

René Galand, The wounded ego of Howard Phillips Lovecraft

The horror stories of Howard Phillips Lovecraft are ranked among the most celebrated in the genre. His fame, however, has been mostly posthumous. His work never attracted the attention of major publishing houses during his lifetime. They appeared mostly in short-lived magazines and amateur publications. Serious critics despised his writing, his style above all.¹ Recognition, even posthumous, was late in coming, but come it did: in 1990, a centennial celebration of his birth took place in his native city, Providence. It was held at Brown University, and lasted three days, with participants from all over the world.² Lovecraft's novels and stories have been accepted as genuine masterpieces by writers as diverse as Borges, Cocteau, and Michel de Ghelderode. They have been made into films and TV shows. Translations have appeared in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Japan, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and several other countries. They have been the subject of theses, and with each passing year the list of scholarly articles devoted to them grows longer and longer. A special issue of the journal *Cahiers de l'Herne* was devoted to him.³ Does Lovecraft deserve this fame? What, in his works, has real literary merit? Not his style, assuredly. Edmund Wilson was right when he poked fun at Lovecraft's use and abuse of adjectives like "horrible", "terrible", "frightful", and "awesome". Here is a list of adjectives found in the opening pages of the novel *At the Mountains of Madness*: hellish, hideous, revolting, loathsome, inhuman, horrible, terrible, hateful, alien, crazy, insane, monstrous, fantastic, cryptical, mysterious, forbidden, unnamably evil, buried, evil, shunned, dark, unnatural, fantastic, malignly frowning, fiendish, deadly, cyclopean, blasphemous, damnable, frightful, bleak, eldritchly demonic, grotesque, queer, sinister, menacing, dimly sinister, uncanny, morbid, strange, delirious, lurking, treacherous, desolate, unearthly, lethal, abhorred, bizarre, febrile, terrifying, oppressive, anomalous, soul-clutching, dreadful, mad, aeon-dead, tragic, brooding, insanely buried, unhallowed, doomed, labyrinthine, bewildering, desperate, viscous, ill-fated, deadly, and many of them recur more than once. Where, then, must we look for literary value in Lovecraft's writings? It will be found, I believe, in the picture he paints of man's fate.

In this respect, Lovecraft's writings bear many similarities with the dramas of Sophocles or Shakespeare. Man, in his pride, believes himself to be the king of the universe. The Roman emperor Augustus was worshipped like a god. In Corneille's tragedy, *Cinna*, he says these famous words: "*Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers.*" And Louis the XIVth found himself as high and as powerful as the sun itself. In reality, man stands no higher, in the scale of things, than the lowest worm. The greatest king, be his name Oedipus or Lear, is only a fly to be swatted by cruel gods, a brainless rat running from a trap to another, a pebble thrown hither and thither by the waves of the sea.⁴ This is also the essence of Lovecraft's vision: man is but a toy in the hands of evil gods who are the true rulers of the universe. The worst blows to human pride, however, have not been struck by writers like Sophocles or Shakespeare, but by scientists. Freud names two of them: Copernicus and Darwin. Jacques Derrida adds another two: Freud himself, and Marx.⁵ The four of them have struck down the altars built to human pride, and their influence has left deep marks in the writings of Lovecraft. Copernicus had proved that the earth was not the center of the universe, but only a tiny rock lost on the confines of a galaxy. Darwin had shown that man was not the king of nature, but only a superior kind of monkey. Marx had demonstrated that man was reduced to the status of a thing, of an object, by social and economic forces of

which he was totally unaware. And Freud, finally, had shown that the conscious will of man was powerless against the wild energy of the unconscious.

