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**Lovecraft's Legacy:**

The Intertwinement of H.P. Lovecraft's Life and Work

**Lovecraftova zapuščina:**

Preplet življenja in dela H.P. Lovecrafta

Magistrsko delo

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Lovecraft's Legacy: The Intertwinement of H.P. Lovecraft's Life and Work**

This thesis argues that in the case of H.P. Lovecraft it is not possible to separate the person from the author, as his personal fears, beliefs and perceived threats decisively shape his body of work. I show this especially through the analysis of the story "The Rats in the Walls," which reveals the author's atavistic fear of mental deterioration, which originates from the family's fragile mental disposition. Next, the story "The Horror at Red Hook" marks Lovecraft's outbursts of racial prejudice towards immigrants, which came to the fore when he came in contact with the Other during his stay in New York. Finally, the analysis of the story "The Shadow over Innsmouth" points out Lovecraft's fear of miscegenation and his obsession with a pure ethnic line. Not only did Lovecraft's personal fears dominate his life, he also channelled them to become an inspiration for his eldritch weird fiction.

**Keywords:** H.P. Lovecraft, the Other, atavism, xenophobia, miscegenation.

## **IZVLEČEK**

### **Lovecraftova zapuščina: Preplet življenja in dela H.P. Lovecrafta**

Magistrsko delo obravnava življenje in delo H.P. Lovecrafta ter zagovarja tezo, da ju ni mogoče ločiti med seboj, saj so avtorjevi strahovi, prepričanja ter grožnje, ki jih je zaznaval, odločilno vplivali na njegov opus. Na podlagi analize kratke zgodbe "The Rats in the Walls" magistrska naloga identificira temo atavizma, oziroma avtorjevega strahu pred mentalno regresijo, ki izhaja iz krhkega duševnega zdravja prednikov. Temu sledi analiza kratke zgodbe "The Horror at Red Hook", ki vsebuje Lovecraftove izbruhe rasnih predsodkov do priseljencev. Avtorjeva ksenofobija je še posebej prišla do izraza v času njegovega bivanja v New Yorku, ko je prišel v neposreden stik z Drugim. Analiza tretje Lovecraftove zgodbe "The Shadow over Innsmouth" razkrije avtorjev strah pred miscegenacijo in njegovo obsesijo z etnično čistostjo. Osebni strahovi H.P. Lovecrafta niso prevladali le nad njegovim življenjem, temveč so mu služili tudi kot navdih za ustvarjanje grozljive fikcije.

**Ključne besede:** H.P. Lovecraft, koncept Drugega, atavizem, ksenofobija, miscegenacija.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Howard Philips Lovecraft (1890-1937) is one of the most popular and most notorious American writers of the twentieth century. Even though his short stories did not receive any significant recognition during his lifetime, which made him unable to break away from relative obscurity and poverty, the weird fiction of H.P. Lovecraft massively grew in stature posthumously and earned him a position in the Canon of horror literature.<sup>1</sup> The eldritch tales of the Cthulhu Mythos have gathered a cult following and references to Lovecraft's work have entered the realms of popular culture as well. Nevertheless, the notoriety of H.P. Lovecraft stems more from his persona rather than from his work. The reason the author is renowned for his prolificacy is not his body of work, but Lovecraft's extensive correspondence with numerous other authors, friends and acquaintances. S.T. Joshi, arguably the most prominent scholar of H.P. Lovecraft's life and work, estimates that Lovecraft wrote roughly 80,000 letters in his lifetime (2016, 284). Even though only a fraction of the letters is still preserved and an even smaller fraction of them is published and available to the public, the letters complement the body of work by outlining the views and character of the man.

In the introduction of the essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft argues that the "oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (2011, 423). On one hand, this statement has inspired his weird fiction, which frequently evokes the horrific effect from the differentiation from the monstrous Other. On the other hand, Lovecraft was unable to rise above this very same fear of the unknown himself, despite the fact he had lucidly identified it. His controversial views on immigration, ethnic minorities, support of eugenics and fears of miscegenation and the downfall of humanity are well documented. These disturbing views have not aged well and present a modern reader with a serious challenge of how to deal with them. Even though many literary critics have gone to great lengths to contextualize the xenophobia inherent to Lovecraft's work simply as the prevailing thought of those times, the legacy of H.P. Lovecraft has been hit by the burden of his own problematic views. Furthermore, Alan Moore suggests that Lovecraft represents "an almost unbearably sensitive barometer of American dread" (2014, 10), which explains why the fascination and extensive studying of Lovecraft's life and work have not dwindled at all.

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<sup>1</sup> The Library of America published an edition of Lovecraft's *Tales* in 2005, which is a milestone that confirms H.P. Lovecraft's canonization (Joshi 2013, 7).

With Lovecraft's work enjoying greater relevance than ever, the thesis focuses on the controversial views of the man and the explicit and implicit messages in his work. This thesis argues that, in the case of H.P. Lovecraft, it is not possible to separate the person from the author, as his personal fears, beliefs and perceived threats decisively shape his body of work.

Drawing from primary and secondary sources, the aim of the thesis is to provide a clear and thorough overview of the intertwining of H.P. Lovecraft as a person and as an author. In order to do that, an examination of his life is presented first. What follows is an analysis of three short stories: "The Rats in the Walls," "The Horror at Red Hook" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth." Each of the three stories comes from a different period of Lovecraft's life: "The Rats in the Walls" was written in his early writing days prior to his departure from New England; "The Horror at Red Hook" was written during his unsuccessful stint in New York, which had a lasting influence on Lovecraft; "The Shadow over Innsmouth" was written in his later period in which he wrote the majority of his more celebrated stories. By choosing stories from different phases of Lovecraft's life, I try to capture the complete scope of his thought and its reflections in his work. In addition, the prevailing themes in each of the three stories manifest in what I identify as the three pillars of Lovecraft's fear: atavism ("relating to or characterized by reversion to something ancient or ancestral"), xenophobia ("intense or irrational dislike or fear of people from other countries") and miscegenation ("the interbreeding of people considered to be of different racial types").<sup>2</sup> The aim is to provide the links between Lovecraft's work and life and prove that fear was, in fact, a key source of inspiration for his writing.

### **1.1. Lovecraft's philosophy and literary style**

Lovecraft's literary style is as polarizing as Marmite: one either loves it, or one cannot stomach it at all. The accumulation of adjectives, archaic language (e.g. eldritch, cyclopean, gibbous), an almost obsessive attention to detail and a slow pace do not make reading Lovecraft's stories an effortless task. After all, Peter Cannon argues that Lovecraft "deserves recognition as one of America's greatest literary eccentrics" (2016, 8). This is an intriguing title and makes one wonder which are the literary and personal traits that justify it. According to Michel Houellebecq, Lovecraft was only interested in evoking "wonderment and fear" and deliberately ignored all other sentiments (2008, 59). Moreover, Houellebecq claims that Lovecraft's "writings have but one aim: to bring the reader to a state of *fascination*" (2008,

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<sup>2</sup> These definitions are from the Oxford Dictionary of English, 3rd ed.

59). The term fascination is related to the term fantastic, which is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as “a mode of fiction in which the possible and the impossible are confounded so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for the story’s strange events” (Baldick 2008, 125). There is no denial that Lovecraft succeeded in his aim and managed to create his very own sub-genre of weird fiction. Today we often equate Lovecraft’s fiction with the term Cthulhu Mythos, but as Joshi points out the term was coined “by August Derleth after Lovecraft’s death” (2016, 150). Named after Lovecraft’s most famous deity, the Cthulhu Mythos stands for “a series of plot devices,” but Joshi makes a clear distinction that the Mythos does not stand for the “tales themselves and [...] the philosophy behind the tales” (2016, 151). Joshi classifies these plot devices in three groups: “a) invented ‘gods’ and the cults or worshippers that have grown up around them; b) an ever-increasing library of mythical books of occult lore; and c) a fictitious New England topography (Arkham, Dunwich, Innsmouth, etc.)” (2016, 151). The reason for Joshi making a distinction between the Cthulhu Mythos on one side and Lovecraft’s body of work and his philosophy on the other is that the Mythos is ever expanding through the amateur writings of fans that comply with the plot devices, but do not always capture the core philosophy at the centre of Lovecraft’s work.

This philosophy at the heart of Lovecraft’s stories and his worldview is cosmic indifferentism. According to Philip Smith, “humanity, in Lovecraft’s vision, is falsely convinced of its own importance on a universal scale” (2011, 835). Lovecraft marginalizes humanity at the expense of the cosmos, which takes the central role. His universe is therefore “populated with creatures far older than humanity which, rather than seeking to manipulate, frighten or otherwise interact with humans, are utterly indifferent to them” (Smith 2011, 835). Furthermore, Smith asserts that “the fundamental horror of Lovecraft’s world is this sense of humanity’s utter insignificance, [and its] realization [that] produces a terrible enlightenment and madness in his characters” (2011, 835). A thorough reading of his work reveals a remarkable consistency of the universe, or as Smith puts it “factual continuations” (2011, 836), which are scattered around Lovecraft’s body of work. Meanwhile, Joshi identifies the central belief of Lovecraft’s cosmic indifferentism as mechanic materialism, which works on two levels. Firstly, “the universe is a ‘mechanism’ governed by fixed laws [...] where all entity is inextricably connected causally [and] there can be no such thing as chance (hence no free will but instead an absolute determinism) since every incident is the inevitable outcome of countless [...] events reaching back into infinity” (Joshi 2016, 36). Secondly, “all entity is

material and there can be no other essence,” meaning that non-material substances such as spirit cannot exist (Joshi 2016, 36). In other words, the protagonists in the Lovecraftian universe are unable to escape from their inevitable, pre-determined fate – they are simply not aware of it yet. Once they discover the scope of their irrelevance in the universe, the unbearable weight of the realization brings them either to madness or breaks them down in a different way. In the short story “Dagon,” for example, the narrator discovers a monolith covered in hieroglyphs depicting crude aquatic creatures and encounters a nightmarish monster in the Pacific. The narrator’s mind is eventually haunted by the images of the creature and the story ends with the protagonist’s suicide.

In numerous stories, Graham Harman asserts, the narrators “tend to be taciturn academics passively observing the horrors that unfold, rather than men of action” (2012, 47). Houellebecq makes a similar observation claiming that “Lovecraft’s characters [...] are almost indistinguishable from one another,” as they are all projections of Lovecraft’s own personality (2008, 68). Moreover, Houellebecq provides a description of a prototypical Lovecraftian character (2008, 68):

Usually students or professors at a New England university (preferably, Miskatonic University) who specialize in anthropology or folklore, or sometimes in political economy or in non-Euclidean geometry; discreet and reserved by nature, with long emaciated faces and who by profession and temperament lean more toward the satisfactions of the mind.

For example, the narrator in the story “The Call of Cthulhu,” Francis Wayland Thurston, is an anthropologist from Boston. Meanwhile, the expedition to Antarctica described in the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* is narrated by its leader, a professor of geology at Miskatonic University named William Dyer. The narrator in the novella “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” however, is much younger, but his interests include genealogical, architectural and historical research. One might think that the use of basically interchangeable characters would be detrimental to the stories, but if one takes into account the philosophy of cosmic indifferentism, this is not the case. There is no need for character development or convincing background stories, as “their sole function [is] to perceive” (Houellebecq 2008, 68). As horror around them unravels, “Lovecraft’s characters function as silent, motionless, utterly powerless, paralyzed observers,” Houellebecq concludes (2008, 69).

The protagonists are often perceptive to dreams which function as “windows into forbidden knowledge and forces beyond humanity’s understanding,” but its recurrence also “intersects

Lovecraft's preoccupation with time and history" (Smith 2011, 836). Judging from his antiquarian interests, Lovecraft looks backwards into the past much rather than to the future. Still, Lovecraft's philosophy of cosmicism does not treat time, nor history, on a human scale, but rather on a universal one, which puts the concepts of time and history far beyond human comprehension (Smith 2011, 836-837).

