Lovecraft had written roughly ninety stories of varying length over a thirty-five year long career when he penned “The Thing On The Doorstep” in 1933 (“Lovecraft’s Fiction – Chronological Order”), and a significant female character had yet to appear. When one finally did, in the above tale, she not only turned out to be a manipulative witch with designs of possessing her luckless young husband’s body due to the impure inferiority of her own, but also that her soul was not truly hers at all, but that of her father, a long-dead wizard patriarch that willingly offered members of his township as breeding material for a race of anthropomorphic fish-people in exchange for gold, jewels and good fishing. As two relatively common themes in his work, there is nothing inherently extraordinary about Lovecraft’s depiction of unwholesome interbreeding and bodily possession, but it is the way it is presented and the form it takes in “The Thing On The Doorstep” that grips one as strikingly misogynistic.

“The Thing On The Doorstep” is directly related to, and indeed almost a sequel to an earlier Lovecraft yarn, the more seminal “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” (1931) where the reader is first introduced to the ominous sea port Innsmouth and its surly, mercurial inhabitants. The narrator uncovers the scheme detailed above in a town

seemingly devoid of women, except for those so malformed by their ichthyian blood that they have to constantly remain behind the shuttered windows of their houses.

The story is, inarguably, not as laden with Freudian issues as its sequel is. However, Lovecraft's fear of the body, along with the particulars of the protagonist's quest, show an aversion to nature, both in a general sense and to his own inner nature. Nature is often tied with the feminine, with culture the opposing, masculine force; this reading, coupled with the tale's association of bad breeding with decline and malignancy, ensures a sense of gynophobia that wafts off the yarn as strongly as the smell of fish that permanently chokes the Innsmouth air.

By reading these stories as a couplet, by examining, comparing and likening them to one another, one can fully examine and appreciate the extent of the constant and inevitable conflict between male and female. Also, once one acknowledges the two stories as quintessential Lovecraft, with prime examples of his most common themes and motifs, a deeper analysis of the man's works becomes apparent.

1: Lovecraft

Although overlooked in his lifetime, H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) has come to represent various things to various people in the last century or so. His work, the bulk of which was written in the 1920s and '30s, has inspired that of modern horror writing giants such as Stephen King (King) and Neil Gaiman (Gaiman), it has bred an entire genre of horror writing, dubbed the Cthulhu Mythos by his somewhat controversial literary heir August Derleth, with respected authors Brian Lumley (Lumley) and Ramsey Campbell

(Campbell) numbering among the more notable contributors, and has spawned several highly successful games, both traditional and computer-based.

Other writers, such as Edmund Wilson and Peter Straub, dismiss him as “inferior” and a “hack” (Miller), though psychologist Dirk Mosig notes that when Wilson criticized Lovecraft, he “at the same time practically indicted the entire fantasy genre. Serious literature must deal with human problems and situations – love, hate, peace, war, agony, ecstasy – and not with the unreal or the impossible. It is this prejudice, in part, which has prevented serious consideration of Lovecraft’s output” (16).

Certainly, his work invites contradictory opinions, by being fairly contradictory in nature itself. It is almost always academic and documentarian in style, being frequently narrated by protagonists who are professors or students, and yet concerns utterly fantastical subjects. Lovecraft’s fiction is impeccably detailed, with latitude and longitude given for locations. All journeys are thoroughly documented, even when large portions of them are pure scenery. And yet, the core of his creations, the monsters, cities and ancient alien beings remain elusive and mysterious, only to be fully detailed by his successors, most notably August Derleth (Derleth). The protagonists and characters of Lovecraft’s fiction very often have completely fleshed out back-stories, birthplaces, schools, etc., yet the actual plots of the stories are wafer-thin, predictable and generally haphazard in nature.

Perhaps the most striking contradictions in Lovecraft’s work stem from his treatment of different ethnicities and cultures, ranging from the awestruck fascination of the titular location in “Under the Pyramids,” to the abject disgust inherent in “The Horror at Red Hook” (1925):

[...] up to recent years there had certainly survived among peasants and furtive folk a frightful and clandestine system of assemblies and orgies descended from dark religions antedating the Aryan world [...] these hellish vestiges of old Turanian-Asiatic magic and fertility-cults [...] he frequently wondered how much older and how much blacker than the very worst of the muttered tales some of them might really be. (Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook" 152)

This is a brief portrait of the Orient and the Old World that becomes downright Conradian in its vitriolic distaste and vilification, and seems to indicate that Lovecraft equates that which predates western society with antiquated, barbaric prehistory and forces of nature (this theme is discussed in somewhat more detail in Section 2: "The Shadow Over Innsmouth").

Also, one can conclude from the above excerpt that Lovecraft had something of a disdain for other cultures, but his lack of regard seemed to spur him into delving into them, utilizing that fear and disgust to fuel his writing, much as he seems to have done with seafood, which he loathed with a passion (Jones 834). Sea-creatures form the basis for some of his most famous monsters, including Cthulhu in "The Call Of Cthulhu," (1926) and the Elder Things and Shoggoths in "At The Mountains Of Madness," (1931) and, of course, the worshippers of Dagon in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth."

But what of Lovecraft's feelings toward women? Biographically, he was briefly married, and seems to have made a decent husband ("H.P. Lovecraft Misconceptions"), if an inattentive one, which is what led to the marriage's end. He was almost entirely raised

by women, namely his “neurotic and overprotective mother,” (Mosig 13) whom he once called “the only person who thoroughly understood [him]” (Jones 836), and, after her death, his two aunts.

