

An Analysis of Racial Prejudice in *The Call of Cthulhu* and the Lovecraftian Lore

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Abstract: When it comes to weird fiction literature, the name H.P Lovecraft is the most important that comes to mind. His genius and contributions to the field of horror fiction are undeniable, like the creation of the “Cosmic Horror” subgenre and his influence on the works of other authors to this day. However, a deep reading of Lovecraft’s writing can reveal an author whose prejudiced opinions constructed a lore that made racialised people and beings the enemies of his stories. The villains in Lovecraft’s stories oftentimes are described as horrific creatures, not humans; monsters that are, in the case of *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016), not only perceived as strange but also worshipped by people that are not of the protagonist’s race. Hence, this study contemplates traces of prejudice and racism in Lovecraft’s depiction of evil. By separating five quotes of what can be considered Lovecraft’s most famous creation — *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016) —, the main objective of this article consists on making documentary research analysing the possible presence of racism in the short story. The studies of Ellis (2010) about Lovecraft’s racism and Frye (2006) on eugenics, besides the one of Joshi (2003) on the concept of Weird Fiction are relevant to this present article, as well as the excerpts and words of Lovecraft (2009; 2013; 2014; 2016) himself.

Keywords: Weird Fiction; Lovecraft; Racism; Evil.

Resumo: Quando se trata de Literatura de Ficção do Bizarro¹, o nome H.P. Lovecraft é o primeiro que vem à mente. Sua genialidade e contribuições para o campo da Ficção de Horror não podem ser negadas, como a criação do subgênero “Horror Cósmico” e a sua influência nas obras de outros autores até os dias de hoje. Entretanto, uma leitura cuidadosa da escrita de Lovecraft pode revelar um autor cujas opiniões preconceituosas construíram um universo que caracterizou pessoas e seres racializados como os inimigos de suas histórias. Os vilões nas histórias de Lovecraft frequentemente são descritos como criaturas horripilantes, inumanas; monstros que são, no caso de *O Chamado de Cthulhu* (2016), não apenas vistos como estranhos, mas também são adorados por pessoas que não são da mesma raça que a do protagonista. Portanto, este estudo é conduzido referente a traços de preconceito e racismo na representação lovecraftiana da maldade. Separando cinco citações do que seria considerada a criação mais famosa de Lovecraft - *O Chamado de Cthulhu* (2016) - o objetivo principal deste artigo consiste em fazer uma pesquisa documental analisando a possível presença do racismo no conto. Os textos de Ellis (2010) sobre o racismo de Lovecraft e de Frye (2016) sobre eugenia, além do trabalho de Joshi (2003) sobre o conceito de Ficção do Bizarro são relevantes para o presente artigo, assim como os trechos e palavras do próprio Lovecraft (2009; 2013; 2014; 2006).

Palavras-chave: Ficção do Bizarro; Lovecraft; Racismo; Maldade.

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²The term “Weird Fiction literature” was translated to Portuguese by the authors of this article.

1. Introduction

H. P. Lovecraft was a relevant horror and fiction writer from the 20th century who wrote novels and short stories within what can be called “Weird Fiction”. One of the main characteristics that may be highlighted in Lovecraftian horror is how the author’s beliefs might have been expressed in his stories, that is, how his words are translating his fears and insecurities. In his works, Lovecraft portrayed the insignificance of humanity in comparison to the greatness of the universe; the decline of human beings within the universe and the possibility of extinction through what the writer described as “cosmic horrors” — unimaginable, fantastic creatures that could wipe out humanity without much effort. Lovecraft (2014, p. 1) justified this concept in his writing by saying: “The oldest and strongest emotion in mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is the fear of the unknown”.

It is possible to see, through the Lovecraftian horror, many of the phobias that the author could have had. The previously mentioned “cosmic horror” could be a sign of cosmophobia. Also, a fear of the sea is shown by the presence of *Cthulhu*, a monster living in the depths of the sea and, most of all, xenophobia, which could be seen as a sign of his fear of the unknown. Due to his traditional and conservative opinions, and an intolerance for what he did not accept, traces of racism can be found in Lovecraft’s works, especially against Afro-Americans, Native Americans, mixed-race people and immigrants.