Undoubtedly the darkest stain that blemishes Lovecraft's legacy today is his literary treatment of people with a background different to his own white Anglo-Saxon Protestant family tradition. Lovecraft's opposition between his personal identity and those coming from a different cultural and ethnic tradition points us to Edward Said's theory on the Other. Said argues "that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability, [because] each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other" (2003, xi). In other words, the concept of the Other is necessary for any personal identity to stand on its own, as the process of identification is artificial and only works via differentiation from the Other. Similarly, Lovecraft reaffirms his own identity of an Anglo-Saxon gentleman through hateful descriptions of other cultures, races and nationalities throughout his body of work. According to David Simmons, "Lovecraft's fiction embodies an American tradition that has persisted into the twentieth century: one that seeks to configure alien, and unknowable, others as internal threats to national, political, and psychological stability" (2013, 28). This implies an element of fragility to Lovecraft's own identity, but also sets up the research of the underlying fears shaping his life and work that are discussed in the following chapters.

## **2. BIOGRAPHY**

The continued scholarly and public interest in Lovecraft, which is unlikely to cease anytime soon, indicates the peculiar lure of his character. Houellebecq discusses the intrigue surrounding Lovecraft's persona in the following paragraph (2008, 39):

Paradoxically, Lovecraft's character is fascinating in part because his values were so entirely opposite to ours. He was fundamentally racist, openly reactionary, he glorified puritanical inhibitions, and evidently found all 'direct erotic manifestations' repulsive. Resolutely anticommercial, he despised money, considered democracy to be idiocy and progress to be an illusion. [...] Throughout his life, he maintained a typically aristocratic, scornful attitude towards humanity in general coupled with extreme kindness toward individuals in particular.

This short description reveals some of the main traits and inconsistencies in the character of H.P. Lovecraft that make him such a compelling person to research. Lovecraft is simultaneously remembered as a racist misanthrope and as a wonderful friend and mentor to his correspondents. He is thought of as an aristocratic elitist, but he died penniless and did not value money. In addition, despite his absolute lack of interest in sex and lack of aptitude for building an intimate relationship, he did get married and persisted in marriage for a few years. It is easy to see how these inconsistencies make him an intriguing character and whet one's appetite for a more detailed account of his life.

### **2.1. Lovecraft's family and his youth**

Throughout his life, Lovecraft was preoccupied with the issue of family stock. For example, Houellebecq argues that "it seemed self-evident to [Lovecraft] that Anglo-Saxon Protestants were by nature entitled to the highest positions within the social order" (2008, 105). This false and distorted view, combined with personal failures and rejections, provided a source of frustration for Lovecraft, but more on that later. Before getting there, a few words on his family background, which was so important to him, are needed. On both his paternal and maternal sides Lovecraft is an offspring of the Englishmen who immigrated to America in search of better life several generations before Lovecraft was born. However, Lovecraft's proud claim that he is an ancestor of an unmixed English line is only valid if one turns a blind eye to the Welsh on his paternal side and the Irish on the maternal side (Joshi 2001, 6). The enterprising quest was particularly fruitful for Lovecraft's maternal grandfather Whipple Van Buren Phillips, whom Joshi describes as a "bold and dynamic businessman [...] who would gain and lose several fortunes in his crowded life" (2001, 2). The reason for starting H.P.

Lovecraft's biographical section by going back as far as his grandfather's entrepreneurial exploits is that Lovecraft was greatly attached to him and, perhaps even more significantly, because grandfather Whipple Phillips's financial means enabled Lovecraft a comfortable, educated and pampered childhood. Whipple's largest venture, apart from some business interests in France, England and Italy, was the damming of the Snake River in Idaho and the irrigation of the surrounding farming region. According to Joshi, Whipple financed the construction of the dam, which was completed in 1890, as well as established a town named Grand View and built a Grand View Hotel, before the dam was destroyed by high waters and needed to be rebuilt in 1893 (2001, 3). The ambitious plan, however, came to an end in 1904, when the dam was "wiped out again," this time sinking the Phillips family financially and contributing to Whipple's death later the same year (Joshi 2001, 3-4). The death of his grandfather was difficult to take for young Howard, for whom the grandfather had provided a father figure. As Joshi points out, Whipple had been "spending considerable time and effort (especially after April 1893, [when Lovecraft's father Winfield was taken to hospital]) raising his then only grandchild" (2001, 3). The consequence of Whipple's death, however, was not only that of emotional grief, but also of direct material nature, since Lovecraft and his mother were forced to move from their luxurious family home to a much smaller and more sustainable house on the same street.

Before focusing on the childhood of H.P. Lovecraft, there is a need for some commentary on his parents, Sarah Susan Phillips and Winfield Scott Lovecraft. Rather little is known of Lovecraft's mother, apart from the description of her as an "intensely nervous person" (Joshi 2001, 5), a disposition that has played an important role in Howard's youth and his personal inhibitions. Lovecraft's recollections of his father would, however, be only vague, since Winfield Scott Lovecraft was struck by an illness in April 1893, which "forced him to remain in Butler Hospital in Providence until his death in July 1898" (Joshi 2001, 13). The illness was, in fact, paresis or syphilis. There was no link between the two at the time, but it was noted that Winfield exhibited several symptoms of mental illness before being committed to the hospital, such as deterioration of social behaviour, paranoia and delusions of grandeur (Joshi 2001, 13). During his father's spell in the hospital, Lovecraft was "intentionally kept in the dark about the specific nature of father's illness," and he never visited him there (Joshi 2001, 15). Furthermore, there is no indication Lovecraft ever fully understood or admitted what led to his father's demise, and he maintained the breakdown occurred due to excessive stress and fatigue. Nevertheless, as Cannon asserts, "at some subconscious level he may have

suspected that syphilis had brought about his father's breakdown, since a number of his better tales deal with hereditary degeneracy and the coupling of human beings with monsters” (2016, 15). This assertion explains some of the most prevailing currents in Lovecraft’s work, such as atavistic fear of regression and fear of mixing with the threatening Other. Considering the fact that both of his parents ended up receiving treatment for mental issues in an institution, it is less surprising that “thoughts of his genteel heritage [...] provided [Lovecraft with] comfort amid the melancholy circumstances of his immediate family” (Cannon 2016, 14). Lovecraft’s preoccupation and glorification of the racially pure family heritage is also in line with the general world view that he maintained throughout his life. Lovecraft admired the distant past with nostalgia and bemoaned the disappointing and unsatisfactory present, let alone the threatening future.

Having briefly explained some of the lasting influences of Lovecraft’s closest family members, it is time to focus on Lovecraft himself. Howard Philips Lovecraft was born on 20 August 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island. After some temporary moves due to Winfield’s profession of a commercial traveller, the family again settled in Providence, which was to be Lovecraft’s beloved home for the rest of his life – with the exception of his spell in New York between 1924 and 1926. Following Winfield’s hospitalization in 1893, Lovecraft was taken under his grandfather’s wing for what was “an idyllic and actually rather spoiled early childhood” (Joshi 2001, 17). For example, Joshi explains that grandfather Whipple “cured his grandson of his fear of the dark, [...] showed [him] the art objects from his travels to Europe, [...] wrote him letters when travelling on business, and he even recounted extemporaneous weird tales to the boy” (2001, 17). This is significant, because it shows how Lovecraft’s appreciation of art, including the written and the spoken word, was encouraged, while his curiosity was indulged from the very early age. Therefore, Cannon’s statement that “by his own account Lovecraft had assimilated alphabet by the age of two and was reading at three” (2016, 15) is far less surprising. The well-stocked library in their family home meant that young Howard had access to numerous seminal literary works and his literary taste was able to evolve. For example, his favourite wealth of stories at the time included Grimm’s *Fairy Tales* and *The Arabian Nights* (Joshi 2001, 18). Soon after that, a love for the Greco-Roman myths and culture developed, which is relevant because it inspired Lovecraft’s first writing exploits. Impressively, Lovecraft composed his first poem, “The Poem of Ulysses,” before his seventh birthday. According to Joshi, Lovecraft remarkably managed to retell the entire story of Odysseus in 88 lines, which was narrated “in *chronological sequence* [...] rather than in the

elaborately convoluted way in which Homer's Odysseus narrates his adventures" (2001, 22). This was not the only consequence of Lovecraft's enthusiasm of the classics, as Howard "astounded the family by declaring himself 'a Roman pagan'" (Cannon 2016, 18), effectively distancing himself from any kind of family religious tradition for good.

In spite of his father's absence, young Howard had embraced something of his from the early age and preserved throughout his life. Joshi argues that Lovecraft's father Winfield is "the source of Lovecraft's own Anglophilia – his pride in the British Empire, his use of British [and archaic] spelling variants, and his desire for close cultural and political ties between the United States and England" (2001, 16). The behaviour of a Tory gentleman was the only thing Lovecraft inherited from his father, apart from the subconscious fear of mental deterioration. It is worth reiterating that the instances of rebelling against religion and retroactively favouring the British side in the discussion on American revolution occurred in 1898, when Lovecraft was merely eight years old. This shows that Lovecraft was a strong-willed child, who was not afraid to take a contrary stance to his inner circle.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it shows an unorthodox childhood in which his companionship consisted predominantly of adults and was occupied by serious topics and discussions.

The year 1898 was relevant for Lovecraft for two other reasons. It was then that Lovecraft stumbled upon the work of Edgar Allan Poe, who became one of his literary heroes and swayed his interest towards the weird and the macabre, and it was then that Lovecraft developed a life-long fascination with science. According to Joshi, "Lovecraft's initial enthusiasm for chemistry and physiology would lead to further interests in geography, geology, astronomy, anthropology, psychology, and other sciences that he would study over a lifetime" (Joshi 2001, 30). In the following years, he would write several essays, articles and treatises in various sciences, most notably in astronomy. According to Joshi, Lovecraft gave a lecture on the subject "to the Boys' Club of the First Baptist Church" in 1907, which suggests he must have held a reputation as a local "astronomical authority" at the time (2001, 53). He also published journals and periodicals, including *The Rhode Island Journal of Astronomy*, which consisted of sixty-nine issues in total (Joshi 2001, 41). The two characteristics one can deduce from this information are his extraordinary prolificacy and a positive and curious

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<sup>3</sup> Joshi recounts the amusing, but telling, anecdote, which presents Lovecraft as an adult trapped in a child's body, but also as someone with a developed ability of persuasion (2001, 35): "Around 1898 [Lovecraft's mother] tried to enrol him in a children's dancing class; Lovecraft 'abhorred the thought' and, fresh from an initial study of Latin, responded with a line from Cicero: '*Nemo fere saltat sobrius, nisi forte insanit!*' ('Scarcely any sober person dances, unless by chance he is insane'). [...] He evidently escaped the dancing lessons."

attitude towards knowledge. The latter came to the forefront in Lovecraft's writing, particularly, as Houellebecq puts it, once Lovecraft realised "that using science's vocabulary can serve as an extraordinary stimulant to the poetic imagination" (2008, 74).

In his youth, Lovecraft suffered from fragile health. Owing to his recurring nervous breakdowns, which started when he was eight years old, he attended school rather sporadically, and was, at times, home-schooled. Other than his prodigious abilities, odd interests for his age and persisting health issues, Lovecraft's early teenage years were not reclusive but social, lively and by most means normal. However, a dark side of his character was simultaneously emerging, as he let his xenophobic feelings enter his work for the first time with the poem "On the Creation of Niggers" written in 1902 (Joshi 2013, 178):

When, long ago, the Gods created Earth,  
In Jove's fair image Man was shap'd at birth.  
The beasts for lesser parts were next design'd;  
Yet were they too remote from humankind.  
To fill this gap, and join the rest to man,  
Th' Olympian host conceiv'd a clever plan.  
A beast they wrought, in semi-human figure,  
Fill'd it with vice, and call'd the thing a NIGGER.