Mosig, in his autobiographic interpretation of Lovecraft’s 1921 tale “The Outsider,” paints a somewhat dark picture of Lovecraft’s relationship with his “monstrous mother” (59):

Sarah Phillips Lovecraft, who died a diagnosed psychotic [in 1921], deeply resented her husband’s general paresis, a hatred that was displaced to the child, only to produce deep guilt feelings and anxiety in the troubled woman. The reaction formation which followed her inability to cope with her neurotic and moral anxiety resulted in the compulsive overprotection that characterized her relationship with the child. But her deep hostility toward her son occasionally found expression through her defenses [sic], as when she succeeded in making him feel ugly and distorted (a feeling that he was never able to overcome completely) – all the while rationalizing that she was doing this for the child’s own good, keeping him close to her, under her “protection,” and away from other children and the rest of the world that might try to “hurt” him. (57)

Similar sentiments are offered in L. Sprague de Camp’s biography of Lovecraft, which states that Lovecraft “showed adolescent bumptiousness, prejudices, dogmatism and affectations, and adolescent timidity towards new human contacts and relationships”

(quoted in Jones 836). Could the poor relations detailed above have resulted in some kind of permanent mistrust of women, which then manifested in Lovecraft's work?

Women certainly remain a consistently un-touched upon subject in not only his fiction, but also his ample documented correspondence, in which he neglects to mention much of his wife, Sonia. This can certainly be accounted for by a simple willingness to keep the topics of his letters professional, as most of them were to fellow writers, but the scarcity of women in his stories is glaring. Although finding a good example of an omission of anything is problematic, for obvious reasons, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" will suit our purposes well, as it ties in with a number of other topics discussed here, as well as being set in an environment that should, at the very least, contain an even number of men and women.

2: "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"

2.1: Summary

"The Shadow Over Innsmouth" begins with an unnamed narrator, speaking in first-person and past tense, telling us that newspapers have reported strange goings-on in the eponymous township: the FBI conducted a full-scale raid of the entire town, and a military submarine fired missiles into a reef not far from its shore. The narrator then announces that he knows the truth behind the strange reports, and delves into the story of his first and only visit to Innsmouth.

He was on a coming-of-age tour – "sightseeing, antiquarian and genealogical" – of New England, and in Newburyport on his way to Arkham. Balking at the train fare between the two towns, the ticket-agent at the stall suggests a bus that goes twice daily

from Newburyport to Arkham, stopping at Innsmouth. As the ticket-agent begins to ramble about Innsmouth, the narrator becomes sufficiently interested in the town to decide to stop there on the way, intending to take the morning bus there, do some sightseeing, and then catch the evening bus to Arkham.

He takes the bus, and does his sightseeing, receiving more information about the town from a young cashier and the town drunkard, Zadok Allen. Pieced together, the three narratives – the ticket-agent’s, the cashier’s and the drunkard’s – tell the real tale of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” the history of the town.

Apparently, at some point in the early nineteenth century, an Innsmouth sailor named Obed Marsh returned from a Pacific journey with a foreign wife and the dark, magical secrets of a tribe of islanders he encountered. When Innsmouth fell on hard times, Marsh used the islanders’ magic to make a pact with sapient, anthropomorphic amphibians known only as the Deep Ones, who inhabit Y’ha-nthlei, an underwater city located in the aforementioned reef.

The pact necessitates that the inhabitants of Innsmouth offer their young as breeding stock in exchange for gold, plentiful fish and, most significantly, eternal life. The townspeople eventually become interbred with the Deep Ones to such an extent that most of the population have the “Innsmouth look,” a certain set of facial characteristics that make them resemble fish. As they age, they become so deformed that they must be concealed in their houses, and eventually become Deep Ones themselves, and take to the water, where they become immortal.

Returning to the present day, the villagers trap the narrator in the town and attempt to apprehend him in the middle of the night, ostensibly because he knows too

much. Through his own ingenuity, he escapes to nearby Rowley, and informs the authorities, who subsequently raid the town. The narrator, however, discovers that he is in fact a descendant of Obed Marsh, and can see the Innsmouth look in himself; he has begun to transform. He ends the tale by swearing his allegiance to the Deep Ones, and pledges to free his cousin, a more transformed Deep One hybrid who has been locked in a mental institution.

2.2: The War on Nature

The introduction and preamble to “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” is notable for being one of very few works in Lovecraft’s tales that involves the large-scale intervention of an official authority – the FBI, to be specific - in thwarting the designs of the Old Ones, Lovecraft’s fictional pantheon of ancient deities that form the primary antagonists in his work. Generally, Human authorities were either powerless to hinder any of their machinations (i.e. the local police in “The Dunwich Horror,” (1928) or “The Horror At Red Hook’s” policeman protagonist, Inspector Legrasse in “The Call Of Cthulhu”) or were simply absent completely (“The Shunned House,” (1924) “The Dreams In The Witch-House,” (1932) “The Colour Out Of Space” (1927)).

This military intervention, despite the story’s final revelation of its ineffectiveness, is quite powerful (“[Y’ha-nthlei] was hurt, but not destroyed”) (553), placing it seemingly at odds with Lovecraft’s normal depiction of Humanity as powerless to stop the Old Ones. Lovecraft himself has been categorized as a “mechanistic materialist” (Mosig 14) who believed the universe, and thereby nature, functioned automatically and completely indifferently to human actions or desires, and the Old Ones

can be seen as a manifestation of that nature. They are certainly not inherently malevolent or even belligerent towards humanity, but are rather “inimical to man, in the same way that man would be inimical to ants, should these get in his way” (Mosig 24).

Cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s 1972 essay “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” makes a strong case for its titular argument:

woman is [. . .] identified with [. . .] something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is “nature” in the most generalized sense. Every culture, or, generically, “culture,” is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature. (72)

This is a crucial argument to any feminist reading of Lovecraft, or indeed any number of books, stories and films where man is involved in a struggle against nature. Instead of becoming a simple struggle to survive against the elements, what we are really seeing is the male-oriented world of culture is striving to impose itself on nature. As

Ortner shows us, the female of the species has much closer ties to nature, and the latter becomes a representation of the former.

The events described at the outset of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” are merely a particularly forceful battle in the ongoing campaign of the male will to assert dominance and regulation over an older, more natural, more ‘female’ force, and. The phallic nature of the weapon used against the Deep Ones – a “deep-diving submarine that discharged torpedoes downwards in the marine abyss” (504) – is a particularly potent symbol of this, with culture quite literally subduing nature by penetrating the earth herself.

Thus we bear witness to, in a very literal sense, a battle where culture suppresses nature with brute force. Furthermore, if we place the assault on Y’ha-nthlei into context with the narrator’s ancestry, it is really an assault on his origins, a womb-like place that welcomes him and his brethren back to its embrace, once their terrestrial existence reaches an end. If Y’ha-nthlei had been destroyed, it would have been denying the narrator his fate, to “swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many columned Y’ha-nthlei” (554).

With its life-giving powers and subversion of culture, as well as its darkly visceral, aquatic location, Y’ha-nthlei begins to resemble a feminine entity or a womb. “Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation [sic] has the burden of subduing,” writes noted philosopher and literary critic Julie Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror* (77). Thus, the “patrilineal” society of the surface world must “subdue” Y’ha-nthlei and its “generative power.”

2.3: A Soldier of Culture

The anonymous narrator of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” has a particular interest in genealogy, which was a keen interest of Lovecraft’s own. He was a keen student of the now-debunked science of eugenics, and indeed, the above-mentioned tendency of discrimination against non-whites was likely the product of a firm belief in the superiority of good breeding. This belief has been rather petulantly dismissed by journalist Laura Miller as “the kind of comforting fantasy common in old families who have nothing left to distinguish themselves but their breeding,” exposing Lovecraft as a hypocrite. “[I]t’s inexcusable in someone who claimed to place his ultimate faith in science,” she writes, but this attitude seems dismissive of the fact that in Lovecraft’s time, eugenics *was* a science.

Furthermore, not in a single Lovecraft tale does “pure breeding” emerge victorious; indeed, if anything, he firmly depicts it as doomed to failure. Even when non-Humans, namely the Elder Things of “At the Mountains of Madness,” make attempts at breeding their servant race, the amorphous Shoggoths, the experiment leads to their ruin.

Nevertheless, the narrator of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is firmly established as a sort of ‘cultural soldier’ by his main interests, genealogy, architecture and history; his encounter with Innsmouth’s interbreeding, decrepit houses and concealed history thereby make fitting objectives for him. The inhabitants work actively to protect Innsmouth’s secrets and thwart the aims of genealogy and history, those aims being to completely and truthfully document what has transpired in Innsmouth.

Furthermore, the fact that his interests are so closely analogous to the writer’s own could be interpreted as Lovecraft setting himself up as a doomed ‘soldier of culture,’

perennially throwing himself at the persistent threats of interbreeding and immigration. By positioning indecipherable foreignness and the unfamiliar as the primary antagonistic forces in his work, and exaggerating them to almost hyperbolic extremes, Lovecraft terrorizes readers with the threat of the total breakdown of the system they inhabit and function within, and conditions them to not only fear, but positively loathe the unknown. The fact that most of his protagonists are doomed only heightens the plight of Lovecraft's beloved civilization.

When coupled with Ortner's parable, the rot and taint that is corrupting civilization in Lovecraft's work can be seen as a manifestation of the male fear of a disorderly, whimsical, 'feminine' world. This is a place where external manifestations of any kind, broadly categorized as "culture," become meaningless, and man is reduced to his base values.

2.4: Into the Unknown

The narrator's immediate increase of interest in Innsmouth when he hears of its inaccessibility and secretiveness is what eventually leads to his downfall, or rather, the discovery that his downfall is inevitable. This 'curiosity-killed-the-cat' motif can be found in much of Lovecraft's work, most notably "The Whisperer in Darkness," "The Call of Cthulhu" and "At the Mountains of Madness," where the narrators all discover facts that shock and horrify them, very possibly resulting in their doom, and the story framing becomes that of a warning to others. Mosig interprets this as another manifestation of Lovecraft's belief that the nature of the universe is simply not for human

beings to understand, in a sort of “to-know-the-face-of-God-is-to-know-madness” effect that frequently causes insanity in Lovecraft’s characters:

His outlook was cosmic; his was not an anthropocentered [sic] universe. The cosmos as portrayed in his stories is vast and incomprehensible, and all the more terrifying due to its essential *indifference* to the trivial accident of organic life, including man [...]. The quintessence of his work is best expressed in his own words: “All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large [...]. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. Only the human scenes must have human qualities. *These* must be handled with unsparing *realism* (*not* catchpenny *romanticism*), but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown – the shadow-haunted *Outside* – we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold.” (Mosig 15)

With this, Mosig paints a clear picture of Lovecraft’s belief, that man was simply not meant to know the larger truths of the universe. It is beyond his ability to even try, lest he suffer the consequences of trying to impose order on disorder. He puts his mind in combat with the chaos of nature, only to have his mind unravel, and he becomes part of the chaos. Nature always triumphs over culture.