Oriental wisdom gives this advice: "Do not step on the tiger's tail". In the world seen by Lovecraft, it is impossible not to step on some tail or other. There are powers as cruel or wanton as any god to be found in Sophocles or Shakespeare. There are other beings, monsters, ghouls and demons of all kinds, always ready to destroy anyone careless or foolish enough to disturb them in anyway. The earth, long before the human race "shambled out of apedom", as Lovecraft puts it in *At the Mountains of Madness*, had been occupied by races from outer space whose powers went beyond any ever dreamed of by man. They built such megalopolises as Valusia, R'lyeh, Ib, in the land of Mnar, and a nameless city in the middle of Arabia Deserta. Remnants of these cities still exist, according to Lovecraft, in unexplored parts of Antarctica, Australia and the Himalayas.⁶ These alien races worshipped strange and cruel gods. The artificial pantheon created by Lovecraft's fertile imagination has been studied by August Derleth.⁷ In this pantheon, there are the Elder Gods, who exist far away from earth, in the constellation Orion. Other gods, the Great Old Ones or the Ancient Ones, have ruled the earth. Supreme among them is the blind idiot god, Azathoth. I would see him as a representative of the absurd. Yog-Sothoth, the all-in-one and the one-in-all, not subject to the laws of time and space, may symbolize the boundless universe, unfathomable to human reason. Other Great Old Ones include: Nyarlathotep, their messenger; Cthulhu, who dwells under the sea; Hastur, who occupies the air and interstellar space; Shub-Niggurath, the Black Goat with a Thousand Young. They correspond, according to Derleth, Nyarlathotep to an earth elemental, Cthulhu to a water elemental, Hastur to an air elemental, and Shub-Niggurath to the fertility principle. Later additions to this pantheon include Dagon, ruler of the Deep Ones, dwellers of the ocean depths, and Yig, the snake-god, probably influenced by the Aztec divinity Quetzalcoatl. The Great Old Ones are gone now, inside the earth, under the sea, or in the recesses of space, but their dead bodies told their secrets in dreams to the first men who formed a cult which never died. This is what is meant in the chant of the followers of Cthulhu: "In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu awaits dreaming." R'lyeh was the mighty city from which Cthulhu once ruled. Some day, when the stars have returned to the appropriate location, R'lyeh will rise again from beneath the sea, and Cthulhu will again bring the earth under his dominion. When the stars were right, the Great Old Ones could plunge from world to world, but when the stars had moved to the wrong position, they had to lie dreaming, waiting for their followers to revive them by the appropriate rites which had been communicated to their ancestors through their dreams, and transmitted from generation to generation of men. Only the Elder Gods can place a limit to the power of the Great Old Ones, and just as some men possess the knowledge given to their ancestors by the Great Old Ones, so have some men retained the knowledge of the Elder Signs which alone can put a stop to the intrusion of the Great Old Ones. (*The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Lurker on the Threshold*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*).

According to Lovecraft, some of the extra-terrestrial aliens who, at one time or other, occupied the earth, still survive underground, below the sea, or in remote areas of the earth's surface (*The Mound*, *The Moon-bog*, *Dagon*, *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, *The Whisperer in Darkness*). Some may even be among us, waiting till they are ready to take over the earth (*The Dark Brotherhood*). Lovecraft explains, in his novel *At the Mountains of Madness*, how

explorers have recently discovered strange corpses in caves near the South Pole. These caves resembled the caves described by Poe in his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. The corpses were shaped like stars. Lovecraft's explorers have been able to make out their history, since its major events were represented on sculptured friezes along the walls of underground buildings. The star-shaped creatures, like other alien races, came out of cosmic space to the nascent, lifeless earth. They lived under the sea for a good deal of time, where they built fantastic cities, and fought with and defeated various cosmic enemies. It was under the sea that they first created earthly life, for food and for other purposes. They created ideal slaves, the Shoggoths, by molding multicellular protoplasmic masses which they kept under hypnotic control to perform the heavy work. The star-shaped Old Ones later lived on land, where they used their Shoggoths to build their huge cities. They also allowed other cell groups to develop into various forms of animal and vegetal life. This was the origin of the human race, whose first ancestors, shambling and primitive mammals, were used for food and for entertainment by the Old Ones who had become land-dwellers. Geologic changes and convulsions of the earth crust destroyed some of their marine cities. They also had to contend with another race of cosmic invaders, shaped like octopi, the fabulous pre-human spawn of Cthulhu, which for a time drove them wholly back to the sea. Later peace was made, the newly emerged continents given to the Cthulhu spawn while the star-shaped Old Ones kept Antarctica. When the lands of the Pacific sank, taking with them the city of R'lyeh and all the cosmic octopi, the star-shaped Old Ones remained supreme. Another danger came from the Shoggoths of the sea, who had developed a semi-stable brain, rebelled against their masters, and were re-subjugated only with great difficulty. The star-shaped Old Ones met with new adversaries, the Mi-Go, half-fungous half-crustacean creatures who had launched an invasion from outer space. The Mi-Go drove the star-shaped Old Ones from all the northern lands, back to the sea and to their original antarctic habitat. As more and more cities were destroyed through the upthrust of mountains, the rending of continents, and the seismic convulsions of sea-bottoms, the civilization of the star-shaped Old Ones declined. The Ice Age brought a cold which never released its grip, either on Antarctica or on the fabled empires of Lomar and Hyperborea, so that the star-shaped Old Ones had to build a new city in huge caverns below an underground Stygian sea. Lovecraft's explorers reach the conclusion that the Shoggoths eventually succeeded in taking over the Cyclopean water city, and killed off all its inhabitants. A few star-shaped Old Ones had been away from the city. Their frozen bodies had lasted through hundreds of centuries until they were discovered by Lovecraft's explorers. They seemingly regained life when they were thawed, killed the explorers and their dogs who had attacked them, and tried to rejoin their lost city. There they encountered the dreaded Shoggoths, who slaughtered them.