The poem is a sad sign of the times and attitudes at the turn of the century in the United States. Still, it makes for abhorrent reading and its despicable message brings significant discomfort to any modern reader. At the same time, it signifies Lovecraft's deep hatred of African Americans and his feeling of white superiority at the age of twelve. According to Joshi, the poem was thankfully never published, but "it is likely that [Lovecraft's friends and family] approved or – at least did not object – to his sentiments" (Joshi 2013, 178). In addition, Joshi refers to Lovecraft's embarrassingly proud statement from 1904, saying that he "became rather well known as an anti-Semite" shortly after entering high school (Joshi 2001, 55). These false views cannot be attributed to some sort of youthful stupidity, especially because Lovecraft's racial views never truly changed for the better. On the contrary, the hatred turned significantly worse during his stay in New York, and was only partially revised before his death.

Despite such abhorrent views, it seemed Lovecraft was on his way to an academic career of some distinction, considering "he was doing reasonably well at Hope Street High School, he

had become prodigiously learned in chemistry, geography, astronomy, and meteorology, and he was accomplished in belles-lettres as a Latinist, poet, and fiction writer” (Joshi 2001, 61). However, this dream of his came to an abrupt end, when he experienced the most serious of his nervous breakdowns in 1908, which prevented him from completing high school education and subsequently enrolling into Brown University in Providence. The nature of the breakdown is subject to speculation, but Joshi believes there is a correlation between the nervous strain and Lovecraft’s schoolwork, as “his relative failure to master algebra made [Lovecraft] gradually awaken to the realization that he could never do serious professional work in either chemistry or astronomy, and that therefore a career in these two fields was an impossibility” (2001, 63). After a carefree youth in which he believed he was on track for a great future, the setback with failing to learn algebra and also the realization that he needed to reconsider his future goals could well be the causes for the breakdown. Considering Lovecraft’s life was unusually well-documented, the lack of information from the period between 1908 and 1913 is striking, or as Houellebecq concludes: “[...] judging from appearances – at least between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three – he did absolutely nothing” (2008, 30). Moreover, Joshi describes this period as “the only time of Lovecraft’s life when the term ‘eccentric recluse’ [...] can rightly be applied to him” (2001, 64).

Besides the disappointment and shame over his scholarly failure, there was another major influence to Lovecraft’s gloomy state. His mother Susie, with her stifling, overly-protecting antics, hardly contributed to Lovecraft’s mental balance. Quite the contrary, Joshi asserts “she was transferring to her son the hatred and disgust she felt for her husband after he was stricken with syphilis” (2001, 68). At the same time Susan was experiencing a mental deterioration herself, principally due to strong fear of the uncertain and threatening financial situation. According to Cannon, “in 1919, suffering from bouts of hysteria and depression, Mrs. Lovecraft entered the same Providence hospital for the insane that had housed her husband” (2016, 17). After her death two years later, Lovecraft’s own health markedly improved, and as Cannon argues, “he was too astute not to realize that his improved health had been in no small part due to her passing” (2016, 17). Susan’s negative and possessive influence is best illustrated with the story concerning Lovecraft’s surprising decision of volunteering to serve in the army in 1917. Lovecraft underwent a “physical examination, which [...] revealed no major physical ailments,” but an intervention from his frightened mother led to their family doctor annulling the previous positive examination (Joshi 2001, 100). The result was Lovecraft’s rejection for duty, which robbed him of an opportunity to

emancipate from his family and left him stuck behind as the world and his peers moved forward.

## **2.2. Meeting Sonia Greene and moving to New York**

During his self-imposed withdrawal from the world, a ray of hope appeared for Lovecraft in the form of the amateur journalism movement. Lovecraft's involvement with amateur journalism began in an unusual fashion, when he got involved in an angry public exchange of letters in the *Argosy* magazine with a "popular [...] writer of sentimental romances named Fred Jackson [...] in the issue for September 1913" (Joshi 2001, 74). Their poetic feud, particularly Lovecraft's wit and provoking tone, convinced the editor of the United Amateur Press Association to invite Lovecraft to join their ranks, which turned out to be the trigger that snapped Lovecraft out of his vegetative state and "transformed [him] both as a writer and as a human being" (Joshi 2001, 76).<sup>4</sup> The discovery of amateur journalism was a turning point for his life, as "for the next ten years [Lovecraft] devoted himself with unflagging energy to the amateur cause" (Joshi 2001, 78). Apart from the newly-found focus and motivation, taking part in the amateur journalist circle provided Lovecraft with intellectual stimulus, as well as with opportunities to publish his writing and form genuine friendships with his numerous new correspondents. Another important milestone for his literary career was the beginning of publication of a pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1923, which specialised in fantasy and science fiction and provided Lovecraft with a means to publish his literary works to a niche audience in return for a modest payment. The publications, of course, occurred on condition the stories would actually pass the editorial cut, which was not always the case for Lovecraft. Still, his work appeared "in five of the six issues from October 1923 to April 1924," establishing Lovecraft as something of a "fixture" in those early issues, according to Joshi (2013, 560).<sup>5</sup> This was a new and exciting time with numerous trips and friendly encounters for Lovecraft, "who never travelled more than a hundred miles away from home up to the age of thirty-one" (Joshi 2013, 527).

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<sup>4</sup> Even though Lovecraft had the ability to make tongue-in-cheek comments in his correspondence, this did not translate to his demeanour in face-to-face interactions. According to Joshi, in 1934 Lovecraft himself "declared that he had laughed out loud only once in the previous twenty years" (2013, 643). One can only wonder what joke had triggered that rare phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> Besides giving Lovecraft a platform to publish his tales, *Weird Tales* occasionally provided him with a different kind of work. For example, in 1924 he was assigned to do "a rush ghostwriting job for Harry Houdini," the famous illusionist (Joshi 2013, 604).

Lovecraft's attitude towards love was described by Joshi as one of a "tripartite nature," which consisted of "love of the strange and fantastic, love of the ancient and permanent, and love of the abstract truth and scientific logic" (2001, 28). This triptych would, however, be disturbed by an important new person entering Lovecraft's life in 1921. Sonia Haft Greene was a (financial) supporter of the amateur work and an occasional contributor, who was the first and only woman to establish a bond with H.P. Lovecraft, if one excludes his female relatives. This well-off, independent, confident woman of Jewish background was "taken in with Lovecraft from the start" (Joshi 2013, 499). While the attraction – between "two intelligent and congenial minds" – was purely platonic, their correspondence progressed well and the two exchanged cordial visits between Providence and New York that had been always initiated by Sonia (Joshi 2013, 499). Her character was described as "dynamic, emotionally open, contemporary, cosmopolitan, and perhaps a little domineering" (Joshi 2013, 614). This description reads as the polar opposite of Lovecraft's characteristics. For example, Lovecraft's emotions were repressed to such an extent that he would "never mention the word *love*," but rather resort to showing sentiment by "wrap[ping] his 'pinkey finger' around [Sonia's] and say[ing] 'Umph'" (Joshi 2013, 636). Lovecraft's Victorian discomfort over anything with sexual or emotional connotations explains the glaring absence of such narratives in his work. Nevertheless, Lovecraft and Sonia rounded off their rapport by getting married in 1924. Emotional immaturity aside, Lovecraft was "quite taken in with the charm and novelty of being married" (Joshi 2013, 614). On the back of some of the most exciting years of his life, in which he enjoyed the attention and company of friends and correspondents, freedom from the stifling maternal protection, and, for his standards, intimate relationship with Sonia, Lovecraft moved to Sonia's apartment in New York with uncharacteristic hope and optimism for the future.

For the marriage and the move to New York to succeed, it was imperative that Lovecraft secure a steady employment with sufficient income. Despite some minor earnings from the publishing stories in *Weird Tales*, Lovecraft was largely supported by Sonia, "and his aunts were contributing as best they could" (Joshi 2013, 666). It is important to stress that Sonia was a relatively wealthy woman with a stable job and "had been making \$10,000 per year" (Joshi 2013, 624), before taking a risk with "attempt[ing] to start her own millinery business" (Joshi 2013, 626). Sonia's business never really got going and soon she was forced to "leave for a job in the Midwest while Lovecraft would relocate to a smaller apartment in the city" (Joshi 2016, 634), as the couple's financial situation was becoming increasingly precarious. It

is unclear how Lovecraft felt about Sonia only returning to New York on occasions but it is highly possible that such marriage by correspondence was actually his preference. Unsurprisingly, Lovecraft's job hunt was proving to be difficult, since he was at this stage thirty-four years old with zero experience, no formal education or qualifications and an obsolete approach to life – that of an English gentleman. According to Joshi, Lovecraft's navigating the labour market was “completely hopeless,” but after Sonia's move he “simply stopped looking very vigorously for work” (2013, 663). For example, the first employment Lovecraft managed to secure was “as an envelope-addresser for three weeks,” as late as in March 1926 (Joshi 2013, 718). Lovecraft's ineptitude when it comes to supporting himself is relevant for any analysis his writing as well, for it was his financial hardship and defeated attitude that had ignited the hatred of his surroundings, which in turn provided a vile inspiration for the stories such as “The Horror at Red Hook” and “He”.

The story “He” was written in 1925 and is described by Cannon as the story of Lovecraft's “extended autobiographical lament” (2016, 75). Its initial paragraph provides an insight into Lovecraft's hatred of the surroundings and the situation in which he found himself into (Lovecraft 2011, 205-206):

My coming to New York had been a mistake; for whereas I had looked for poignant wonder and inspiration in the teeming labyrinths of ancient streets that twist endlessly from forgotten courts and squares and waterfronts to courts and squares and waterfronts equally forgotten, and in the Cyclopean modern towers and pinnacles that rise blackly Babylonian under waning moons, I had found instead only a sense of horror and oppression which threatened to master, paralyse, and annihilate me. [...] But success and happiness were not to be. Garish daylight shewed only squalor and alienage and the noxious elephantiasis of climbing, spreading stone where the moon had hinted of loveliness and elder magic; and the throngs of people that seethed through the flume-like streets were squat, swarthy strangers with hardened faces and narrow eyes, shrewd strangers without dreams and without kinship to the scenes about them, who could never mean aught to a blue-eyed man of the old folk, with the love of fair green lanes and white New England village steeples in his heart.