Mosig goes on to elaborate further, saying that the majority of the horror effect in Lovecraft's work is derived from what psychologist Leon Festinger would later call 'cognitive dissonance,' the "harsh, grating, inharmonious feeling resulting from psychological inconsistencies, i.e., from a clash or conflict between two ideas or between beliefs and behavior [sic]" (Mosig 81). The two beliefs in question would be: a) the belief in an androcentric universe where humans have importance and purpose, and b) the discovery that the universe is in fact completely indifferent to mankind and its fate, and that there are immensely powerful and ancient intelligences in it that are equally indifferent to us.

Another theory than the one described in the above paragraph, is that trying to wrap one's head around the cosmic truths presented by the malevolent knowledge in Lovecraft's work is, to continue with the phallic symbolism, a bit like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Attempting to impose a grid, or culture, on the disordered morass of nature is naturally impossible, and leaves the mind reeling, as a "complete awareness of reality would almost certainly result in mental disintegration and psychosis" (Mosig 32). From a feminist perspective, this image could recall the stereotypical male misogynist perception of the female mind being a cluttered mishmash of hormone-driven urges that is as incapable of logical thought as it is impossible to logically predict or comprehend. It could even reflect the male disdain, fear and disgust of menstruation, another manifestation of nature that was, in Lovecraft's day at least, uncontrollable by culture.

2.5: The Ticket-Agent's Monologue

Culture's tenuous grip on the town of Innsmouth is similarly slipping, as is revealed in our remarkably thorough introduction to Innsmouth. This introduction is obtained through the monologue of the Newburyport ticket-agent, whom the narrator converses with while trying to decide whether or not to visit the decrepit town. A number of important points are introduced in the monologue, beginning with the town's very location, "down at the mouth of the Manuxet [river]." It is queerly vaginal somehow, and suggestive of some kind of coitus between man and nature.

Innsmouth's status as a port being reclaimed by nature is cemented by the ticket-agent, as he describes it as a place that was "almost a city," that the railway line there was "given up years ago," and that it has "no business to speak of except fishing and lobstering [sic]" (506). In other words, the town is reliant on nature to survive, and has been cut off from culture, a status that foreshadows the later revelations that Innsmouth is completely under the control of the Deep Ones. Nature corrupts, it would seem, and absolute nature corrupts absolutely.

When examined deeper, however, the men who are corrupted by the dark forces at work in his stories (the cultists in "The Call of Cthulhu," Wizard Whateley in "The Dunwich Horror," the titular protagonist of "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" and, of course, our doomed narrator in "The Shadow over Innsmouth," to name but a few) are all corrupted by other cultures. This corruption is perhaps traceable to Lovecraft's abovementioned xenophobia, which again rears its ugly head in the ticket-agent's monologue, as he describes how he "[hates] those Innsmouth folks [himself]," and implies their ancestry can be traced to "what a lot of our New England ships used to have

to do with queer ports in Africa, Asia, the South Seas,” “what queer kinds of people they sometimes brought back with ‘em”, namely “the Salem man that come home with a Chinese wife” (507).

It is interesting that not only the anonymous Salem man, but also a far more important character, the father of Obed Marsh, seems to have married “some kind of foreigner – they say a South Sea islander.” This woman became Obed’s mother, and it is strongly insinuated that it was she who originally taught Obed how to summon the Deep Ones. In other words, she lay at the root of Innsmouth’s ‘problems,’ presumably instilling in Obed his irreverent attitude toward his fellow townspeople’s religiosity (524).

This is an inverted precursor to what was to become one of horror’s bigger clichés: the concept of the white woman being abducted by the foreign monsters/aliens/tribesmen, and consequently must be rescued. Here, white men do the abducting, only to have the tables turned on them by the evil magic of the foreign women, who eventually threaten the male society with their subversive nature-magic.

Animals being at odds with Lovecraft’s creatures is another common feature of his work, and “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is no exception: the ticket-agent mentions how those with the fish-like “Innsmouth look” are hated by animals, and how “they used to have lots of horse trouble before the autos came in” (508). This would seem to be at odds with the forces of evil in Lovecraft’s work being, in fact, forces of nature, but upon closer inspection, it is only domesticated animals that show unease around the demons, much like the Innsmouth horses, and the dogs of “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Whisperer in Darkness.” Indeed, wild animals are not only perfectly at ease with the monsters (the bizarre albino penguins of “At the Mountains of Madness”), but are also

sometimes manifestations of them (the titular rodents of “The Rats in the Walls”) and act in concert with them (the whippoorwills of “The Dunwich Horror”).

The connotations of this are obvious: nature cannot be trusted for benignity towards men unless it is tamed, and that more faith and loyalty can be expected of a tamed animal than a human being under the influence of the Old One Ones. Working under the assumption that the Old Ones represent nature, or at the very least a melding of nature and civilization, this means that all culture is good, and is perpetually at odds with nature, which seeks to undermine and destroy it.

The Innsmouth sailors often boost their income with “a queer foreign kind of jewellery” (508) that we later discover is actually crafted by the Deep Ones in their sunken city. The jewels are essentially crafted by nature, and are described as having a generally organic look to them, and give the impression that they may be incidental by-products of some insidious natural process, rather than being designed or sculpted. They could be interpreted as being an infiltration of nature into a high bastion of culture, as the world of expensive jewellery is one that is firmly controlled and created by humans, and has no precedent in the animal kingdom.

Furthermore, and more importantly, the most famous example of the Deep Ones’ jewellery is a tiara, which, papal headgear aside, is associated almost exclusively with women in modern western culture. The narrator’s eventual fall to his Innsmouth ancestry is represented most obviously by his fascination with such a locally made tiara that he discovers, and can be read as the narrator being feminized in a destructive way, with his ‘womanly’ fascination with the tiara running parallel with his decline as a human being.