Many other alien creatures stalk the earth, always ready to destroy anyone who might present a threat to them: a supernatural hound (*The Hound*); creatures shaped like horrible animals (*The Unnamable*); a cannibalistic creature, half human and half frog (*The Shuttered Room*); a huge rat with a human head (*The Dream in the Witch House*); the ghouls whose image has been captured on film by Pickman, an artist-photographer interested in the occult (*Pickman's Model*); a succubus in the shape of a woman (*The Shadow in the Attic*); night-gaunts and monstrous creatures of all kinds (*The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*); the living models of the creatures represented by ancient Egyptian artists: men with the heads of chacals or crocodiles,

or the huge and loathsome abnormalities which the Sphinx was originally carved to represent (*Imprisoned with the Pharaoh*). What can human beings do when they encounter such alien entities? Critics have noted that Lovecraft's protagonists, when they find themselves in this situation, seldom behave in a manly manner: most often, they faint dead away, like female heroines of Victorian novels. If they survive the encounter, they only wish they could forget the monstrosities they have witnessed, and welcome death as the only refuge from the unnamable horrors which they fear will come after them (*The Hound*). But even death may not bring oblivion: there may be ways of bringing human ashes back to life and to subject the resurrected corpses to endless torments (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*). The rare individuals who can successfully resist the alien monstrosities are those who have gained some knowledge of the arcane spells inherited from the Great Old Ones or of the Elder Signs. These have been preserved in some ancient books: the *Necronomicon* written by the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, *The Pnakotic Manuscripts*, *The R'lyeh Text*, *The Book of Dzyan*, *The Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan*, *The Dhol Chants*, *The Book of Eibon*, etc.⁸ This knowledge, however, came to man from the Elder Gods or from the Great Old Ones: it could never have been gained by man's own intellectual powers.

Lovecraft's pessimistic view of the insignificance of the human condition within cosmic space and time could only be made darker still by his personal interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution. In his writings, the process through which mankind evolved from a shambling ape-like mammal into *Homo sapiens* is easily reversed. There is, for instance, a "part of the Catskills where Dutch civilization once feebly and transiently penetrated, leaving behind as it receded only a few ruined mansions and a degenerate squatter population." In the descendants of the Martense family, the process of mammalian degeneration has been carried to its extreme: they have become filthy white gorilla things with sharp yellow fangs and matted fur, "the frightful outcome of isolated spawning, multiplication, and cannibal nutrition above and below the ground." They live in mound-burrows, like moles, preying on the poor mongrel inhabitants of malodorous shanties on isolated slopes (*The Lurking Fear*). The horror and disgust felt by Lovecraft's narrator when he faces what has become of the vanished Martense family since Gerrit Martense, a wealthy New Amsterdam merchant who had built a magnificent mansion on a remote woodland summit of the Catskills, goes a long way toward explaining Lovecraft's own conservatism and racism. This may be why Lovecraft was an early admirer of Hitler and Mussolini. Lovecraft had undoubtedly been influenced by Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1854), which had been popularized among English readers by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, but he had given these theories a personal twist. According to Lovecraft, the best human type developed by the Aryan race was the Anglo-Saxons, and their crowning achievement was the civilization of England and her American colonies in the XVIIIth century. Lovecraft was especially incensed at the American Revolution, which cut off the American colonies from the motherland, and at the lack of stern immigration laws which would have allowed only people of Anglo-Saxon stock to enter the United States. He found a perfect example of this social and racial degenerative process in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, "a maze of hybrid squalor near the ancient waterfront opposite Governor's Island," and in its population, "a hopeless tangle of Syrian, Spanish, Italian and Negro elements impinging upon one another." It is a far cry from what it used to be: "Here long ago a brighter picture dwelt, with clear-eyed mariners on the lower streets and homes of taste and substance where the larger houses line the hill. One can trace the