The optimism of the first months of Lovecraft's stint in New York is dismantled in a brutally honest fashion, as the narrator declares the decision to come to New York, and implicitly Lovecraft's marriage to Sonia, as a “mistake.” Not only the “success and happiness” stayed out of reach, but the autobiographical narrator felt threatened with “a sense of horror and oppression.” This perceived threat to Lovecraft, or “a blue-eyed man of the old folk,” were

the immigrants, who were blamed for Lovecraft feeling out of place. His xenophobic stance towards immigrants is not only wrong and regrettable, but also ironic, considering that Lovecraft was married to Sonia, a Jewish immigrant born in Ukraine. According to Joshi, Sonia challenged Lovecraft's views by saying she too belonged in that group, to which Lovecraft replied: "*You are now Mrs. H.P. Lovecraft of 598 Angell St., Providence, Rhode Island!*" (2013, 689). The anecdote shows that Lovecraft was ready to tailor his judgements without consistency and that he picked those targets that suited him in a given moment. One of the reasons Sonia had married him in the first place was the "feeling that she could mould Lovecraft to suit her wishes," but she was unable to influence his racial prejudice (Joshi 2001, 238). Unfortunately for her and the outcome of their marriage, Lovecraft was "generally thoughtless, spineless, emotionally remote and financially incompetent," preferring to spend time with his circle of friends rather than with his wife and preferring platonic relationship by correspondence (Joshi 2001, 239). Therefore, it came as no surprise that the pair divorced and that Lovecraft spent the rest of his life as a bachelor.<sup>6</sup>

### **2.3. Lovecraft's prolific period, and death**

While in the story "He" the narrator is trying to resist "crawl[ing] back ignobly in defeat" (Lovecraft 2011, 206), Lovecraft did exactly that and returned to Providence in 1926. The return to the familiar surroundings of his beloved New England provided him with an abundant inspiration for story writing. The period between 1926 and 1934 is when Lovecraft wrote his best and most mature works. According to Houellebecq, the list of Lovecraft's "great texts" is the following (2009, 41): "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926), "The Colour Out of Space" (1927), "The Dunwich Horror" (1928), "The Whisperer in the Darkness" (1930), *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932), "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (1932) and "The Shadow Out of Time" (1934).<sup>7</sup> Apart from publishing his stories in pulp magazines with varying success, the "only actual book published and released in Lovecraft's lifetime" was the publication of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" in 1936 (Joshi 2001, 382). Even though he was finally settled back in Providence, Lovecraft in this period travelled as much as his modest financial situation allowed. According to Cannon, a trip to the City of Quebec resulted in Lovecraft's longest work, a "quaint 75,000-word travelogue

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the divorce being conducted on amicable terms, Lovecraft never bothered to finalize it and sign the divorce papers in 1928, which made the procedure invalid. Moreover, this means that once Sonia remarried in 1936, the marriage was "legally bigamous" (Joshi 2001, 277).

<sup>7</sup> Lovecraft considered the story "The Colour Out of Space" to be his personal favourite (Joshi 2001, 256).

[written] solely for his own pleasure,” titled *A Description of the Town of Quebeck in New-France, Lately added to His Britannick Majesty’s Dominions* (2016, 21). The travelogue does not hold a prominent position in Lovecraft’s body of work, but it points out how stubborn Lovecraft was in pursuing his own literary principles and in firmly rejecting what was commercially valued. Another principle of his – that of replying to every single letter received – led Cannon to call Lovecraft a “compulsive communicator,” who accumulated an unprecedented volume of letters in which he discussed a broad range of subjects, such as “the architecture and history of colonial New England, ancient Rome, tiny kittens, sunsets and coffee ice cream” (2016, 23). The letters enabled the scholars to study his views on contemporary issues as well as on trivial subjects to the most minute detail. For example, the letters document Lovecraft’s political conversion, “shift[ing] from conservative elitist to New Deal Democrat,” as well as adopting an increased tolerance, but “never wholly abandoning his ethnic prejudices” (Cannon 2016, 24).

In the final two years of his life, Lovecraft’s decreasing health was accompanied with increasing financial woes. There is a probable correlation between the two, as Lovecraft’s “poor diet may have caused or contributed to both his cancer and his renal failure” (Joshi 2001, 386). Intestinal cancer made the final month “agonizing” for Lovecraft, who stayed loyal to his habits and kept diary of his disease “until he could scarcely hold a pen,” which was shortly followed by his death “in the morning of March 15 1937” (Joshi 2001, 387-388). During the last years, Lovecraft lived off a modest family inheritance, which was almost completely spent at the time of his death. The coincidence is striking, because, as Houellebecq puts it, it seems “as if [Lovecraft] had lived exactly the number of years allotted him by his (rather feeble) family fortune and his own (rather strong) ability to economize” (2008, 92). While Lovecraft’s work was never widely recognised during his lifetime, its posthumous success is a testament to the genuine friendships Lovecraft had nurtured throughout his life. After his death, friends August Derleth and Donald Wandrei founded Arkham House, “a firm initially designed solely to preserve Lovecraft’s work in hard covers,” which was followed by “the emergence of more scholarly criticism in the 1970s” (Joshi 2001, 390-391). Lovecraft’s work would have remained an obscurity in the world of literature, if there were not several individuals with whom Lovecraft established genuine friendships during his life. A life in which success proved elusive and failures frequent. The failures include the marriage with Sonia Greene as well as Lovecraft’s not being able to finish his education, secure a stable income or make a breakthrough as a writer. According to Houellebecq, Lovecraft was

“pierced to the core” by the many rejections (2009, 109). Repeatedly failing to find his place or his professional niche in the society was even more disappointing for Lovecraft, considering he irrationally believed a respectable position should rightfully be his due to his family ancestry. Therefore, his personal defeats are the key to understanding Lovecraft’s attitude to the world, which Houellebecq summarizes as “absolute hatred of the world in general, aggravated by an aversion to the modern world in particular” (2009, 57). If one tries to dissect this aversion further, there are three threads that appear stronger than others: atavism, xenophobia and miscegenation. The following chapters support this claim through the analysing of three of Lovecraft’s emblematic stories, each from a different stage of his life. The story “The Rats in the Walls” is one of Lovecraft’s earlier works and was written in 1923. The story “The Horror at Red Hook” summarizes Lovecraft’s attitude during the stay in New York between 1924 and 1926. The story “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is from the later period and was written in 1931. Particularly with the latter two stories, it is inevitable that they could be used for justifying white supremacy, maintaining a clear ethnic line and igniting hatred towards other races.

### **3. “THE RATS IN THE WALLS”**

The short story “The Rats in the Walls” is regarded as the best one of the Lovecraft’s early tales. For Joshi, this story marks an “exponential leap in quality” and is “clearly the best of Lovecraft’s fictional works prior to 1926” (2016, 114). Moreover, Joshi compares it to the masterpieces written by Edgar Allan Poe due to its “rich texture, complexity of theme, and absolute perfection of short-story technique” (2016, 114). This is high praise indeed, but “The Rats in the Walls” also illustrates one of the Lovecraft’s biggest fears – the fear of atavism.

It is difficult to identify the root of this fear with certainty, but it is highly possible that the fear stemmed from Lovecraft’s own family background. The well-documented mental illness of his father could well be the reason for Lovecraft’s fixation on the atavistic motif of regression to something ancient and primitive or even descending into madness. Simmons succinctly states the Lovecraftian story structure that applies perfectly to “The Rats in the Walls”: “The protagonist is undone by the unwise actions of his ancestors” (2013, 20). The inescapable demise of the main characters due to their forefathers’ misdeeds is most notably present in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” – analysed in chapter 5 – and “Facts concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family”. However, the atavistic motif truly comes forth in “The Rats in the Walls”.<sup>8</sup>

#### **3.1. “Cursed of God”**

Through the first-person narration by Delapore, the reader learns about the lurking tragedy via a carefully introduced background story of the tainted family history. Lovecraft meticulously presents the framework of the Delapore story, trying to make it as realistic as possible. Therefore, one learns of the exact date Delapore settled into the Exham Priory after a lengthy restoration process. The former “seat of [his] ancestors”(90) – a curious mixture of Gothic, Saxon, Romanesque, Roman, Druidic and Cymric architectural styles – had long been deserted after a gruesome tragedy several generations ago. The master, along with five children and numerous servants, was killed in unexplained circumstances, leaving the remaining master’s son Walter a suspect and “the only survivor of the abhorred line” (90). Walter de la Poer’s murders were condoned by the locals as if “he had purged the land of an immemorial curse” (95) and he was aided to escape to Virginia in order to start his life over

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<sup>8</sup> The direct quotes from the following subchapters refer to “The Rats in the Walls” (Lovecraft 2008, 90-105), unless stated otherwise.

again hoping to forget the “horror greater than that of conscience or the law” (90). Notably, Walter changed his name to Delapore in an attempt to end the family line and deny its history.

This denial of the past became something of a theme among the next generations of Delapores. Never ones to boast “of crusading ancestors or other mediaeval and Renaissance heroes” (91), their only family tradition was the transfer of a sealed envelope to the eldest son to be opened after father’s death. However, “the envelope that bound [them] all to the past” (91) had been lost in a fire, meaning that the first-person narrator and his father never learned of the contents of the inherited horror. At this point the narrator – holding the advantage over the reader of knowing the full outcome of the mysterious events to take place – exclaims with regret (91): “Had I suspected their nature, how gladly I would have left Exham Priory to its moss, bats, and cobwebs!” This narrative device used by Lovecraft is called diegesis. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, diegesis is used to “designate the narrated events or story as a ‘level’ distinct from that of the narration” (2008, 90). For example, the diegetic level is that of a withheld tragedy, whereas the level above the diegetic one is called extradiegetic and is represented by Delapore’s narration of the events from the asylum.

The tragic ignorance of the family curse is what hooks the reader and sets the story in motion. The curiosity of the narrator was evoked by his son, who had fought in England during the First World War alongside Anchester local Captain Edward Norrys from whom he had learned some “very interesting ancestral legends” and “peasant superstitions” (91). The fascination over his heritage was enough for Delapore to purchase the Exham Priory and, after his son’s death left him in solitude, Delapore moved to England and poured all his efforts into the restoration of the building. There he was met with incredible reluctance of the locals – save Captain Norrys – to get involved with the restoration process. The many decades that have passed since the tragedy, did not prevent the villagers of Anchester from disliking the last descendant of the Delapores. For the people, the Exham Priory and its former and current tenants were seen as “a haunt of fiends and werewolves” and the locals were not able to hide “an almost unbelievable fear and hatred of the place” (92).

With Capt. Norrys’ help, Delapore slowly pieced together the “indescribable rites” and “nameless ceremonies” that had taken place at Exham Priory ever since prehistoric times (92). He learned that “Henry the Third [had] granted the site to [his] ancestor, Gilbert de la Poer, First Baron Exham, in 1261” (93). This milestone marked the horrible tales taking a turn for

the worse, as a chronicle referred to the de la Poer name as “cursed of God” as early as 1307 (93). The de la Poers were described as “a race of hereditary daemons beside Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade would seem the veriest tyros” (93). Their cruelty was even “preserved in balladry” and coincided with an “occasional disappearance of villagers” and public displays of severed heads (93). The most dramatic tale, however, concerned an army of rodents – “which had burst forth from the castle three months after the tragedy that doomed it to desertion” – and unleashed its rage on the village by “sweep[ing] all before it and devour[ing] fowl, cats, dogs, hogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings before its fury was spent” (93). Despite the newly-acquired knowledge of the tainted family history, the pride of the restored Priory and the determination to redeem for the past prevailed for Delapore. He adopted the previous spelling of his family name – de la Poer. This seemingly harmless nod to his family heritage and to a symbolic return to his roots inadvertently set de la Poer on course of a horrible regression to the most despicable family patterns of behaviour and condemned him to a tragic fate.

### **3.2. “A twilit grotto, knee-deep with filth”**

After a thoroughly presented framework, the tale “The Rats in the Walls” moves to 16 July 1923, when de la Poer moved into the restored Exham Priory together with several servants and his beloved cats. Lovecraft, who was very fond of cats himself, here attributed a trait of his own to the narrator. The eldest cat in particular, draws attention of the reader with its name – “Nigger-Man” (94). Being de la Poer’s favourite pet, its name is used repeatedly as it follows him around the house or as Frye asserts with his tongue-in-cheek (2007): “The narrator endlessly dotes on the creature, seemingly seeking every possible opportunity to publicize the poor thing’s name.” Meanwhile, Donald Burleson adds that Lovecraft actually once had a cat of the same name and that its name “raised no known protests from the readers” of the *Weird Tales* magazine, where the story was published (2016, 246).<sup>9</sup> The restlessness of the cats was disturbing and they were seen lurking along the walls of the de la Poer’s study and scratching the panels. Suspicion of rodents in the walls was dismissed, but the following night “a low, distant scurrying as of rats or mice” was heard by de la Poer himself (96). Even though none of the servants heard anything, traps were put around strategic locations of the house.

