

Michael Roa

Dr. Landau

HIST219O

11/27/17

Lovecraft's Mythology of Horrors

Lovecraft is a popular author in our modern day. Hallmark works such as *Call of Cthulhu*, *At the Mountains of Madness*, and *The Shadow Out of Time* shaped the horror genre, and arguably make up core works to the horror literature¹. Amidst Lovecraft's fictional works lie critique to the 19th century's rampant imperialism and society. Lovecraft's inner thoughts on the dangers and horrors of colonialism and imperialism are revealed in four works. He attacks assumptions of anthropology regarding inferior cultures² through paranormal means in *Curse of Yig*. Ignorance of native ways and knowledge quickly lead to frontiersmen facing danger 'inferior' natives easily avoid. Lovecraft assails unfettered exploration into the unknown with *The Nameless City*. The typical tales of exploration into a lost world subverts to show some worlds are meant to be lost. The power of science is called into question in *The Colour out of Space*. Harvard analogies fail to resolve the terrifying decay of a farm unlucky enough to experience a visit from out of this world. Finally, an idea of what it means to be part of a higher civilization is sighted in *At the Mountains of Madness*. Superior creatures from another world colonized Earth, left signs of their once amazing empire, but fall to an even larger empire. Before

¹ (Joshi, H.P. Lovecraft: A Life 1996)

² (Heather Long n.d.)

delving into his views through stories, an understanding to the views of Lovecraft himself must be brought to bear.

H.P. Lovecraft was born in 1890 at Providence Rhode Island, these rocky shores of New England set the stage for many of his works³. His first recognized work *Providence in 2000 A.D.*⁴ displays a world where white heritage has been displaced by immigrants and sets the tone of Lovecraft's views on race. *On the Creation of Niggers* shows his thoughts on racism to the greatest light, a firm believer in the ideas of social Darwinism⁵. The Roaring Twenties failed Lovecraft as he first began writing his main works in 1925 during a time of financial hardship⁶. H.P. Lovecraft passed in 1937 in absolute poverty with cancer and malnutrition in his hometown⁷. Lovecraft's dire economic state may have developed his general resentment towards civilization possibly inspiring his critiques of modernity. He creates an "anti-mythology"⁸ for his horror, a world where humans are not the center stage. As well, common themes and tropes displayed by literature are subverted for a more terrifying nature. Anti-mythology works to reverse the role of white studied men in Lovecraft's works, the wonders of science and exploration and even civilization at large as humanities most 'valued' creation are shown paltry⁹. The self-created mythology serves as Lovecraft's basis to critique modernity. A firebase to attack imperialism because of imperialism itself is a vital part to the modern society. An example for 'anti-myth' at play is the role of white settlers in *The Curse of Yig*.

³ (Woodward 2008)

⁴ (Joshi, I am Providence: The Life and Times of H.P. Lovecraft, Vol. 1 2013)

⁵ (Galand 1999)

⁶ (Tyson 2010)

⁷ (Joshi, A Dreamer and a Visionary 2001)

⁸ (S. T. Joshi 2001)

⁹ (Gray 2014)

The *Curse of Yig* details the journey of a couple into Oklahoma to settle the lands. The ethnologist husband receives advice from the natives of a curse that besets those who attack snakes. While the husband heeds the advice, his wife mistakenly kills a nest of snakes. The husband practices native's methods devoutly to keep away the demon Spirit of Yig to the chagrin of his wife who believes him insane. The husband is inadvertently killed by his wife after a night of visions. The wife is sent to an asylum, whereupon the curse reveals its true power and she gives birth to half-snake half-human creatures in her cell¹⁰. This story gives display of the reversal of white man's intellect against native culture and custom. The possibility of a world where the natives know more than 'educated' white man, his hubris inviting grand folly. Particularly this example counters the trope of 'The Great Invincible White Hunter', instead the 'Great White Hunter' fails against the warnings of the 'lesser hunters' of the Indians through their 'savage superstitions'.

The Nameless City follows the trope of The Lost World and the Hamitic tribe. The rather descript 'Nameless City' is dreamed by the Arabian mystic Abdul Alhazred in the sands of Arabia. Our anthropologist narrator enters during a sandstorm to find a long-gone human civilization. He uncovers strange ruins descending an inhuman chasm in which he discovers coffins. To his horror the coffins are filled with lizardmen clothed in decorations not buried, seemingly sleeping. Murals on cavernous walls detail how the lizardmen civilization existed long before humankind. He comes to a horrifying realization that lizardmen ate humans as he is then

¹⁰ (H.P. Lovecraft 1929)

exposed to the remaining lizardmen inhabitants of the catacombs. He flees to the surface and recounts the tale and horrors of *The Nameless City*¹¹. Here Lovecraft subverts the common fiction trope, the Hamitic tribe. The Nameless City, 'lost tribe's' ruins, are not the traditionally lost Hamitic tribe, rather something else entirely. Another trope subverted in this work, the notion that exploration always brings good is questioned. In the real world, exploration brought more land to the empire, but to Lovecraft exploration just as easily unearths something meant to be buried forever. Instead a tribe of lizard savages, with ruins of a civilization that are superior to even those of Rome are found.