Thus, recognizing the presence of the author’s phobias in his literature, this article intends to describe *how* Lovecraft’s perception of the world and racialised people in it influenced his “Weird Fiction” and was used to build the image of the villains and evil itself. In other words: how the things he feared or disliked were explicitly expressed in the antagonists of his tales. In this sense, this article proposes to contextualise Lovecraft’s fiction in his historical period and precepts, for his beliefs influenced his writing heavily.

To do so, Lovecraft’s chef-d’oeuvre, the short story *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016), has been chosen as this work’s corpus. In this text, Lovecraft shows the pinnacle of horror so grand that cannot be tamed or even described, and the races that seek to unleash the creature play an important part in the story. Hence, the main objective of this work is to point out traces of racism and prejudice in how evil is depicted by analysing five selected excerpts of this short story through documentary research of a qualitative nature.

2. Weird fiction, cosmic horror and prejudice in the Lovecraftian horror

As previously mentioned, H.P. Lovecraft was a horror author who wrote stories within the literary genre “Weird Fiction”, which is a fiction subgenre that encompasses elements of fantasy, horror and supernatural fiction. In the words of Neuharth (p. 1, 2019), when interviewed by James Machin, weird fiction is: “Fiction that provokes and involves a

more conceptual fear than that precipitated by threats to physical safety or straightforward revulsion”. Originating in the 19th century with Edgar Allan Poe as its pioneer, weird fiction inspires fear and awe, serving as a form of expression of psychological and philosophical institutions within society, such as the cultural, religious and even political ones (JOSHI, 2003). Thus, the sole meaning of weird fiction indicates the usage of the unknown — mythical, alien, supernatural forces — as a tool to reach its goal: a fear so genuine that it is paralysing, for there is nothing you can do to fight it.

The subgenre led to the creation of Lovecraft’s most famous concept. This concept would, later on, serve as an inspiration for many authors (Ramsey Campbell, Lin Carter, Stephen King, T.E.D. Klein, Brian Lumley, Colin Wilson, etc); it is the idea of “Cosmic Horror”. Lovecraft once wrote in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*:

[Cosmic horror is] that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space (LOVECRAFT, 2014, p. 3)

Cosmic Horror is a result of one of humanity’s deepest fears: the fear of men’s insignificance against the greatness of the universe. Acknowledging such fears, Lovecraft used this concept to conceive most of the monsters that would terrorise his tales, each one big and nearly impossible to defeat; highlighting along these lines the impotence of the human race, as opposed to writing the human race as in charge of their reality. The *Cthulhu*, for instance, is a great example of a cosmic monster whose defeat is not possible; humanity can only wait for its inevitable return.

The fear of the unknown does not exist only within the context of literary fiction. Humanity has always let this sort of fear influence their social and political lives. Fearing or feeling a repulsion for what one does not know (or does not live with) is one of the reasons used to justify any type of prejudice. England — and Europe, in general — have a history of cultural racism and the belief in white and Christian supremacy. Lovecraft (2013) was known for his traditionalist and conservative political opinions; even though he was not British, his praise for the glory of Britain can be seen in many of his poems like “An American to Mother England” (2013) and “Britannia Victura” (2013). He also was, as a matter of fact, a eugenicist (FRYE, 2006). In the 19th century, Eugenics was a strong movement that opened space to racist and Eurocentric supremacist thoughts with the belief in the improvement of the human race through selective breeding. This line of thought was the very same one that motivated, in the late 19th century and 20th century, eugenic policies including the Nazi ones. Hence, Lovecraft used his conceptions of race and his knowledge of science to inspire the creation of horror in his fiction.