2.6: The Esoteric Order of Dagon

The primary religious allegiance of Innsmouth's people is to a cult-like congregation calling itself the Esoteric Order of Dagon. The second of our five guides to Innsmouth, Miss Anna Tilton of the Newburyport Historical Society calls it "a debased, quasi-pagan thing imported from the East a century before" (511).

The fact that religion, civilization's biggest benchmark, is generally represented in Lovecraft as ranging from near-total irrelevance and ineffectiveness ("The Dreams in the Witch-House," "The Haunter of the Dark" (1935)) to deranged cults and malignant insanity ("Under the Pyramids," (1924) "The Call of Cthulhu") is significant enough to warrant an investigation in its own right, far too lengthy to discuss here, but it will suffice for our purposes to note his position towards religion before continuing.

Lovecraft was an atheist from early in his life, although he preferred to call himself agnostic, but there seems to be no mention of his thoughts on contemporary religion's effect on human culture, only that he thinks "it is damned unlikely that anything like a central cosmic will, a spirit world or an eternal survival of personality exist" (Letter to Robert E. Howard), and a particularly snide comment on the intellectual capacity of religious people shines through in "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, when the narrator relates that "it is fortunate that [several characters in the story] were all strong men of action and simple, orthodox religionists, for with more subtle introspectiveness and mental complexity they would have fared ill indeed" (679).

Furthermore, he viewed religion as being directly opposed to intellectual thought, calling it "childish and diluted pseudo-gratification" in a 1931 letter to Frank Belknap Long (Mosig 23). Besides his intellectual attitude, however, there is nothing to indicate

that Lovecraft held a particular disdain for religion, culturally speaking, that is to say whether or not he felt organized religion was, in general terms, a good thing. This is a lamentable gap, for religion is, by and large, male-centred and male-dominated in the extreme, and if Lovecraft's derision extended to this aspect of religious organization, it might 'redeem' him somewhat, as far as accusations of sexism are concerned. Another, and far more likely possibility, is that he agreed with the orthodox conception of women as subservient and inferior, and his failure to address this agreement in his writings may be indicative of a hypocrisy in his beliefs that he was unwilling to confront publicly. This is, of course, all speculation.

Returning to the Esoteric Order of Dagon, it is fairly typical of Lovecraftian cults: secretive, sinister, and relentless in its pursuit of new 'believers.' It is, however, somewhat exceptional in its choice of real estate: a former Masonic Hall, with the order "replacing Freemasonry altogether" (511) in Innsmouth society.

The Freemasons, with their exclusively male membership, high standards of education and societal status and connotations of high culture, cannot stand for anything other than the epitome of Lovecraft's idealized white, male, scholarly high society. Indeed, most of his protagonists and narrators could easily belong to the Freemasons, with their cultured reasoning, patriarchal leanings and access to uncommon knowledge. Lovecraft's own grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips, was a noted and active Freemason, rendering it a near certainty that Lovecraft viewed Freemasons in a positive light ("H.P. Lovecraft Misconceptions").

It does much to both strengthen and complicate the dichotomy of culture and male against nature and female in “Innsmouth” that the decline of the town is so closely linked to a “debased, quasi-pagan” cult replacing a Masonic temple (511).

Specifically, it implies wisdom in the concept of a town that is ideologically guided by a secretive and exclusive society, so long as that society does not answer to a power higher than its own (i.e. an Old One). Lovecraft evidently has no problem with this decidedly authoritarian concept. Such elitist thinking is historically associated with male-dominated society, as both are conservative and believe in the leadership of a small, exclusive group.

Conversely, it also equates radicalism and subversion with evil. Lovecraft’s cults can be seen as regressive atavism in a society built on practical, specifically constructed values that mankind must fight to preserve. This is also represented on a powerful physical level in “Innsmouth,” as the narrator and other descendents of the Deep Ones take on the fishlike appearance of their ancestors as they age. They eventually degenerate totally into an anti-human society based on primitivism, aggression, fear and blood, akin to that of the Pacific aboriginals in Zadok Allen’s tale on p. 525. Victory for the cultists means defeat for the societal impositions of culture on nature, with jungle law prevailing.

All of this suggests that a society governed by the laws of nature is something to be feared and reviled. Man cannot allow his precious culture to slip into chaos, nor can his governance over culture be replaced by that of non-human entities.

Lovecraft’s famous introductory clause in his speculative essay, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” proclaims that “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (423). It is

perpetually the quest of culture to classify, understand and eventually dominate the unknown, thereby making it the central force in the war against the fear of the unknown.

This fear would also speak to the fear of regression to a primal, vulnerable state in which mankind is at the mercy of the elements, effectively feminizing humanity; as is discussed in Ortner's essay, woman is so closely associated with nature due to the fact that "woman's body and its functions, more involved with "species life," seem to place her closer to nature, in contrast to man's physiology, which frees him more completely to take up the projects of culture" (73).

Therefore, a society that is controlled by nature is a feminine society, and it is precisely that society which Innsmouth has degenerated into.

3: "The Thing on the Doorstep"

3.1: Summary

"The Thing on the Doorstep" begins, much like "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" does, by telling us how it ends. The narrator, one Daniel Upton of Arkham, has murdered his best friend, the mental patient Edward Pickman Derby, who had been an inmate of Arkham Sanatorium until his untimely end.

Upton then gives us a brief account of Derby's life, of how the two grew up together. Derby became a writer, fascinated with the occult, and Upton an architect, with the latter becoming somewhat more responsible and independent than the former. The account continues as Derby meets and falls in love with Asenath Waite, who is in fact an old Innsmouth wizard named Ephraim Waite who possessed his newborn daughter's body shortly after her birth, while the girl's spirit died in Ephraim's body. Like most

natives of Innsmouth, Ephraim is a Deep One hybrid, the result of interbreeding between the townspeople and the anthropomorphic fish-people dwelling off the town's shore.