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<sup>9</sup> The lack of reaction suggests that such name-calling was acceptable at the time. This supports the claims of a large number of scholars – including Burleson – that argue Lovecraft’s racism was simply a sign of the times.

It was not only the walls that were invaded by the rats, but de la Poer's dreams as well (Lovecraft 2008, 97):

I seemed to be looking down from an immense height upon a twilight grotto, knee-deep with filth, where a white-bearded daemon swineherd drove about with his staff a flock of fungous, flabby beasts whose appearance filled me with unutterable loathing. Then, as the swineherd paused and nodded over his task, a mighty swarm of rats rained down on the stinking abyss and fell to devouring beasts and man alike.

This nightmarish vision was interrupted by the cat's movement, "for on every side of the chamber the walls were alive with [...] the verminous slithering of ravenous, gigantic rats" (97). Inexplicably, all the traps sprung open, but nothing was caught. Moreover, it was clear that the mass migration of rats was directed somewhere towards the depths below. Captain Norriss and de la Poer researched the Roman sub-cellar and decided to spend the night there, when de la Poer again experienced the horrible vision of the grotto, only this time it "seemed nearer and more distinct" (99). Even in the deepest known cellar, the rats continued to move "still downward" (99), but just as shocking was that Norriss could not hear the commotion, which was seemingly reserved only for de la Poer's and the cats' ears. The horror is therefore purely private at this stage. Indeed, it was the cat that made the most important discovery by "clawing frantically around the bottom of the large stone altar" (100). On closer examination, de la Poer noticed a draught of air coming from a gap between the floor and the stone altar. The dilemma "whether to abandon [the] search in superstitious caution, or to gratify [their] sense of adventure and brave whatever horrors might await [them] in the unknown depths" was resolved by a compromise (100). Due to the complexity of the findings and the need for expertise of various subjects, a group of distinguished scholars was brought in to help de la Poer and Captain Norriss with the exploration.

### **3.3. "The antechamber of hell"**

Through joint efforts, the group of explorers managed to find a way underneath the Roman altar by forcing it "to tilt backward, [as if it was] balanced by some unknown species of counterweight" (101). The fact that the entrance underground countered the laws of physics was a sign of chaos to come. As the team of explorers descended down the steps, they walked over a "ghastly array of human or semi-human bones" (101). A closer examination revealed that the bones had "marks of rodent gnawing", but the skulls also showed signs of "utter idiocy, cretinism, or primitive semi-apedom" (101). In addition to the discoveries of

degeneration in development of the poor skeletons, a member of the team observed that the passage “must have been chiselled *from beneath*” (102).

The reader can sense that the climax is approaching due to Lovecraft’s brilliant storytelling technique, provoking Burleson to declare Lovecraft “a master of the art of restraint” (2016, 70). The dramatic pause used here fits perfectly as the narrator momentarily halts, saying, “I must be very deliberate now, and choose my words” (102). The pause is placed ahead of the description of the descent further down the stairs, which coincides with the descent into madness. Most of the men lost composure or consciousness at the sight of the “twilit grotto of enormous height, stretching away farther than any eye could see” just like the one in de la Poer’s vision (102). Among the decayed primitive buildings, there was “an insane tangle of human bones [...] in postures of daemoniac frenzy, either fighting of some menace or clutching other forms with cannibal intent” (102). The “degraded mixture” was mostly of the lowest stages of the evolution and some of them “must have descended as quadrupeds through the last twenty or more generations” (102-103). Some of them were kept in prison cells – presumably being groomed for sacrificial slaughter. As the gruesome revelations of the family secrets kept piling up and the team of researchers walked deeper and further in the grotto, the full realisation of his family’s atrocities had a profound effect on de la Poer. In fact, the whole descent down the crypt and along the grotto coincided with de la Poer’s descent into madness. The narrator’s once clear and articulate thoughts started to gradually regress, culminating in the following passage right before de la Poer is found “crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Capt. Norrrys” (Lovecraft 2008, 104):

My searchlight expired, but still I ran. I heard voices, and yowls, and echoes, but above all there gently rose that impious, insidious scurrying; gently rising, rising, as a stiff bloated corpse gently rises above an oily river that flows under endless onyx bridges to a black, putrid sea. Something bumped into me—something soft and plump. It must have been the rats; the viscous, gelatinous, ravenous army that feast on the dead and the living.... Why shouldn’t rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things? ... The war ate my boy, damn them all ... and the Yanks ate Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret ... No, no, I tell you, I am *not* that daemon swineherd in the twilit grotto! It was *not* Edward Norrrys’ fat face on that flabby, fungous thing! Who says I am a de la Poer? He lived, but my boy died! ... Shall a Norrrys hold the lands of a de la Poer? ... It’s voodoo, I tell you ... that spotted snake ... Curse you, Thornton, I’ll teach you to faint at what my family do! ... ‘Sblood, thou stinkard, I’ll learn ye how to gust ... wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? ... *Magna Mater!*

*Magna Mater! ... Atys ... Dia ad aghaidh 's ad aodann ... agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas 's dholas ort, agus leat-sa! ... Ungl ... ungl ... rrlh ... chchch ...*

It is a wonderful passage that shows not only mental regression, but also a linguistic one. De la Poer's senses start to break down one by one. First, the sound of the rats replaces the voices of the men. Next, his vision fails him, as the familiar sight of Captain Norrrys is mistaken for rats as well. Finally, de la Poer's mind is gone completely as he falls into a frenzy of nonsensical statements and rhetorical questions which gradually regress to Middle English, Gaelic and end with complete gibberish. Burleson explains that the "linguistic regression [...] symbolizes de la Peer's [sic] own reversion to type [which is] the cannibalistic horror of his ancestry" (2016, 72).

Because he was unable to deal with the inherited burden, the revelation proved too much for de la Poer to handle and he buckled under the family curse. However, the ending of the story implies that the narrator tells of his tragic fate from his asylum cell. The final passage – described by Burleson as "one of the most stylistically Poesque passages in all of Lovecraft's work" (2016, 72) – provides the reader with two ways of interpretation (Lovecraft 2008, 105):

When I speak of poor Norrrys they accuse me of a hideous thing, but they must now that I did not do it. They must know it was the rats; the slithering, scurrying rats whose scampering will never let me sleep; the daemon rats that race behind the padding in this room and beckon me down to greater horrors than I have ever known; the rats they can never hear; the rats, the rats in the walls.

With de la Poer laying the blame on the rats, it is possible to consider his actions simply as consequences of insanity. Meanwhile, the other explanation is one of inescapability from the family's primitive patterns and of an atavistic relapse to the most horrible deviance. The latter resolution is certainly favourable. The latter interpretation led Mitch Frye to coin the phrase "genotypic horror" based on Lovecraft's "storytelling mode that exploits genetic fears" (2007). Frye supports his argument by characterizing "Rats in the Walls" as a "eugenic story" in which the "true villain is the uncontrollable and controlling gene" (2007). This confirms the fear of atavistic reversion to type as one of the pillars of Lovecraft's fear infiltrated in his work and according to Sophus Reinert this "very specific fear of biological and cultural atavism would haunt Lovecraft remorsefully for the rest of his life, informing practically all of his subsequent work" (2015, 13).

## **4. “THE HORROR AT RED HOOK”**

Lovecraft’s brief and unsuccessful spell in New York marks a crucial change in his writing. Reinert asserts it was there “that his art and his life finally met” and there that the stories started to “mirror his ideals of violent Nordic action against lesser races” (2015, 4). Furthermore, Houellebecq describes the escalation of Lovecraft’s racist discourse in comparison to his earlier years as a shift from a “distant and benevolent disdain” towards a “full-fledged racist neurosis” (2008, 105). In addition, Houellebecq characterizes Lovecraft’s personal struggles during his stint in the multicultural landscape of New York as “the brutal hatred of a trapped animal who is forced to share his cage with other different and frightening creatures” (2008, 106). It was the change of environment from the familiar and comfortable New England, where the majority of population was white and of Protestant background, to the precarious New York that triggered Lovecraft’s escalation.

This chapter deals with the second pillar of Lovecraft’s fear – xenophobia – and analyses the short story “The Horror at Red Hook”.<sup>10</sup> The story was written in 1925 amid his stay in New York and therefore provides an insight into Lovecraft’s attitude of the urban environment and the inhabitants of the melting pot. The story, published in 1927, is not regarded as one of Lovecraft’s better ones, but it bears witness to his personal attitudes taking over his writing.

### **4.1. “A maze of hybrid squalor”**

In the initial paragraph, the omniscient narrator presents the seemingly excessive nervous reaction of a man who “without visible provocation [...] with a series of terrified shrieks, br[oke] into a frantic run which ended in a stumble and fall at the next crossing” (148). The man in question was a New York police detective and the protagonist of the story Thomas F. Malone. Immediately, the reader is left wondering what kind of event had crippled Malone’s mental state to such an extent that the man described as “large, robust, normal-featured, and capable-looking” was suffering from such severe emotional imbalance (148). The first explanation is given in the briefest of terms saying that “the collapse of certain squalid brick houses in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, and the consequent death of many brave officers, had unseated his nervous equilibrium” (149). The whole truth, however, reveals a “horror beyond all human conception”, which is why Malone has kept the secret to himself

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<sup>10</sup> The direct quotes from the following subchapters refer to “The Horror at Red Hook” (Lovecraft 2008, 148-165) unless stated otherwise.

(149). After this mysterious hook, the story slowly reveals Malone's investigation into the New York underground described in Lovecraft's harsh, loaded terms as the "polyglot abyss" and the "poison cauldron where all the varied dregs of unwholesome ages mix their venom and perpetuate their obscene terrors" (149-150).

The story's introduction is followed by a description of Red Hook, which continues in the same hateful and derogatory vein as the introductory remarks. The cityscape of Red Hook is called "a maze of hybrid squalor" forming a connection between the multicultural character of the area with filthiness (150). Lovecraft completes the uninviting veduta with adjectives "dirty", "decayed" and "Dickensian" that describe the highways, streets and alleys (150). In the antiquarian fashion so characteristic of Lovecraft, the disparity between the glorious past and the decayed present is introduced by a nostalgic description of an alleged former "brighter picture" traceable only in "the relics of former happiness" in the shape of rare old "homes of taste and substance" and the memories of "clear-eyed mariners" populating the streets (151). On the other side, there is the decayed present dramatically called "babel of sound and filth" (151). The use of a biblical reference of the Tower of Babel here stands for the plurality of cultures and languages of the Red Hook's population. In addition, referring to the foreign languages as *babel* reduces their meaning to mere nonsense. To Lovecraft's narrator it equals "a hopeless tangle and enigma [of] Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another" (150-151). In contrast with the past greatness, the present state of Red Hook is a "tangle of material and spiritual putrescence," which mirrors Lovecraft's feelings on the aesthetic as well as moral decay (151). Furthermore, Lovecraft's narrative voice describes the plurality of languages as blasphemous, the immigrants as "prowlers" with "swarthy, sin-pitted faces" and attributes offences such as "murder and mutilation" to the "aliens" (151).

The crescendo of xenophobic remarks does not stop there. Lovecraft's fears disguised as Malone's observations of the Red Hook district's population take an anthropological turn when Malone judges that "modern people under lawless conditions tend uncannily to repeat the darkest instinctive patterns of primitive half-ape savagery in their daily life and ritual observances" (151). The hateful rhetoric continues as Malone thinks of his repulsion aimed at "the chanting, cursing processions of blear-eyed and pockmarked young men" (151). The hardly hidden xenophobia does not only show with explicitly vile descriptions of the people, but also by attributing dubious primitive characteristics as it is evident from the next paragraph (Lovecraft 2008, 151-152):

They chilled and fascinated him more than he dared confess to his associates on the force, for he seemed to see in them some monstrous thread of secret continuity; some fiendish, cryptical, and ancient pattern utterly beyond and below the sordid mass of facts and habits and haunts listed with such conscientious technical care by the police. They must be, he felt inwardly, the heirs of some shocking and primordial tradition; the sharers of debased and broken scraps from cults and ceremonies older than mankind.