Many authors, although admiring Lovecraft's writing abilities and exceptional creativity, acknowledge that the author has certain ideologies that cannot be stimulated. These ideologies are oftentimes inserted in his writings, although some might not believe and recognise them. An author's worldview, ideals and prejudice are always part of their texts, explicitly or implicitly. Lovecraft's prejudice in terms of race is not and cannot be separated from his works, and analysing them in detail means keeping an eye open to his problematic opinions as a human being. In this sense, the connection between the Lovecraft human and the writer is identified: his poems, letters and short stories show how discourses of prejudice can be related to the concept of fear and voiced through language and literature. On this issue, Frye (2006, p. 239) comments: "I feel, however, that Lovecraft's role as eugenicist is virtually inextricable from his role as writer of weird fiction [...] Lovecraft's fear of genetic unknowns parallels the general existential concerns he voices in letters and stories".

Considering such notions, the present article analyses how the author might have used his preconceived notions as a source of inspiration for his novels and short stories, in particular his *magnum opus*: *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016). In this short story, Lovecraft shows the pinnacle of cosmic horror that inspires weird fiction writers until today. Also, — intentionally or not — the main villain of the story is a "racial other" (FRYE, 2006, p. 240): something distinct from us. Hence, it can be seen how Lovecraft's phobias and prejudices might have influenced his plots when it comes to the characterization of evil.

3. Racial prejudice in *The Call of Cthulhu*

The horrors described in *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016), and mainly, its great ancient creature, the *Cthulhu*, have inspired many authors and have also been the object of several adaptations. However, what makes this short story so compelling? One would argue that the relevance of the story lies in Lovecraft's uncanny ability to create horror through his invented universe and develop situations that bring out the discomforting feeling of despair and helplessness.

The cosmic horror, as developed by the author and broadly present in the short story, tackles the intrinsic human fear of being defenceless against forces that cannot be dealt with. Such fear is translated by the author's creation of enemies that could not even be described, as their own existence defies human comprehension. The existence of *Cthulhu* by itself already represents the human race's demise, and there is no action that could possibly be taken in a form of defence, as the monster is not only immortal and invincible but cannot even be understood.

Through the *Cthulhu* itself, or scenarios that are carefully described and evoke incomprehensible fear (the whole concept of the city of R'lyeh for example); the unnatural aspect of everything that is related to the *Cthulhu* or the other ancients is enough to cause

discomfort and of course, the unexplainable fear. Such a unique form of producing horror makes the Lovecraftian lore stand out in the midst of many works of the horror genre of the author's time period as well as current works.

"Men [...] will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse" (LOVECRAFT, 2014, p. 3). The very conception of weird fiction and cosmic horror helped Lovecraft to construct villains based on his fear of the unknown. In many of his stories, evil is recognised in the peculiar, alien face of "the other", which can be explained as a general concept of discrimination against other races — human or not. In *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (2009), Lovecraft makes us fear the sea and its hybrid creatures, the *Deep Ones*: half human and half amphibious, these creatures cause repulsion in the reader since the author first mentions them. Lovecraft uses his creativity to conceive genetically impossible beings, always described in a fog of mystery and horror, coming to subdue humans through their promises and secretive cults. Cosmic horror, racism and/or xenophobia meet when Lovecraft, most of the time, portrays evil as something genetically and racially distinct from the protagonists of his stories: the white, English man (FRYE, 2006).

Such doing is not a minority in his writing. The first quote analysed in this article is the first time *Cthulhu* makes its appearance through the description of a clay figure found on Angell's belongings. In the words of the author:

It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings (LOVECRAFT, 2016, p. 3).

Lovecraft imagines a grand horror resulting from the mixing of unrelated animals. The *Cthulhu*, although not from our dimension, takes its grotesque form of "an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature" (LOVECRAFT, 2016, p. 3). In just the first three pages of the short story, Lovecraft presents us with the great evil: the racial other, a cosmic stranger. It is also interesting how he describes the type of people that are involved with it, that is, knowing this evil in such an intricate manner that they are capable of making a sculpture of it. If "only a diseased fancy could conceive" (LOVECRAFT, 2016, p. 3) such a being, it can only mean that the people involved in the *Cthulhu* cult are sick, wicked ones as well. And, as this work will discuss further on, the ones involved in the rising of *Cthulhu* are Black people, Native Americans and mixed people; this fact shows the Lovecraftian desire for villainizing those that are from a different race than his.