relics of the former happiness in the trim shapes of the buildings, the occasional graceful churches, and the evidence of original art and background in bits of detail here and there, -- a worn flight of steps, a battered doorway, a wormy pair of decorative columns of pilasters, or a fragment of once green space with bent and rusted iron railing." These ancient alleys and byways have now become the site of "the darkest instinctive patterns of half-ape savagery" (*The Horror at Red Hook*). Lovecraft's horror of miscegenation is in fact a dominant theme in his fiction. A short story, *Arthur Jermyn*, provides a perfect illustration of this revulsion. Sir Arthur Jermyn, an English baronet, soaked himself in oil and set fire to his clothing one night. He did so after receiving a boxed object from Africa. Why did he commit such a gruesome suicide? It turns out that his great-great-great-grandfather, Sir Wade Jermyn, one of the earliest explorers of the Congo, had married a woman who, he said, was the daughter of a Portuguese merchant. She died in Africa, leaving him a son. Sir Wade's conjectures on a prehistoric white Congolese civilization had earned him much ridicule. He also raved about the gigantic walls and pillars of a forgotten city, and of the living things which inhabited this place, fabulous creatures which sprang up after great white apes had overrun the dying city which was a remnant of this prehistoric white Congolese civilization. In 1854, years after Sir Wade's visits to Africa, legends were still told among Congolese tribes of a lost city peopled by great white apes and ruled by a white god and his ape-princess. In 1911, Sir Arthur Jermyn went himself to the Congo, where he learnt that the ape-princess had been the consort of a great white god who had come out of the West. They had reigned over the city together, but when they had a son, all three went away. Later the god and the princess had returned, but after the death of the princess her divine husband had the body mummified and enshrined in a vast house where it was worshipped. Then he departed again. The mummified goddess became a symbol of supremacy for whatever tribe would possess it, which is why it was captured by the war-like N'bango tribe who massacred all the inhabitants of the forgotten city. Sir Arthur Jermyn did find the ruins of the forgotten city, and returned home after entrusting the Belgian agent of a trading company with the task of procuring for him the mummified goddess. The mummy was delivered at Jermyn's house in the afternoon of August 5, 1913: the ape-princess was none other than Sir Arthur Jermyn's great-great-great-grandmother. He had been unable to face the fact that his own simian appearance was so similar to that of the ape-princess.

The theme of man regressing to the level or the shape of an animal recurs in several other stories by Lovecraft: *The Beast in the Cave*, *The Rats in the Wall*, *The Curse of Yig*, and *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*, for instance. The idea of humans mating with extra-terrestrial or non-human beings is depicted as equally revolting. In some stories, humans mix with fish-like creatures. Their offspring look human at first, but later turn more like the sea-creatures and must live in the sea. Like Sir Arthur Jermyn, the protagonist of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* finds, to his horror, that his own mother had been such a sea-creature. Biology, for him as for Sir Arthur, becomes destiny. In another story, a woman is impregnated with star-spawn and produces a son, Wilbur Whateley, who reaches a man's size and maturity at the age of ten: below the waist he is covered with black fur, has legs like a dinosaur, an eye on each hip, a tail, and tentacles with blood-sucking mouths protruding from his belly (*The Dunwich Horror*).

Lovecraft's views on the evolution of civilization parallel his views on human evolution. Just as he inverted Darwin's theory of evolution, he inverts Marx's theory of progress toward the