Derby and Waite marry, only for Upton to see his friend deteriorate and begin to behave increasingly irrationally. Although Upton does not know it at the time, Asenath, or rather Ephraim, has begun periodically entering Derby's body, and plans to permanently possess it for some unclear purpose. Derby's spirit, meanwhile, is deposited in Asenath's body. On the few occasions when Derby has complete control over his own body, he does so with the knowledge he has acquired of arcane spells and rituals.

After three years, Upton receives a telegram requesting him to collect Derby, who has been found raving like a lunatic near a Maine village. On the drive back to Arkham, Derby's personality goes through an abrupt change as he is possessed by Asenath/Ephraim. Some time later, Derby comes to visit Upton, telling him that he is divorcing Asenath and that everything will be fine; in reality, Derby has murdered his wife.

During a later visit to Upton's house, Derby has a complete mental breakdown as Ephraim's spirit possesses him from beyond the grave, and is committed to Arkham Sanatorium. Derby's spirit, now gruesomely imprisoned in Asenath's decaying corpse, makes a final visit to Upton, and informs him via a written note of everything that is transpired, and instructs him to kill the Sanatorium inmate. The tale ends with Upton confessing his fear of Ephraim's vengeful spirit possessing his own body.

3.2: Another Soldier of Culture

“The Thing on the Doorstep” is something of a rarity amongst Lovecraft’s more lengthy work, in that the narrator, Daniel Upton, escapes physically unscathed at the tale’s conclusion. To recall the earlier discussion on Lovecraft’s self-appointed status as a ‘soldier of culture,’ one would think that Upton breaks the mold, but upon closer examination, Upton is not particularly characterized by anything as indistinct and diffuse as a love of culture, but rather, his loyalty to his friend, the story’s true protagonist, Edward Pickman Derby.

With his gift of “writing verse of a sombre, fantastic, almost morbid cast which astonished the tutors surrounding him” (626), “Poe-like talents” (627), and his “high marks in everything but mathematics and the sciences” (628), he can be viewed as the complimentary counterpart to the anonymous narrator of “Innsmouth.” While the latter might represent Lovecraft’s practical, historical leanings, the former could be seen as representing his more esoteric, artistic side, and their respective tales reflect this.

“Innsmouth” works systematically to its conclusion, with four different characters offering 300 years of back-story through methodical monologues, and the narrator himself giving a detailed description of the architecture, before regaling every moment of his escape from the town and subsequent discovery of his demonic ancestry. “Doorstep,” on the other hand, flows erratically through the Derbys’ tempestuous marriage until it comes crashing to the story’s horrific climax, swerving viscerally from chapter to chapter, much akin to Asenath’s driving in the story.

Derby remains, however, firmly entrenched on the side of culture (rather than nature), as evidenced by only receiving low school marks in school subjects concerning

forces outside of human control. More tellingly, nature, represented by Asenath and her Deep One ancestry, weakened him, while culture, represented by the spells he knew, as well as his ties to the sensible Upton, made him strong.

3.3: Edward Pickman Derby

“Doorstep’s” protagonist is made susceptible to the weakening and corrupting influence of women and nature early on in the story, and indeed in his own life, “never [being] allowed out without his nurse,” and is feminized by his inability to grow a beard, “his attempts to raise a moustache [being] discernible only with difficulty.” He is also described as having a “soft and light” voice (627).

Furthermore, he is raised in “coddled seclusion” (626) by his parents, and remains almost completely dependent on them financially up to and after their death, giving him strong associations with domesticity and family, which, according to Ortner, is a key element in the distancing of women from culture.

His fate at the hands of Asenath/Ephraim invites a strong comparison to rape, with his body being entered unwillingly, and he is forced to accept a domesticated and archetypically female role in the marriage, secluded at home in his wife’s body while she assumes his identity, and it is in this ‘body-snatching’ aspect that Derby is most thoroughly and obviously feminized with, and in a way, could almost be read as a feminist parable.

Through the body switching, Derby is forced to submit to the status of women in the 1930s as second-class citizens, with no real control over his estate, social life or

surroundings. No-one questions Asenath when she proclaims, in her guise as Derby, control over ‘his’ wife’s monetary affairs or living conditions; no-one doubts ‘his’ word when he explains away his wife’s absences as being due to “illness.” These were all realities of women in most of the world’s societies well into the middle of the 20th century, and our narrator, the perceptive and affable Daniel Upton, has no real objections to any of this, fretting instead over the changes in Derby’s personality.

3.4: Asenath Waite

Any delusions of “The Thing on the Doorstep” having feminist leanings are utterly destroyed, however, by Lovecraft’s portrayal of Asenath Waite. From the very beginning, the young witch sets her goal of escaping her inferior female body as if it were a prison:

Her crowning rage, however, was that she was not a man; since she believed a male brain had certain unique and far-reaching cosmic powers. Given a man’s brain, she declared, she could not only equal but surpass her father in mastery of unknown forces. (631)

This is quite a misogynist statement, even if Asenath is really a man in a woman’s body. The implication that a woman’s brain is inferior in any way to a man’s is downright offensive to a modern reader, and probably to many of Lovecraft’s contemporaries as well.

Furthermore, the suggestion that certain “cosmic powers” were permanently off-limits to women further underscores the argument that only men have access to true culture, and enslaves women to nature. Women are permanently limited by the very nature of their birth as women, while a man has the potential to rise above his natural status and defy nature, bending it to his will with body-possessing magic.