The more the short story develops, the more the racism held by Lovecraft can be seen as an influence on his writing. His aversion to people he was not acquainted with and who were treated as villains inside the environment of his stories can be seen in many forms, through various situations and often unveiled. Although the actual monster, the *Cthulhu*, only makes an appearance at the end of the short story, a lot about it is mentioned especially when descriptions of the cults that worshipped the ancient creature are made. The following quote, continuing the events of the previous one, describes Professor Angell's first contact with a *Cthulhu* cult; when inspector Legrasse comments that, during a rainy night in New Orleans:

The statuette, idol, fetish, or whatever it was, had been captured some months before in the wooded swamps south of New Orleans during a raid on a supposed voodoo meeting; and so singular and hideous were the rites connected with it, that the police could not but realise that they had stumbled on a dark cult totally unknown to them, and infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles (LOVECRAFT, 2016, p. 7).

As made clear in the excerpt, the raided cult happened somewhere that inspector Legrasse and the other scholars were simply unfamiliar with. The reasons that led to the raid in the swamps of New Orleans were not inspired by a desire to contain the *Cthulhu*, after all, at the time the monster was still unfamiliar to them; the creed was stopped simply for practising what the author described as “the blackest of the African voodoo circles” (LOVECRAFT, 2016, p. 7). This demonstrates not only racism towards African Americans, but also religious intolerance with religions of African origin. The text proceeds to later affirm that “The region now entered by the police was one of traditionally evil repute, substantially unknown and untraversed by white men.” (LOVECRAFT, 2006, p. 3). Once again, this implies that places uninhabited by white men are filled with evil and immorality; the white men being reasonable and correct, unlike people the author might consider inferior or simply irrational. This characteristic in the excerpt reveals what Ellis (2010) calls binary opposition in the Lovecraftian lore and poetry: a system in which language is used to oppose two distinct groups, in this case, good and evil, the correct and the corrupt.

The unveiled — yet subtle — attacks on racial minorities in Europe and the USA continue throughout the entire short story. On this matter, it is important to comment on how Lovecraft used language to characterise the races he talked about in his writings. Ellis (2010) remarks how, in his poetry, Lovecraft used several literary and linguistic tools to characterise races and construct the opinion of the readers about them; sarcasm, projection and irony are just some of the strategies used by the author in his early poetry. Ellis (2010) explains that utilising these strategies does not mean automatically being racist, but employing language in certain patterns to construct a derogatory view of race is inappropriate and suspicious, at least. Also, Lovecraft dehumanises the races he opposes

through language; he takes their civilisation out by using derogatory adjectives and expressions like “savage” and “ape-resembling beast” in *De Triumpho Naturae* (LOVECRAFT, 1905, p. 14, l. 19 apud ELLIS, 2010, p. 128-131).

When it comes to *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016), though, Lovecraft utilises the strategy of binary opposition and references to colour and offensive adjectives (ELLIS, 2010, p. 133) to display how the protagonist sees the antagonists. The binary opposition is used by Lovecraft in the sense of elevation and debasement; speaking highly of some and poorly of others, inducing the judgement of readers to construct some characters as victims and others as accomplices in the greater plan of The Great Old Ones (the group from which the entity *Cthulhu* is from). The internalised racism of his time is also shown in the distinct description of the white folk and minorities in the short story. Whereas the white folk are distinguished, good men with high-ranked professions — police officers, researchers and professors —, the other races are described as cult participants, prisoners and seamen. All of them “proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type [...] [with] a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands” (LOVECRAFT, 2016, p. 12). Hence, the Lovecraftian ability to downgrade characters through degrading adjectives and unabashed usage of colour, constructing racialised people as naive and mischievous, thus, more susceptible to the evil influence and control of *Cthulhu*.