triumph of the proletariat and a classless society. The concept of decadence had been popularized in literature by Huysmans and other late nineteenth century writers. In *The Decline of the West*, the German scholar Oswald Spengler gave the theory historical support. Lovecraft, in his fictional world, extends the law of historical decadence to all forms of civilization, alien as well as human. Sculptured friezes found in the city abandoned by the star-shaped Old Ones, in Antarctica, show that long before its occupants had been forced to leave because of climatic changes and eventually massacred by their Shoggoth slaves, they had lost their creative powers and no longer mastered the scientific knowledge developed by preceding generations (*At the Mountains of Madness*). The underground civilization discovered by a Spanish conquistador in search of the fabled Gold Cities of the American West also falls into decay (*The Mound*). The short story *The Street* is actually an allegorical telling of the decline of civilization in the English colonies of America. Lovecraft alludes successively to the Pilgrims' arrival, the early struggles with the Indians, the prosperity achieved in the XVIIIth century, the War of Independence, the industrialization of the country and the commercialization of life, the Civil War, the waves of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and from the Near East, World War I, the Russian Revolution and the fall of the czar, the fear caused by the anarchists at the time of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial. Lovecraft illustrates these events by retracing the history of a single street. First, good valiant men of Anglo-Saxon blood fashioned that street, which initially was but a path trodden by bearers of water from a woodland spring to a cluster of houses by the beach. More men came and built cabins of stout logs along the path, with masonry on the side toward the forest where many Indians lurked with fire-arrows. There was a war, after which no more Indians troubled the street. More families came from the Motherland. The village grew into a town, waxed prosperous, and the town became a city. The cabins gave place to beautiful houses of brick and wood, with stone steps, iron railings, fanlights over the doors, carven mantels, graceful stairs, pleasing furniture, china and silver. Books and paintings and music came to the houses, and the young men went to the university. Behind the houses were walled rose-gardens with hedged paths and sun-dials. Once, most of the young men went away. Some never came back. It was then they furled the old flag and put up a new banner of stripes and stars. In time there were no more swords, three-cornered hats or periwigs in the street, but walking sticks, tall beaver hats, and cropped heads. One heard strange puffings, shrieks and rumblings from the river and from other directions. The earth was torn up to lay down strange pipes, and tall posts set bearing weird wires. Then came days of evil when many who had known the street of old no longer knew it and went away, for they found the newcomers had coarse and strident accents and unpleasant and ugly faces. Young men had to march forth once more, clad in blue. Many more never came back. Cheap ugly new buildings displaced the rose-gardens. New kinds of faces appeared on the street, swarthy, sinister faces whose owners spoke unfamiliar words and placed signs in unknown characters upon the musty houses. War and revolution raged across the sea. The new country had sent her young men to fight for the Motherland. This time, they wore olive drab uniforms. The ones who returned did not come back to the street. A dynasty had collapsed in Europe, and its degenerate subjects had found their way to the street, where only fear, hatred and ignorance now ruled. In everyone's eyes there was only a weird glitter of greed, ambition and wickedness. The swart sinister men who dwelt on the street were anarchists who only wanted to tear down the laws and virtues bequeathed through fifteen centuries of Anglo-Saxon freedom and

justice. The decadence of American civilization, which, for Lovecraft, had reached its apex in the XVIIIth century, prior to the War of Independence, is thus ascribed to industrialization, to the commercialization of life, and to the unrestricted flow of immigrants from non-Anglo-Saxon stock. The conclusion of the story indicates the cure prescribed by Lovecraft for all social ills: the destruction of the street and of its inhabitants. In the story, this destruction is brought about by a hurricane. If it had not been for that providential storm, the only solution would have been military intervention. It need hardly be said that Lovecraft inclined to fascism as a means of restoring or maintaining law and order.

To the fear of supernal entities, biological regression, and social disintegration must be added the threat to man's physical and psychological integrity. Lovecraft's fiction makes manifest this dual horror. His protagonists may be threatened with mutilation, dismemberment, or even the total loss of their own body, or with the total alienation of their own personality. In *The Moon-bog*, Denys Barry, a wealthy Irish-American, has bought back his ruined ancestral castle in Ireland to restore it to its former splendor. He has made the mistake of draining a great marshy bog which is reputed to have been the site of a city peopled by bog-wraiths. Denys Barry, his servants and his workers are all transformed into a horde of enormous slimy frogs. When the conquistador Pamfilo de Zamacona y Nuñez, in 1545, attempted to escape from the subterranean world of Xiniaian, which he had entered in 1541 in his quest for the fabled Gold Cities of the American West, with the complicity of his lover, the native woman T'la-Yub, the masters of Xiniaian turned his mutilated body into an automaton and planted it as a sentry to guard the tunnel leading to their world. His spirit was imprisoned in the headless body of T'la-Yub (*The Mound*). It is also the psychological personality, the consciousness of Charles Dexter Ward which has been replaced in his own body by that of his evil ancestor Joseph Curwen (*The Strange Case of Charles Dexter Ward*). But for the timely help of his fiancée, Adam Duncan would have been subjected to the same fate (*The Picture in the attic*). Other stories present variations on the theme of psychological alienation, when the protagonists discover within themselves the presence of a hitherto unsuspected personality. Such is the experience described in *The Outsider* and in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, where the narrators are faced with the unescapable truth about their own identity. In *The Outsider*, Lovecraft has described the discovery of the protagonist's real personality in a most effective symbolic way, somewhat similar to the device used by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Grey*: the character finds himself suddenly in front of a mirror, and he sees a disgusting, horrible face, the face of a ghoul.