Asenath is instantly associated with the arcane and countercultural by the course she is attending when Upton first hears of her, “medieval metaphysics” (630). Furthermore, female influence is directly equated with destructive corruption during her described seduction of Derby, with Upton finding his interest in her “rather regrettable,” (631) and both Upton and Derby’s father work to break off the affair, but to no avail.

It is important to note, however, before we continue, that Asenath makes for a queer case as far as feminist interpretations go, due her status as an unwilling physical host to the soul and mind of her father Ephraim. Can her actions truly be interpreted as those of a woman, if they were really committed by a man in a woman’s body?

This aspect of the character certainly adds several layers of complexity to her interpretation. Mosig describes Lovecraft as having been “[a] conservative in matters of art and morality” (68). Does Lovecraft perceive women as being incapable of malice and countercultural behaviour, or even simply not possessing the necessary imagination and deviousness to hatch the scheme that forms the central plot of “Doorstep?”

Ortner, in her abovementioned essay speaks of the ease of which masculinity imprints itself on the external, or culture, while woman makes her presence felt in an internal, physical “natural” way; therefore, women are marginalized in complex society while men assume the central roles that shape society itself. While the universal truth of

this is certainly debatable, it was, for the most part, true in Lovecraft's day. Perhaps a criminal or sociopathic character that was not at least partly male simply would not have been believable in contemporary fiction.

In the end, such speculation is rendered irrelevant by the simple fact that Lovecraft decided to make Ephraim's heir a woman, when he could so easily have made the same character male. Incidental details, such as the gender of the narrator's friend, or his relationship to the antagonist, seem unlikely to be the sole motivator for creating a female villain; could the story not just as easily have been about two men, mutual acquaintances of the narrator, with one of them taking over the body of the other? Therefore, we have to treat Asenath as a woman.

Her insidious influence exploits Derby's perceived weaknesses of character. His emotional reliance on his family and his interest in nature magic are like addictions, and indeed, Asenath's conquest of him is nothing short of drug-like. From his initiation into her group of friends, a "decadent college set" (639) of "intelligentsia" (631), right through to its creeping decay, accelerating dementia and physical disintegration, he behaves like someone going through all the stages of addiction.

The marriage of Derby and Asenath is contrasted with that of Upton and his wife. Mrs. Upton is remarkably absent from the story's progression, even to the point of being deliberately avoided: not even her name is given, and the only hints of her existence come from the incidental mentions of things like Upton's son being born, or her tagged indirect agreement with her husband that Asenath was becoming noticeably more hideous over time (632). It would seem that in Lovecraft's ideal marriage, the wife is neither seen nor heard, and when she is, it is to gainsay other women in agreement with her husband,

relate gossip about others (633-4), or provide their husband with a son and heir. This 'safety-in-domesticity' diatribe also recalls that of the wild animals/tame animals behaviour comparison discussed in part 2.5 of this essay.

Asenath is also a competent and aggressive driver, in stark contrast to Derby, who cannot drive at all, requiring "an obviously hired chauffeur or mechanic" to do it for him (633). Such a skill would have rendered her a threat to the male-dominated automotive world of the time, and the general association of masculinity with forceful, efficient driving ensure that Derby is further emasculated as a character. This, coupled with the insinuation that a woman driving is a dangerous, terrible thing, and that Asenath's true skill at the task comes from Ephraim, make "Doorstep's" car scenes an effective triple-whammy of misogynist commentary.

Firstly, it implies that a woman who is a better driver than her husband is both unusual and unnatural. Second, the power and mobility it gives Asenath is viewed as a negative thing. Thirdly, her driving skills are not, in fact, her own, but Ephraim's; hence it is insinuated that a 'normal' woman could never learn how to drive in such a fashion. Instead, she has to rely on the magic of her patriarch to bestow upon her that power.

It is also important to note the distinction between the female nature-magic of "Innsmouth," which manifests in physical deformity and material gain, and the male culture-magic of "Doorstep," which is represented by obscure knowledge and altered consciousness. The townspeople of Innsmouth revert to primeval beings, while Ephraim seeks to rise above his physical self.

In "Innsmouth," it is strongly implied that a great many of the townspeople that have become so deformed that they must be permanently confined to their houses are

women, the matriarchs of the three or four most prestigious families in Innsmouth. Therefore, we have a very polarised dichotomy. On the one hand, we have magic that calls on the power of nature to grant you material riches for the price of physical deformity, and confines women to their homes. On the other hand, in “Doorstep,” we have magic that is accessible only through culture, and bestows the ability to become almost completely incorporeal, or at least not confined to a single body. Naturally, the latter ability is not available to women, but can be used to possess and control a woman’s body, giving her unnatural powers.

Hence, we see in one story, “Doorstep,” the folly inherent in empowering women with culture, and in the other, “Innsmouth,” we see the degradation and degeneration caused by allowing the male to slip into the hands of the female, of culture being overpowered by nature. It sends a powerful message: do not trust women, and trust women with power least of all.

4: Considerations

The cultures of Lovecraft’s Old Ones are, as noted above, all irrevocably tied to nature. They have underwater habitats and cults gathering in ancient woods, swamps and deserts, and August Derleth even ascribed to assign five of Lovecraft’s best known Old Ones – Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath, Tsathoggua, Cthulhu and Dagon – to different elements, one to air, two to earth and two to water, respectively (Derleth). Although this classification appears nowhere in Lovecraft’s work, it effectively makes the Old Ones

and their cultures forces of nature, but with a civilization – a culture within nature, if you will.