Horror tales often are not built to have happy endings. The Lovecraftian lore is filled with feelings of despair and hopelessness; the idea that men are simply unprotected against the great dangers of the cosmos. *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016) is not different at all; binary opposition appears as the central literary design of the short story in yet another example as the main character spends a lot of time unveiling secrets that most of the population is completely oblivious to and at the end of the story finds himself in unavoidable danger. Here, Lovecraft separates the protagonist from the ignorant rest of the world. The apocalyptic crisis that the unleashing of *Cthulhu* announces is ignored or simply unheard of by the majority of the population, having only the people involved with the cult and the protagonist investigating the situation, having to bare the great suffering that knowing it all brings. Such defencelessness is present in the following excerpt:

One thing I began to suspect, and which I now fear I *know*², is that my uncle's death was far from natural. He fell on a narrow hill street leading up from an ancient waterfront swarming with foreign mongrels, after a careless push from a negro sailor. I did not forget the mixed blood and marine pursuits of the cult-members in Louisiana, and would not be surprised to learn of secret methods and poison needles as ruthless and as anciently known as the cryptic rites and beliefs (LOVECRAFT, 2016, p. 16).

² Emphasis made by Lovecraft.

After discovering so much about *Cthulhu*, Thurston fears that he might have the same ending as his uncle: pushed to his death by the hands of a black man. Once again, there is a focus on skin colour and it is possible to see the villainization of this man in the eyes of the character; a servant of the evil monster that not only terrorised so many people but also will be responsible for, at some point, putting an end to humanity. Thurston, fearing a fate the same as his uncle's, shows a position from the author who chose to place a black person as untrustworthy; the same posture is constantly seen by prejudiced people who see Black people, Indigenous people, or immigrants as the enemy. It is possible to see that what the man fears are those people; the hate is never directed to the actual foe.

4. Conclusion

In the conception of Lovecraft (2014), uncertainty and danger are powerful allies when writing weird tales. Every unknown object, place, person and world has an infinite capacity for bearing evil. Hence, in *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016) the author is attentive to portray unknown people, communities, cultures and beings as vessels for corruption and disaster. His writings portray the fantasies of a man about "evil possibilities" coming from unknown places but mostly coming from people he cannot relate with (FRYE, 2006, p. 240). Analysing the works of a long-gone author brings out many doubts as to what could have motivated the plots, characters, and situations described in the stories. It is not possible to affirm with certainty the reasons for the choices made by H. P. Lovecraft when establishing his concept of what is evil. However, it can be assumed that Lovecraft's careful racial description when talking about each one of his characters does not seem incidental.

Concerning the question this article aimed to answer and the quotes analysed it is possible to argue that the ideas and principles of a writer can be seen in their text; in this sense, Lovecraft let every side of him — good or bad — show through his lore. Taking not only *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016) as an example but also other short stories and poems cited in this article, it can be seen that throughout these writings each person's skin tone or birth country are carefully placed. This placement always happens with the minorities on the evil, belittled side. In *The Call of Cthulhu* (2016) we see the main character, his uncle and every noble, heroic and trustworthy person being white and educated. However, George Angell's murderer, as well as every single one of the *Cthulhu*'s worshipers are either Black, Indigenous, or simply mixed-race.

Finally, it can be established that the greatest fear of Lovecraft (2016) is not only the monsters which hide in the depths of the sea or the abyss of the cosmos. His character, Francis Wayland Thruston spent all his life seeing his demise in the face of every man and woman different from him. This reveals a much more human and tangible fear: of reality, facts of existence that can potentially hurt you. Thus, it can be argued that the real possibility of something going extremely wrong is one of the things that led Lovecraft to

write frightful tales. In his world, Lovecraft teaches that every corner can hide the evil and unthinkable, therefore, one must always be alert — and alert others of this menace. Perhaps, this was what he was trying to express with his lore.

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