The ideological perspective illustrated in Lovecraft's writing was obviously influenced by his existential situation: race, cultural tradition, social class, economic circumstance, family environment, sexual difficulties. Lovecraft's relatives on his mother's side belonged to the New England upper class. They were proud to be descended from the first colonists. These aristocratic bourgeois were called "Brahmins" in Boston, like the members of the highest caste in India. Lovecraft was proud of the fact that there were English noblemen among his maternal ancestors. His paternal grandfather, Joseph Lovecraft, had been a native of Devonshire whose father had lost his property. In 1827, Joseph Lovecraft emigrated to the United States with his wife and his six children. One of these children, George Lovecraft, had married a girl of British parentage. They had three children, two girls and a boy, Winfield Lovecraft. Winfield's parents were extremely proud of their British heritage and insisted their son speak with an English accent.

Lovecraft himself grew to be a strong Anglophile. Like many descendants of the early colonists, he was extremely proud of his ethnic background and he nurtured a strong nostalgia for the time when political and economic power was held by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Conditions had changed considerably with the influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, from Asia, from the Caribbean, from Latin America, and even from Ireland and French Canada. Lovecraft's racist outbursts were also directed against Jews and Negroes. He spoke of "squat, swarthy strangers", of "biologically inferior scum of Southern Europe and Western Asia," of the "stinking mongrel vermin", of "packs of greasy chimpanzees" [he was referring to Negroes], of the "more Asiatic types of puffy, rat-faced Jew", of "low-grade Southern Italian and Portuguese", of "the clamorous plague of French-Canadians", of the Irish "who are the pest of Boston", of "the hideous peasant Poles of New Jersey", of "loathsome Asiatic hordes" who make life impossible for "a proud, light-skinned Nordic". In moments of extreme xenophobia, he went so far as to advocate segregation or extermination: "Either stow'em out of sight or kill'em off -- anything so that a white man may walk along the streets without shuddering or nausea"⁹ These ethnic phobias were widespread among people of Old American ancestry at the time. Political power had already slipped out of their hands in many large Eastern cities. A large number of old and proud families had also lost much of their money, and were reduced to a state of genteel poverty. This was the case of Lovecraft himself, who found himself totally unable to compete with clever and ambitious immigrants.

Lovecraft's father had been a fairly prosperous salesman for the Gorham Silver Company. In 1893, when Lovecraft was only two and a half, his father went violently insane and had to be committed to a mental institution where he died in 1898. Lovecraft's maternal grandfather had been fairly wealthy, but the failure of a business venture caused him to lose most of his fortune. He died in 1904. Lovecraft's mother was ill-equipped to provide her son with the educational guidance and the social and practical skills required to get and hold a decent job. She raised him to be a gentleman of leisure, kept him at home, never kissed or hugged him, kept telling him how ugly he was, and greatly contributed to turn him into a snobbish, insecure, shy, nervous, repressed, and sexually inhibited child. There is no question that she was mentally unstable. She suffered from spells of hysteria and depression, and eventually, in 1919, had to be placed in the mental institution where her husband had died twenty years earlier. Lovecraft was twenty-nine at the time. His mother remained in this mental institution until her death, in 1921, following a gall-bladder operation. Lovecraft inherited some money from his grandfather and his mother, but the income from the capital was far too small to live on, even though his lifestyle was spartan in the extreme. His only meager earnings came from the sale of an occasional story, from ghost-writing, from helping would-be writers with their work, and from occasional menial jobs (selling tickets for evening movie shows, for instance). He constantly had to dip into his capital to make ends meet. When he died in 1937, at the age of 47, he had but little money left. Had he survived, he would probably have had to depend on the charity of his maternal aunts, with whom he lived after his mother's death. He did, more than once, make strenuous efforts to find a job, but his job-hunting methods were, to say the least, rather inept. It is well-known that racism, xenophobia, and reactionary politics are a common defense against one's own failures or inadequacies (in the case of the individual), or against the historical and economic conditions which have reduced a social class or an ethnic group to an inferior status (e.g., the Southern whites who turned to the

Ku Klux Klan, or the defeated and ruined Germans who blamed all their misfortunes on the Jews and turned to Hitler).