The introductory sequences of the story create a strict contrast between the writer's antiquarian yearning for a simpler, more orderly past and the perceived modern decadence in the form of the confusing plurality of nationalities, dialects and rites. The description of Red Hook and its inhabitants tells a story of Lovecraft's failure to fit into the changing world and holding onto his reactionary worldview. Moreover, as Reinert puts it (2015, 6): "Red Hook perfectly symbolized Lovecraft's fears for America's future: a place under whose globalized and hybridizing sway civilized men reverted to their primal archetypes." This atavistic theme of reversion to (arche)type mentioned here is, of course, familiar from the tale "The Rats in the Walls" analysed in the previous chapter, and it appears throughout Lovecraft's work.

#### **4.2. "A metamorphosis as startling as it was absurd"**

"The Horror at Red Hook" then focuses on the curious case of Robert Suydam – the key antagonist in the police case that has brought Malone on the brink of madness. Suydam was the descendant of an old noble Dutch family, who chose a life of a recluse. Once "a queer, corpulent old fellow [with] unkempt white hair, stubbly beard, shiny black clothes, and gold-headed cane" has come to Malone's attention when Suydam's relatives questioned his sanity in the court of law (152). The reason for this intervention was a deterioration of the hermit's habits and appearance, as he was seen "loitering [...] with groups of swarthy, evil-looking strangers", studying ancient literature and using his inherited income to maintain a basement flat in Red Hook, where mysterious ceremonies were conducted (153). Suydam was able to keep his freedom, but during investigation Malone had found that the old scholar was indeed connected with "the blackest and most vicious criminals of Red Hook's devious lanes" and with smuggling of "nameless and unclassified Asian dregs wisely turned back by Ellis Island" (153-154). (Note the subtle commentary of the contemporary immigrant authorities *wisely* rejecting legal entry to the USA for the group of people in question.) Malone's assumption was that the majority of the "slant-eyed folk" originated from Kurdistan, the last surviving

worshippers of the devil (154).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, just as New York was hit by a kidnapping wave, Suydam “embarked upon a metamorphosis as startling as it was absurd” (155).

As if he realised his dodgy dealings would not be able to continue undisturbed without a distraction, Suydam transforms from a hermit to a well-kept man of class, who suddenly stuck to the social conventions with his orderly, gentleman-like behaviour. Joshi points out the importance of Suydam’s character, who is, for Lovecraft, “a traitor both to his class and to his race” and is in no position to be seen congregating with people of lower classes and different backgrounds “as a high-born member of the civilization that originally colonized the area” (2016, 124). In Suydam’s portrayal, one can therefore observe Lovecraft’s reactionary rigidity when it comes to class and race. According to Joshi, Suydam is able to recognize that “his clandestine activities must be masked by a façade of propriety” (2016, 124), which is the reason why he changes his public persona to something much more acceptable for someone of his background and class. Suydam therefore shows a great deal of calculating lucidity by following the code of proper behaviour and buying himself time and peace for his schemes.

An announcement that Suydam was engaged to be married to a wealthy woman duly followed Suydam’s successful surfacing in the social circles. Coinciding with the surprising news was a raid on Suydam’s properties due to a kidnapping epidemic in New York. During the raid Malone discovered horrible paintings and archaic inscriptions of various languages that suggested sacrificing rites had been taking place there. However, with no proof of the missing kidnapped children, the police had to step back. The imperfect plot gains pace as the events started to unravel quickly on the day of the Suydam’s wedding on a ship. Simultaneous to the sudden appearance of a tramp steamer, a scream resonated from Suydam’s room. The sailor who was first at the scene has gone mad from the hideous sight of the murdered Mr. and Mrs. Suydam. It is unclear to Malone what exactly happened in the room, but Lovecraft leaves hints that the strangulation had not been executed by a human hand due to “the claw-mark on Mrs. Suydam’s throat”, the red letters of the word “LILITH” flickering on the wall, “a certain phosphorescence” in the air as well as a “suggestion of a faint and hellish tittering” (158). “A horde of swart, insolent ruffians” then swarmed from the mysterious tramp steamer and demanded Suydam’s body (158). Lovecraft does not elaborate how it was that the men knew when and where to appear, but merely states that their leader, “an Arab with a hatefully negroid mouth”, handed a note to the captain (158). The note – signed by Suydam himself –

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<sup>11</sup> Kurdistan here functions as an empty signifier of evil. The nation is remote and obscure enough to fit the author's purpose.

urged the receiver to comply with the man's request, which is – quite inexplicably – enough to convince the ship's captain to give them permission to take Suydam's body. After they left, the undertaker noted that Mrs. Suydam's body, which was left behind, had been drained of blood.

### **4.3. "Of course it was a dream"**

As Detective Malone carried out a raid of the Suydam's basement flat, the events took a turn for the occult. The locked cellar door gave way "from the *other* side" and dragged Malone "through the aperture and down unmeasured spaces" (160). Suddenly surrounded by the "old brick slums and dark foreign faces", Malone wished none of this was actually taking place and tried to convince himself that the vision was "of course [...] a dream" (160). What follows was presumably meant as a section of the story with the greatest horror effect on the reader, but it falls a bit flat and fails to evoke the desired fearful effect. Malone witnessed a ritual worshipping Satan and the "leprous limbs of phosphorescent Lilith" in which the worshippers put Suydam's dead body below the pedestal as a sacrifice to the goddess, while chanting and dancing "with Dionysiac fury" (161). During the rite, Suydam's body somehow came to life and tipped the pedestal over, effectively bringing Malone's dream to an abrupt end, but also linking the vision with reality as the building collapsed without explanation. Malone was found under the ruins in the vicinity of the body of Robert Suydam – apparently brought there via an underground canal.

### **4.4. Epilogue**

The investigation revealed that Robert Suydam had been a mastermind of a human trafficking ring using the underground canals and tunnels for his dark deeds. Moreover, in the subterranean cells several captives were found "in a state of complete idiocy" including "infants of disturbingly strange appearance" (163). Their death at the first encounter with the daylight was described by Lovecraft as "rather merciful" (163). Although the mentioning of the retrograded captives scarcely adds to the story, their inclusion is another reference to the theme of atavism from the story "The Rats in the Walls". This shows that the fear of regression to primitive patterns remained firmly in Lovecraft's thoughts. Meanwhile, the overriding fear of people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds characteristic for this particular story ends with the following final outburst on the decayed Red Hook and its people (Lovecraft 2008, 164):

As for Red Hook – it is always the same. Suydam came and went; a terror gathered and faded; but the evil spirit of darkness and squalor broods on amongst the mongrels in the old brick houses, and prowling bands still parade on unknown errands past windows where lights and twisted faces unaccountably appear and disappear. [...] The soul of the beast is omnipresent and triumphant, and Red Hook's legions of blear-eyed, pockmarked youths still chant and curse and howl as they file from abyss to abyss, none knows whence or whither, pushed on by blind laws of biology which they may never understand.

The passage, with adjectives such as “blear-eyed” and “pockmarked”, maintains the vicious flow of loaded terms as it has been throughout the story. On the other hand, the reference to the biological laws is an allusion to the theories of eugenics, which were closely followed by Lovecraft. What is even more noticeable is the underlying futility of trying to defeat ancient instincts. Lovecraft's pessimistic world view is clear to see in the conclusion of “The Horror at Red Hook” as he bemoans the unstoppable decay of the multicultural society and what he considers lurking primitive human patterns.

In a letter to Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft himself described the tale “The Horror at Red Hook” as “rather long and rambling” and admitted that he didn't “think it [was] very good” (Derleth and Wandrei 1968, 20). Furthermore, Lovecraft characterizes the story as “at least an attempt to extract horror from an atmosphere to which you deny any qualities save vulgar commonplaceness” (Derleth and Wandrei 1968, 20). Always a harsh critic of his own work, Lovecraft's self-evaluation does not come as a surprise, but in this particular case, I agree with it. The story is far from the level of his better ones in terms of plot and particularly in terms of the attempts to evoke horror. It does, however, provide a painfully accurate insight into Lovecraft's xenophobic impressions and his struggles to understand the metropolitan environment of New York. In a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, Lovecraft advertises the story by making a connection between the story's antagonists and “the gangs of young loafers & herds of evil-looking foreigners that one sees everywhere in New York” (Derleth and Wandrei 1968, 27). The hateful rhetoric of this quote simply proves the clear link between the work and the author as there is no way to distinguish between the two of them.

It is most definitely Lovecraft himself speaking through the narrator's outbursts of xenophobia. According to Houellebecq, “racial hatred provokes in Lovecraft the trancelike poetic state in sentences” (2008, 107). Stating that Lovecraft's state of racist frenzy is when Lovecraft is at his creative peak sounds like a kind of perverse admiration, which Houellebecq defends by arguing that “every great passion, be it love or hate, will in the end generate an

authentic work” (2008, 118). Admitting that Lovecraft “was more on the side of hate”, or more precisely “of hate and fear” (2008, 118), Houellebecq pinpoints the root of Lovecraft’s xenophobia manifesting in “The Horror at Red Hook” and his other works (2008, 113):

Underlying [the] ruminations on the decay of cultures, which are merely a superimposed layer of intellectual justification, is fear. Fear from afar, preceded by repulsion – it is what generates indignation and hatred.

Indeed, it is the intellectual supremacy mixed with fear and repulsion that is at the very core of Lovecraft’s life and work.

## 5. "THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH"

Houellebecq considers the novella "The Shadow over Innsmouth" to be one of Lovecraft's "great texts" (2008, 41). However, it was not always held in such high regard. After Lovecraft completed the story in December 1931, he was "marred by self-doubt, discouragement at his previous work, [and] lack of confidence in his ability to do what he really wished to do as a fiction writer" (Joshi 2016, 188). According to Burleson, Lovecraft's disappointment over the final version of the story was so immense that he himself made "the 'editorial decision' that the story's length and slowness of buildup would render it commercially unacceptable" (2016, 181-182). Lovecraft's refusal to test the waters for "The Shadow over Innsmouth" was ignored by his friend August Derleth, who bypassed Lovecraft and submitted the story to *Weird Tales* in 1933 without the author's consent, but its publication was rejected (Joshi 2016, 193). Despite the initial rejection and reluctance to publish the story, "The Shadow over Innsmouth" is today recognised as "a work rich in symbolism, imagery and suspenseful plotting" (Burleson 2016, 182).

The key reason the novella "The Shadow over Innsmouth" was chosen for analysis was its prevailing theme – miscegenation between humans and amphibian creatures – which represents the third pillar of Lovecraft's fear. Biological elements have been present in Lovecraft's work throughout the 1920s. During that time, Lovecraft held close interest in the eugenics movement and his xenophobic neurosis reached a climax during his stay in New York. By the time "The Shadow over Innsmouth" was completed in 1931, "the eugenics and anti-immigration movements had already seen their heyday," as the public became more concerned by the Great Depression, according to Bennett Lovett-Graff (1997, 175). Still, racial degeneration as a consequence of interbreeding is at the forefront of the novella as well as at the forefront of Lovecraft's personal fears, regardless of the fact that the racial question lost some of its momentum in the public discourse. For Lovecraft, his work was a platform to confirm and reassure himself his own genealogical worth. According to Lovett-Graff, Lovecraft "compensated [for his insecurities] by exaggerating the threatening image of the Other while fantasizing his own beleaguered but heroic position in the fight for racial and cultural purity" (1997, 179). Indeed, the horror in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" is mostly

biological.<sup>12</sup> Lovecraft builds on the opposition between the narrator's alleged normality and the Other's visual repugnance that eventually come together in an unforgettable final twist.