Even so, the cultures of the Old Ones are all eventually consumed by nature, their cities sunken, frozen or buried, one of the many holes in Derleth's system. There is neither room nor necessity to go into a full-fledged critique of Derleth's folly here, but suffice it to say that he attempted to reshape Lovecraft's Old Ones into elemental warriors on either side of a pitched battle for the fate of mankind, reminiscent of Christian mythology.

It is ironic how much Derleth's attempt to mould and classify Lovecraft's world reflect the efforts of mortal minds attempting to comprehend the mind-boggling, indescribable immensity and uncaring apathy of the Old Ones and the universe. Lovecraft's characters go insane because they are faced with something they cannot classify and understand with their predetermined notions of morality and motivation. This lack of understanding pervades all effective mysteries, yet it is this very element that Derleth seemed curiously intent on destroying, "apparently unable or unwilling to understand the essence of Lovecraft's dynamic pseudomythology" (Mosig 21).

It is noteworthy that the central motive of the antagonists of both "Innsmouth" and "Doorstep" is, in fact, known to the reader; that is to say, the human antagonists, namely Obed Marsh and Ephraim/Asenath Waite. They both want to live forever, a relatable enough motive, and through this familiarity, the characters gain strength and plausibility, despite their bizarre nature. They use secret knowledge to wield unimaginable power, with the aim of obtaining inhuman ability.

The narrator of “Innsmouth” succumbs to the lure of such power, revelling in his non-human ancestry at the tale’s culmination, yet he is not truly a turncoat, in the strictest sense of the word. He is merely regressing to a pre-human society, but if we lay the semantics of timing aside, then he is actually pursuing freedom from human culture.

At no point do any of the Innsmouth townspeople express any dismay at their true nature. The children play gleefully in the street, and the fish-people hunting the narrator during the story’s climax do so with enthusiasm, not like mindless slaves at all. They are freed from the constraints and convolutions of human society, existing in a unity of purpose and belief, “banded together in some sort of fellowship and understanding”.

(518)

Fear may be the oldest and most powerful human emotion, but fear begets fascination, and it would be hard to say that Lovecraft was not fascinated with the unknown. His protagonists give in to this fascination time and time again, in spite of knowing the danger and evil they face. For all the evidence pointing to Lovecraft having been a misogynist, an androcentrist and even a bigot, it is important to remember that his white, English-speaking male protagonists almost always lose their battles, not as martyrs, but as willing defectors. It would seem that in his heart of hearts, Lovecraft knew that just as men cannot be without women, mankind can not exist without its atavistic nature; if fear is so powerful and primal, then who is man to resist its power?

Dirk Mosig, in his interpretation of Lovecraft’s poem “The City,” wrote that modern man and primeval man were so removed as to be irreconcilable, that “the ultimate tragedy of modern man [is] his inability to become one with himself, of tolerating and accepting the savage beast within and the red rivers of blood in his

ancestral past” (53). If such a barrier exists in Lovecraft between man’s culture-defined existence now, and his place within nature in prehistory, could the same be said of men and women? Do the sociopathic actions of Asenath Waite highlight a rift between the wants of men and the wants of women?

Perhaps not, but the underlying themes of the stories, especially that of “The Thing on the Doorstep,” highlight the deviousness of empowered women. This may not seem as true of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” until we recall that it was a powerful woman, the Pacific sorceress who became Obed Marsh’s mother, who lay at the root of the shadow itself. In both stories we have women to whom great power was entrusted, to whom ageing, desperate men turned for help, only for the women to poison and destroy everything the men sought to save.

There are several important things to remember, however. Firstly, as the above paragraph states, the actions of the women were carried out at the behest of powerful men, both of whom did receive what they want: Obed Marsh got his riches and his immortality, and Ephraim Waite got his power and *his* immortality. There is no real insinuation that women are by nature evil in either of the tales.

Second, Lovecraft was a product of his time. Contemporary thinking enforced second-class status on women, both as citizens and characters in literature. Asenath Waite is a dangerous threat to her society because she is unpredictable; a woman with a man’s powers was a novelty in 1920s America, an unknown quantity. She is a literary device in a horror story, just like any locked door in a haunted house or graveyard crypt on a moonless night, intended to scare the pants off the reader by showing us something he

has not seen before. Is it so surprising that after almost ninety years, she may seem just as dated and clichéd?

Third, as stated on several occasions in this essay, Lovecraft believed that the universe was indifferent to us. The real enemy in any one of his supernatural works is the cold, apathetic godlessness of the cosmos, and the horror that results from meddling in dark powers that humanity does not fully understand. Any terrible realization or injury that might befall the humans in Lovecraft's stories are accidental by-products of schemes laid by vastly powerful beings who, by and large, have no interest in us as a species. Therefore, it would be grossly fallacious to assume that he truly feared some kind of class warfare between the sexes.

5. Conclusion

In the end, much can be said in both defence and condemnation of H.P. Lovecraft, and his depictions of women. However, there can be little question that he effectively, if perhaps not consciously, harnessed a very primal fear in his horror: the fear of a disorderly and godless universe, where actions have no meaning and no consequence.

All the order that civilization has imposed on nature is the result of male thinking, to imprint something of lasting value onto the external, the rational. As mankind advanced through the ages, femininity began to be seen as something weak, fluid and impermanent. The steady ebb and flow of nature automatically became the foil to man's frantic attempts to assert himself.

In Lovecraft's work, we see this conflict brought to light in very stark, and yet very nuanced and layered ways. His work is a conduit through which we can examine not

only the duality of masculine and feminine, but also the meaning of that duality, or if it even has any meaning in the empty chaos of the universe. We learn that, for all our internal conflicts and partisan struggles, for all our seemingly grand achievements and victories, we still belong to nature, and we are, by our nature, only human.

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