The first colonists who settled in New England had been well-received by the Indians, but when newcomers seized more and more land, the Indians started to fight back. The colonists, who were pious Puritans, never questioned their own righteousness in dispossessing those whom they saw as naked savages. It is significant that one of their descendants, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, should place the abode of the "black man", that is, the devil, in the forests where the Indians had retreated, but were not the Puritans always dressed in black? For the Puritans, the influence of evil was everywhere. The omnipresence of evil and the impossibility of erasing the mark of sin is amply illustrated in Hawthorne's writings (*The Scarlet Letter*, *Young Goodman Brown*, *Rapaccini's Daughter* ...). The Puritans had a strong belief in the Devil's powers, and were quick to suspect anyone of falling into sin, as was amply demonstrated by the Salem trials for witchcraft. One of the first victims of these trials, as is well known, was a black woman. Lovecraft had abandoned his ancestors' puritanical faith, but in his writings, it is usually among swamp Negroes, West Indian mulattoes, Mexican Indians, Kanakas and half-caste people that the demon gods recruit their followers (*The Horror at Red Hook*, *The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Electric Executioner*, for instance). And in the novel *The Lurker at the Threshold*, it is also an Indian sorcerer who calls to earth the gods of outer space, Dagon, Ossadowegah, or Yog-Sothoth.

The Puritans's strong sense of sin was especially aimed at sexual activity. Their culture unquestionably tended to inhibit sex. The view that sex was a bestial disgusting business to which men and women are condemned to submit for the sole purpose of breeding children was still common even in late nineteenth-century New England, and Lovecraft was no exception. The fact is that he led an almost sexless life. A major cause of his sexual repression was certainly his mother's attitude toward the body, her refusal to touch him, her description of him as hideous. Considering his low sexual drive, it might be thought rather strange that he should ever have married. This he did, however, and what is stranger still, his bride was a Russian-born Jewish divorcee named Sonia Haft Shifirkin Greene, a very attractive woman by all accounts. He was thirty four, she was forty one. They were married on March 3, 1924. She was obviously sexually experienced. It was she who had initiated the relationship. She later confided to a friend of Lovecraft: "Howard was entirely adequate sexually, but he always approached sex as if he did not quite like it." (L. Sprague de Camp, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209). She always had to make the opening move. After the wedding, they lived together in New York, but the marriage did not last very long. They were both unemployed, and on December 31, Sonia had to leave New York for Cincinnati, where she had found a job. They were not to live together again as man and wife, and they eventually were divorced, amicably, in 1929. Sonia was to remarry in 1935. Lovecraft returned to Providence, where he moved in with his two maternal aunts.

How could a man so filled with hatred and disgust for Jews and foreigners enter such a union? It must be remembered that nearly all of the sexual couplings mentioned in Lovecraft's writings involve mates not just of different races, but of different species. Sir Wade Jermyn marries a white ape-woman (*Arthur Jermyn*), old Captain Obed Marsh a fish-creature (*The Shadow over Innsmouth*), Lavinia Whateley is impregnated by an entity called from outer space by her wizard father (*The Dunwich Horror*), and Uriah Grandison couples with a female

succubus (*The Shadow in the Attic*). The marriage of Lovecraft with Sonia Haft Shifirkin Greene may have provoked in him a similar mixture of fascination and repulsion. This mixture of opposites reminds me of Baudelaire's prose-poem *Le Joujou du pauvre*. It tells of two children separated by the metal bars of a fence. On one side, there is a beautiful white castle, a well-tended park, a child richly dressed surrounded by magnificent toys scattered on the ground. On the other side, the side of the road, there is a child dressed in rags, whose only toy is a rat in a cage. The rich child has cast aside his splendid toys. He has eyes only for the caged rat. The poem concludes with an observation about the children's teeth: they are equally white. The castle, the rich child and his toys represent the social, moral and artistic values accepted by conventional society. The fence which surrounds them, however, points to the restrictiveness of these values. The raggedy child and his rat are outside the gate. They symbolize the freedom of the road, the vitality of life, the dark and threatening animal powers of the unconscious, of Eros and Thanatos. The two children thus may be considered as symbols of the opposition, in Freudian terms, of the superego and the id, or, to use a Nietzschean terminology, of the Apollinian and the Dionysiac. Lovecraft would not have devoted so much of his writings to half-animal and half-human creatures or to alien monsters had he not felt for them both horror and fascination. If ever the Asiatic hordes, the swamp Negroes and the West Indian mulattoes who worship Cthulhu should come to rule the earth, mankind would become as the Great Old Ones, "free and wild and beyond good an evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy [...] and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom." (*The Call of Cthulhu*). It is hard to believe, after reading these lines, that Nietzsche's teachings had not found a sympathetic echo in Lovecraft's unconscious.