### **5.1. The "Innsmouth look"**

"The Shadow over Innsmouth" is narrated by a male first-person narrator who is not named in the story, but is called Robert Olmstead in Lovecraft's notes (Joshi 2016, 188). The narrator shares a number of personal traits with the author. For example, the narrator's travel around New England was a "coming of age" treat in which he pursued "sightseeing, antiquarian, and genealogical" interests (505). A knack for studying old architecture, doing in-depth research in libraries and discovering more of his own ancestry, mirrors Lovecraft's own interests. According to Joshi, Lovecraft had a habit of conducting his "own thorough researches into the history and topography of the places he wished to visit [as well as making] frequent trips to libraries, chambers of commerce, and elsewhere for maps, guidebooks, and historical background" (2016, 195). The resemblance does not stop there. On his backpacking tour, the narrator is "always seeking the cheapest possible route" (505), which again reflects Lovecraft's frugal travelling habits. This shared frugality or asceticism is also seen in their habits of nourishment. For the narrator, "a bowl of vegetable soup with crackers" satisfies his daily needs (534), whereas Lovecraft's was famous for a similar diet consisting of the bare minimum of nutrients.

It is the quest for the cheapest means of transport that turns the narrator's attention towards Innsmouth and sets the story in motion. Newburyport's ticket-agent mentioned the possibility for the narrator to take the route to Arkham via Innsmouth with a "terrible rattletrap" of a bus, which would be the most budget-friendly way to travel (506). This was the first time the narrator heard of "shadowed Innsmouth," but he was intrigued by the place that could "inspire such dislike in its neighbours" (506). As the ticket-agent shared more details about "a queer kind of town," he spoke "with an air of feeling slightly superior" (506). Via the ticket-agent's tale, the reader and the narrator learn of Innsmouth and its inhabitants for the first time. It is a tale that mixes historical facts with wild rumours. At the same time, the disparity between the Innsmouth folks and the rest is clearly demarcated. According to the ticket-agent, the town was currently in a state of decay, although the refinery used to be run with great profit by its founder Captain Obed Marsh. This is the first time a "skin disease or deformity" is mentioned

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<sup>12</sup> The direct quotes from the following subchapters refer to "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (Lovecraft 2008, 504-554) unless stated otherwise.

in connection with the Innsmouth folk and the ticket-agent quickly distances away from them by saying the “folks here and hereabouts always try to cover up any Innsmouth blood they have in ’em” (506). Very quickly the people of Innsmouth are defined as the Other and their bloodline as something that brings shame upon any individual that is part of it. Next, the ticket-agent mentions the circulating whispers that Captain Marsh was “driving bargains with the devil and bringing imps out of hell to live in Innsmouth” and that “some kind of devil-worship and awful sacrifices” occurred there (506). Even though the agent is dismissive of these rumours, they add intrigue to the place. However, the ticket-agent is less dismissive of the racial prejudice of the Innsmouth people. Apparently, “some kind of foreign disease brought from China or somewhere” decimated the population to only 300 to 400 people, which included some “odd specimens” and “queer kinds of people” from “queer ports” (507). The ticket-agent then supports the prejudice by saying he cannot blame those who hold it and claims: “I hate those Innsmouth folks myself, and I wouldn’t care to go to their town” (507). In addition, he provides the first description of the condition, which the narrator later comes to call the “Innsmouth look” (Lovecraft 2008, 507-508):

Some of ’em have queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain’t quite right, Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shrivelled or creased up. Get bald, too, very young. The older fellows look the worst – fact I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a very old chap of that kind. Guess they must die of looking in the glass! Animals hate ’em – they used to have lots of horse trouble before autos came in.

The description is a convincing attempt to interpellate the Innsmouth folk into the role of the Other based on their visual traits that are seen as “queer” and not “quite right”. The claim that animals dislike them wraps up the interpellation convincingly, as it implies a discrepancy in the natural order – even animals are aware that there is something wrong with the Innsmouth folk. The agent also warns against going to Innsmouth at night for the people there are “lawless and sly, and full of secret doings” (509). On that note, the ticket-agent ends his pitch to convince the narrator not to visit Innsmouth. As if reverse psychology was applied, the gossip has the exactly opposite effect and the narrator is fully determined to spend the following day researching Innsmouth.

The narrator did what Lovecraft would have done and visited the library in order to find out as much as possible about the intriguing place. The staff there gave him an impression that “in the eyes of the educated, Innsmouth was merely an exaggerated case of civic degeneration”

(509). Even though the library visit shed little light on the history of Innsmouth, a reference to odd jewellery pointed the narrator into the direction of the Newburyport Historical Society, where a strange tiara was exhibited. The tiara and its alien features brought him into a state of deep fascination and made him wonder whether the tiara's "workmanship was of another planet" (510). In addition to the ticket-agent's opinion, the narrator then learned of the attitude towards "shadowed Innsmouth" from another person that had never set foot there (511). The curator Miss Tilton voiced the feelings of "disgust at a community slipping far down the cultural scale," but this qualm stemmed from her piety, as the Innsmouth's orthodox churches had been taken over by a "debased, quasi-pagan" cult called The Esoteric Order of Dagon (511). It is interesting that Lovecraft includes this angle of religious degeneration – considering his stance on religion was somewhere between agnosticism and atheism – although to be fair, this moral view does not develop any further throughout the story.

The following morning the narrator boarded the dodgy bus to Innsmouth excited by the architectural, historical and anthropological gems ahead. The narrator then saw the bus driver with a "dull expressionless face [...], bulging, watery eyes that seemed never to wink, a flat nose, a receding forehead and chin, and singularly undeveloped ears," who fitted the travel-agent's description of a person hit by a mysterious disease perfectly (512). Inexplicably, the narrator was instinctively hit by "a wave of spontaneous aversion which could be neither checked nor explained" (512). During the bus ride, the narrator tried to guess "what foreign blood was in him," but failed to do so (512). Nevertheless, he still considered the driver alien, which he attributed to "biological degeneration" (513). After finally setting foot in "rumour-shadowed Innsmouth," the narrator left his luggage in the only hotel in town and strolled towards the chain grocery (514). There he asked the young employee, who was not native to Innsmouth, for some information on the place. The two of them bonded over their dislike of "the place, its fishy smell, [and] its furtive people" (517). The boy described them as "sullenly banded together in some sort of fellowship and understanding – despising the world as if they had access to other and preferable spheres of entity" (518). He then drew the narrator an accurate sketch map of Innsmouth and suggested him to go and talk to the only local that may give away any secrets, the town drunkard Zadok Allen.

## **5.2. "A kind o' relation"**

Up until now, the narrator had only conversed with Innsmouth's outsiders, but in order to go a step beyond the wild gossip, it was necessary to reach out to a native as well. "The half-

crazed, liquorish nonagenarian” Zadok Allen was his best bet to obtain an additional point of view (522). After the narrator spotted Zadok loitering around the fire station, he easily lured him to a remote, abandoned spot using a whiskey bottle. Encouraged by the beverage, Zadok began telling the story of Captain Obed Marsh. He sailed to the Pacific after Innsmouth had been heavily hit by hardship and settled on an island populated by the tribe of Kanaka. There Captain Obed started trading for the golden jewellery of the locals and gaining their trust until the natives shared their secret with him. In exchange for human sacrifice, the Kanakys received gold and plenty of fish from “them deep-water things” (526). These amphibians were satisfied with such a bargain at first, but eventually wanted to mix with the natives. Zadok explains the interbreeding arrangement in greater detail (Lovecraft 2008, 526):

When it come to matin’ with them toad-lookin’ fishes, the Kanakys kind o’ balked, but finally they larnt something as put a new face on the matter. Seems that human folks has got a kind o’ relation to sech water-beasts – that everything alive come aout o’ the water onct, an’ only needs a little change to go back agin. Them things told the Kanakys the ef they mixed bloods there’d be children as ud look human at fust, but later turn more’n more like the things, till finally they’d take to the water an’ jine the main lot o’ things daown that. An’ this is the important part, young feller – them as turned into fish things an’ went into the water *wouldn’t never die*. Them things never died excep’ they was kilt violent.

What is clear from Zadok’s testimony is that the Kanakys agreed to mate after they learned that they would gain immortality. In addition, the sea creatures and human beings are in a “kind o’ relation,” which further increases the uneasiness that had been caused by the reveal of the interbreeding agreement. At this point, a sharp reader already starts to suspect the analogy between the Kanakys and the Innsmouth folks and the hunch is to be confirmed, as Zadok continues the tale. Captain Obed knew that the natives were “full o’ fish blood,” but he continued trading for their gold nevertheless (526-527). He was even given a “funny kind o’ thingumajig” that was able to bring out the sea creatures from anywhere in the water (527). Obed was driven by greed and had soon imported enough gold to open the refinery in Innsmouth.

According to Frye, the refinery “stands in for the idea of cultural multiplicity” (2007). The refinery is the source of Innsmouth’s wealth and it melts the regular gold as well as the gold obtained from the Deep Ones in return for interbreeding. Frye’s interpretation is that the refinery “processes alien and normal gold alike, blends the two into a combined substance, and disseminates the resultant mixture,” effectively functioning as a melting pot (2007).

Captain Obed greed-driven bargaining with the Deep Ones therefore mirrors the economic logic behind the American melting pot and “reflects the author’s disgust with the way American capitalism inadvertently diversified the country” (Frye 2007). As appealing as it sounds, Frye’s allegory is reductionist in the sense that the geopolitics are far more complex than his allegory suggests. The same could be said about Lovecraft’s criticism of the melting pot phenomena, which did not surpass the simplistic, superficial terms. In other words, Lovecraft’s disgust over the diversification is misplaced.

However, on one of his returning visits to the Kanaka islands, Obed found the place deserted and the Kanakys nowhere to be seen. The only things that remained were “little stones strewed about – like charms – with somethin’ on ’em like what ye call a swastika naowadays” (527). According to Lovett-Graff, the use of Nazi symbols as the charm which keeps the Deep Ones away is Lovecraft’s most “distasteful literary crime” (1997, 183). “The Shadow over Innsmouth” was written in 1931 and Lovecraft died in 1937, before he could see the full account of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. Still, Lovecraft opted to use the swastika as the symbol of defence from the Deep Ones, who, in turn, symbolize a threat to “the eugenic and cultural soundness of America” (Lovett-Graff 1997, 183). In comparison to Lovecraft, the reader holds the advantage of knowing the full extent of the horror and madness of Nazism, but even so, one is able to deduce how seriously he must have felt threatened by other races to use such symbolism.

It is worth pointing out that the narrator does not believe Zadok Allen’s story. The narrator considered it a “crude allegory” without any real “substantial foundation” (528). Zadok was, however, in full storytelling mode and continued explaining Innsmouth’s decline after the trade with the Kanakys had ceased. Desperate for a boost, Captain Obed called the Deep Ones to Innsmouth using the “funny-shaped lead thingumajig” and struck a deal with them (528). In return for human sacrifices at the Devil’s Reef, the sea creatures reciprocated with golden jewellery and abundant catch for the fishermen. After a while though, similarly as with the Kanakys, the Deep Ones proposed higher stakes to the bargain. Their desire to procreate with the Innsmouth folks was met with some resistance, which was quelled violently in 1846. The history books blame the drop in Innsmouth’s population on the plague, but according to Zadok’s frightened testimony, the carnage was inflicted by hordes of the Deep Ones rising from the sea. All the survivors were forced to take the Oath of Dagon and swear to secrecy. Years of miscegenation took its toll on their appearance and the elderly were kept indoors, as they “can’t shet [their] eyes no more, an’ [were] all aout o’ shape,” until their body was

amphibian and they were able to take to the water (531). However, the true horror, according to trembling Zadok Allen, was that the sea creatures were slowly, but surely, moving ashore. With this last revelation Lovecraft uses Zadok to hint at the threat of a miscegenated race taking over, before he runs away in a frightened frenzy.