The horror provoked by the discovery, within oneself, of an alien personality may eventually be replaced by joyful acceptance. In *The Outsider*, the narrator soon embraces what he had at first rejected with disgust. So does the protagonist of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* when he learns that his grandmother was a fish-creature. Instead of fearing the unknown sea-depths, he feels queerly drawn to them. They bring him exultation instead of repulsion and terror. His uncle killed himself (like *Arthur Jermyn*), rather than accept himself for what he was, but the narrator of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* will escape to the underwater city where he will dwell forever amidst glory and wonder. The strange city under the sea is an obvious representation of the strange and wondrous treasures which await those who dare enter the depths of the unconscious.

A similar, albeit less pronounced duality may be observed in Lovecraft's views on race and politics. I have mentioned his rabid pronouncements against non-Anglo-Saxons and his praise of Hitler and Mussolini. But Lovecraft is also the man who married a Russian-born Jewish woman, and who counted several Jews among his closest friends. As he matured, he grew far more tolerant not only of Jews, but also of Negroes, French Canadians, and other ethnic groups. He would also abandon the conservative Republican party, favor the Socialist program of Norman Thomas, vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal, denounce the Nazis, and sympathize with the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.

This change in his attitude toward race and politics is clearly reflected in his last writings. The narrator of the novel *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931) shows understanding and pity for the survivors of an alien race doomed to extinction. Similarly, the story *In the Walls of Eryx* (1935) is a strong indictment of Western (and Yankee) racism, imperialism, colonialism, and

capitalism. American astronauts have been sent to the planet Venus to lay their hands on the precious crystals which can provide an abundant source of energy for earth, as well as huge profits for the Company's shareholders. Unfortunately, the crystals are sacred to the Venusian natives, scaly lizard-like humanoids who have only swords and poison darts to defend themselves. For the astronauts, the only sane solution is to bring enough troops armed with modern weapons to wipe out the entire native population.

In early March 1937, Lovecraft was diagnosed with colon cancer, but the diagnosis came much too late for surgery. He died a few days later, on March 15, at the age of forty seven.

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- I. *The Dunwich Horror and other stories*
- II. *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels*
- III. *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*
- IV. *The Horror in the Museum and Other Revisions*
- V. *Selected Letters. i. 1911-1924*
- VI. *Selected Letters. ii. 1925-1929*
- VII. *Selected Letters. iii. 1929-1931*
- VIII. *Selected Letters. iv. 1932-1934*
- IX. *Selected Letters. v. 1934-1937*

Over the past thirty years, Lovecraft's novels and stories have also been collected in numerous paper back editions:

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In my own study of Lovecraft, I have used only, besides Lovecraft's own works, the preface by August Derleth and the biography of L. Sprague de Camp. In truth, my main inspiration has been the page of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993, p. 161) in which he discusses the blows struck against human pride by Copernicus, Darwin, Marx and Freud. That page has provided me with the source and the framework of my essay. This does not mean that there are not many valuable insights and judgments to be found in the other studies mentioned in the above bibliography. It only means that I have approached Lovecraft's writings from a different angle.

1. L. Sprague de Camp, *Lovecraft. A Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), p. 466

2. *H.P. Lovecraft Centennial Conference*, August 17-19, 1990. The program mentions 25 papers, exhibits, film showings, and meetings. Here are the titles of some of the papers: "Roots of Horror in New England", "Lovecraft's medieval history", "Autobiographical reading of *The Colour out of space*", "*Dagon* and Lovecraft as a character of fiction", "Importance of dreams in Lovecraft's writings", and "Current state of Lovecraft criticism".

3. *Cahiers de l'Herne*, no 12 (1969)

4. "... as flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods: they kill us for their sport." (*King Lear*, IV, i); "je veux le voir courir d'un piège à l'autre, comme un rat écervelé" (Cocteau, *La Machine infernale*. Cocteau's play is quite faithful to the spirit of *Oedipus Rex*); "le spectacle de rois roulés comme

les galets des grèves" (Malraux, *Les Voix du Silence*, [Paris: Gallimard, 1951], p. 628

5. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993), pp. 160-162.

6. *At the Mountains of Madness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), p.48; *The Shadow out of Time*

7. Preface to *The Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), vol. I, p. VII-VIII

8. August Derleth, "The Cthulhu Mythos", in *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), vol. I, pp. X-XII

9. L. Sprague De Camp, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-2, 216, 219, 248, 251, 256, 264-308

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[Translation of Reun ar C'halan [René Galand]: "Me gloazet Howard Phillips Lovecraft", *Al Liamm*, niv. 312 (Genver-C'hwevrer 1999), pp. 9-32]