Up to this point of the story the “narrative tension [...] grows with the accumulation of inexplicable facts” (Lovett-Graff 1997, 182). The tension is built by the voices of the outsiders – the ticket-agent, the curator and the grocery clerk – and the knowledgeable insider, Zadok Allen. Each of them adds another rumour or another layer of intrigue to the mix. Even though the narrator remains sceptical of their testimonies, the reader is able to pinpoint “the sexual taboo whose violation lies at the heart of the tale: the repulsive sexual intermingling of humanity and these froglike beings” (Lovett-Graff 1997, 182). In addition, Lovett-Graff asserts, the desire to violate this taboo “is cast as the sick desire of the alien Other” (1997, 184). The interbreeding between different species is – rightly – regarded as taboo. The problem arises when a different reading of the story may have easily extended this taboo to mating between different human races, which should most definitely not be portrayed as a source of horror.

### **5.3. “Their crouching, shambling gait”**

Zadok’s paranoiac fear that the conversation with the narrator was spotted is confirmed, as the narrator’s planned evening departure by bus is scuppered due to an engine failure. He is therefore forced to spend the night in the hotel. Looking at the “evil-visaged clerk” (535), the narrator remembers the ticket-agent’s tales of the locals’ attitude towards “prying strangers” spending the night and of “more’n one business or government man [that had] disappeared there,” in addition to one that had lost sanity (509). These tales caused the narrator to be strangely alert and set up the horror. When the nocturnal intruders indeed arrived, he was prepared to act, as if he had “subconsciously been fearing some menace and considering possible avenues of escape for hours” (536). In an action-packed, albeit slowly developed, sequence uncharacteristic of Lovecraft, the narrator manages to evade the pursuers, whose “hoarse barkings and loose-syllabled croakings bore so little resemblance of human speech” (537).

Even though the narrator escaped from the hotel, the pursuit was still on. The chasers were after him in great numbers and managed to set roadblocks on all the streets leading out of

Innsmouth. The narrator could hear their “horrible croaking voices exchanging low cries in what was certainly not English” and was repelled by “their crouching, shambling gait” (541). Joshi asserts that such quotes betray Lovecraft’s “own paranoia through that of his narrator [...] as if a foreign language is in itself an aberration” (2016, 191-192). Ironically, the narrator impersonates this exact movement to avoid being spotted when he crosses the street. Crossing the street towards his escape route via the abandoned railroad, the narrator gazed back towards the moonlit Devil Reef. “The most horrible impression of all was borne in upon [him],” as he set sight on “a teeming horde of shapes swimming inward toward the town” (542). With a bit of luck, the narrator successfully made way to his escape route, but laid low as a “legion of croaking, baying entities of unknown source flopped noisomely past” at a nearby road (548). As the “stench waxed overpowering” and the narrator felt “a strengthening of the abnormal element” (548), he opened his eyes and caught sight of the exterior of his tiara-wearing pursuers (Lovecraft 2008, 548-549):

I think their predominant colour was a greyish-green, though they had white bellies. They were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly. Their forms vaguely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes that never closed. At the sight of their necks were palpitating gills, and their long pawns were webbed. They hopped irregularly, sometimes on two legs and sometimes on four. I was somehow glad that they had no more than four limbs. Their croaking, baying voices, clearly used for articulate speech, held all the dark shades of expression which their staring faces lacked.

The reveal of the Deep Ones represents the first climax of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” where the reader, via the narrator, is shown the monstrous Other in its amphibian form. The image functions as a warning from the threat of hybridization and miscegenation and evokes horrific effect for its alien unfamiliarity. As Houellebecq suggests, “it’s hard to think of a batrachian with any degree of calm after reading [Lovecraft]” (2008, 69). This attempt to project relatively harmless natural qualities as a source of horror is not isolated. For example, not many individuals will “find the iodized smell of the sea to be repugnant and foul [...] save of course those who have read ‘The Shadow over Innsmouth’” (Houellebecq 2008, 69). The accumulation of unexpected horrors certainly proves too much for the narrator, who loses consciousness upon setting sight on the Deep Ones.

#### 5.4. “True Marsh eyes”

“The Shadow over Innsmouth” could have easily ended with the narrator regaining consciousness and informing the authorities. Instead, the final chapter provides “one of the most memorably horrific power-punches in all of Lovecraft’s works” (Burlison 2016, 186). For Joshi, the narrator’s storyline represents Lovecraft’s “greatest union of internal and external horror,” (2016, 194). On one hand, the external horror is represented by the threat of the Deep Ones to the whole civilization. On the other, the internal horror unravels purely on the narrator’s personal level, as he inadvertently moves closer and closer towards the truth about his ancestry.

Hints and allusions leading towards the final twist are scattered throughout the story. For example, when the narrator sees the tiara of unknown origin for the first time, he feels “an uncomfortable sense of pseudo-memory, as if the [aquatic designs on the tiara] called up some image from deep cells and tissues, whose retentive functions are wholly primal and awesomely ancestral” (511). Furthermore, when the narrator first sets sight on the Devil Reef through the bus window, “a subtle, curious sense of beckoning” overshadows the impressions of decayed landscape (514). Next, observing the facial features of the Innsmouth folks, the narrator briefly remembers a “pseudo-recollection” of the physique’s resemblance to a picture of some familiarity (515). In addition, he feels a “shuddering touch of evil pseudo-memory” when he sees a glimpse of the Order of Dagon pastor’s tiara (516). After the horrific experience in Innsmouth, the narrator follows up his genealogical research and finds out that his grandmother might have been a Marsh. This is when the reader is given yet another clue by the Arkham Historical Society’s curator, who comments that the narrator himself has “the true Marsh eyes” (550). He was not the first family member, who stumbled upon the trail of a “kind of terror of [their] own ancestry” (551). His uncle committed suicide soon after a trip to the Arkham Historical Society, whereas the narrator’s cousin was secluded to life in a sanatorium.

These clues build up to the story’s second climax – in which the narrator faints for the second time – this time upon finding the exotic tiara among his grandmother’s possessions. Tiara, the symbol of the alien race and consequently the symbol of miscegenation, has been reoccurring throughout the story and has also delivered the tragic revelation to the narrator, who is finally aware that the blood of the Deep Ones runs through his veins. He connects the dots and realizes his grandmother must be the miscegenated daughter of Captain Obed Marsh,

“married off to an Arkham feller as didn’t suspect nothin’,” according to Zadok Allen’s tale (531). This realisation takes a massive toll on the narrator’s health and appearance. So much so that he needs to quit his job and retreat to a solitary life until one day the reflection in the mirror tells him that he has “acquired *the Innsmouth look*” (553). He starts experiencing strange dreams in which he explores underwater cities and civilization and even communicates with his immortal grandmother. The narrator’s horror and fear is gradually replaced by a strange draw or expectancy which turns into a full and surprising embrace of his fate (Lovecraft 2016, 554):

I shall plan my cousin’s escape from that Canton madhouse, and together we shall go to marvel-shadowed Innsmouth. We shall swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y’ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory for ever.

The narrator’s decision to embrace his heritage, which had caused such distress and shame initially, is as sudden as it is surprising. As Joshi points out, the narrator has consistently been calling Innsmouth derogatory names, such as “rumour-shadowed Innsmouth” (514) or “hushed city of alienage and death” (521). However, after he converts, the repugnance turns into awe of the “marvel-shadowed Innsmouth” (Joshi 2016, 196). Interpretations of the ending differ from author to author. For example, Lovett-Graff states that “the narrator’s resolution to join the Deep Ones rather than kill himself testifies to the overpowering pull of heredity that characterized Lovecraft’s thinking” (1997, 187), which suggests that the taboo themes of heredity and miscegenation occupied Lovecraft due to some “unconscious fascination” (1997, 186). Joshi, in contrast, interprets the final climax as proof “that not merely [the narrator’s] physical body but his mind has been ineluctably corrupted” (2016, 196). The narrator’s final choice of eternal life underneath the water therefore in no way absolves the central threat of miscegenation. If anything, it underlines the threat of the Other. The immortality of the underwater race is a warning of the irreversibility of miscegenation which Lovecraft understood as a threat to ethnic and cultural purity. Even today, over eight decades after H.P. Lovecraft wrote “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” the alleged foreign threats to the ethnic structure and cultural legacy remain a perennial feature in the public sphere. This confirms Moore’s claim from the Introduction that Lovecraft truly was a “sensitive barometer of American dread” (2014, 10), as he managed to articulate some of the most persistent human fears, via the unlikely vehicle of the Deep Ones.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to closely examine H.P. Lovecraft's personal life and his body of work and highlight the intertwined connections between the two. His biography reveals him as a child of fragile health, but of prodigious literary abilities from an early age. His hopes of pursuing an academic career in one of the sciences were hit by a blow in the form of a nervous breakdown, which robbed him of concluding the high school education and enrolling into Brown University. A ray of hope was provided by his inclusion in the amateur press community, in which Lovecraft developed his literary skills, formed friendships and found a sense of purpose. As has been shown, he was an eccentric and fascinating individual, who was deeply troubled by the changes in society that he perceived threatening.

This fear of change and fear of the unknown was something that triggered Lovecraft's writing and provided a pool of inspiration from his early stories to the later ones. I classified Lovecraft's fear into three main pillars: the fear of atavism, xenophobia-driven fear, and the fear of miscegenation. I connected the three pillars with the central themes in three stories, written by Lovecraft at three different periods of his life. Firstly, in the story "The Rats in the Walls," the reader learns of the narrator succumbing to the atavistic threat of his ancestral tradition and reverting to the most primitive relapse of cannibalism. In the background of the atavistic theme, lurks the fragile mental health disposition of Lovecraft's family. After all, both of Lovecraft's parents were committed to Butler Hospital: his father due to mental deterioration following the contraction of syphilis and his mother due to hysteria and depression. Next, the prevailing theme in the story "The Horror at Red Hook" is xenophobia, manifesting itself in outbursts of vile abuse directed at Brooklyn's immigrant inhabitants. The story was inspired by Lovecraft's unhappy and unsuccessful stay in New York, where he first came into direct contact with the proverbial Other. The first encounter with the multi-cultural population of the melting pot, after previously living a sheltered life in New England, led Lovecraft to blame it for his own shortcomings. Finally, the novella "The Shadow over Innsmouth," focuses on the taboo theme of miscegenation between humans and the Deep Ones. Underneath the surface, the story functions as a warning about the threat of tainting the cultural and ethnic purity by interracial relationships, which was one of Lovecraft's anxieties. The link between Lovecraft's personal life and his body of work is therefore firmly established. One can even argue that the fear and hate provided Lovecraft with creative impulse to write his stories.

An ethical dilemma, which is inherent to Lovecraft's legacy today, is whether one should continue reading his texts, knowing that they also include blatantly racist ideas and descriptions as well as some other more opaque racist undertones. Furthermore, does the fact that Lovecraft used his work not only to confirm and reassure himself his own biological and genealogical worth, but even used his hatred of the Other as an inspiration for producing his work, brings into question his position in the Canon of horror literature? There is no doubt that despite his literary talent and influence, Lovecraft's place among the greats of literature will forever be marred by a caveat, denoting his unforgivable attitudes. Still, just as one should not simply dismiss Lovecraft's work as racist scribbles, one also cannot solely read his works with admiration without delving deep into its context, as his life and work are forever inseparable.

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### **Izjava o avtorstvu**

Izjavljam, da je magistrsko delo v celoti moje avtorsko delo ter da so uporabljeni viri in literatura navedeni v skladu s strokovnimi standardi in veljavno zakonodajo.

Ljubljana, 20. maja 2019

Gregor Gregorc