The Colour out of Space provides a movement away from the atypical constant praise of technology. It follows a small farm in Arkham, Massachusetts that experiences an event, quite literally, out of this world. A meteor falls near the homestead bearing materials unknown from the distant voids of space. A team of scientist are dispatched to investigate and bring back samples for testing. Their testing reveals little, only serving to confuse the scientist's more, as the material follows no known laws of Earth. On the farmstead crops and animals die en masse weighing heavily on the resident family who soon become ill. As the material in the lab dissolves the scientist are prompted to retrieve more. But the farm has fully decayed and more terrifying nightmare creature seems to inhabit the farmstead. Locking themselves into the farmhouse they witness the meteor's true nature as it creates a colour indescribable as all around it perish.¹² The failure of science in *The Colour of Space* devastates the usual trope of educated whites resolving otherwise impossible problems easily. Instead the scientist fails to realize that they let a greater

¹¹ (Lovecraft 1921)

¹² (Lovecraft, *The Colour Out of Space* 1927)

horror entrench counter to their efforts. Aptly named ‘Miskatonic University’ the campus mirrors that of Harvard, Brown and other world-class Ivy-League schools. Yet even these best-of-the-best fails in *The Colour of Space*, and a clear message is sent. With the worlds rapid development of science and technology, Lovecraft seeks to warn that science should not always be trusted to resolve every issue.

Lovecraft’s magnum opus work¹³, *The Mountains of Madness* is cited as the one first ‘true science fiction’ work¹⁴. In this work a team of scientist travel to Antarctica to follow a prior research team’s discovery. Following their colleagues trail they come across the remains of alien skeletons and frozen specimens. The remains are dated earlier than human civilization yet is too advanced to be explained by science, the creatures by all accounts are truly alien. A break-away party’s camp is devastated all but one member of the team slaughtered, some discussed. and the frozen specimens missing. The remaining team travel over insurmountable mountains by plane, bringing them to a lost stone cyclopean city riddled with hieroglyphics. The city is revealed to be constructed by ‘Elder Things’ who colonized Earth with the help of genetically engineered workers called ‘shoggoths’. The Elder Things fought a war of unimaginable scale for Earth against the cult god Cthulhu and the horrifying alien Mi-go. The shoggoths, eventually overthrow the Elder Things as an even greater evil is rumored to be lurking over another mountain range. The Elder Things flee under subterranean oceans never to be seen again. The team discover a corpse of an Elder Thing, killed in a struggle, when a shoggoth in the form of a goo that attacks them. They flee by means of their plane with one of the remaining crew looking

¹³ (Numerous 2017)

¹⁴ (Sturgeon 1948)

back, looking over the mountains. He sees something so great an evil his mind is lost. His team member comforts him before concluding that the slaughtered team was instead killed by one of the specimens they unearthed in self-defense. The creature then dissected some of the humans for scientific curiosity.¹⁵ The *Mountains of Madness* Lovecraft comes to bear with colonialism most heavily. He envisions a world where a superior creature has come to Earth, bringing ‘their civilization’ and ‘wars’ to a point where the imagination cannot conceive the scale of their empire. In a sense this is akin to how empires of Europe brought their vast wealth and magical technology to the colonized world. Lovecraft shows how brutal it is to be subject to a superior species, and in the world of the early 20th century’s social Darwinism this has massive implications for the treatment of other races regarded as ‘lesser species.’

Howard Philips Lovecraft’s best show of influence is in his creation of an entire subgenre to horror. “Lovecraftian Horror” is described as the ‘cosmic horror of the unknown’, a world where cults summon unimaginable things from beyond the veil. Anti-mythology acts as a key axiom to Lovecraftian horror, a riposte of usual literary tale and trope. Typical outcomes for stories of the time are instead ignored and the work strays into the unknown. Here Lovecraft draws upon his own personal life to define ‘what happens next’. In this literary unknown Lovecraft expresses his hatred of modernity and, much like other fictional works projects his viewpoint into the world. To a man who the modern world failed he instead creates a world where man fails the world, both past and present. The power of science fails to resolve the crisis at Arkham in *The Colour out of Space*. Native ways prove the only defense against a greater

¹⁵ (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 1936)

horror in *Curse of Yig*. The ‘lost world’ in *The Nameless City* shows fervent exploration of ancient can yield results we are not prepared to face. *At the Mountains of Madness* examples, the ideas found in *The Nameless City* as well as parodying colonial wars. These works show how Lovecraft’s hatred of modernity poisons his works to attack various subjects; imperialism, infallibility of science, anthropology, even the ‘superiority of the white’. The anti-mythology acts pivotally throughout the tales, decimating tropes; white hunters fall, Hamitic tribe’s ruins are shown to be something far from ‘white civilization’, the educated scientist reduced to a babbling mess, and the downfall of the world’s greatest empires.

Works Cited

- Galand, René. 1999. "The Wounded Ego of Howard Phillips Lovecraft." In *Me gloazet Howard Phillips Lovecraft*, 12. Wellesley College: Al-Liamm.
- Gray, John. 2014. "Creatures of the deep, HP Lovecrafts philosophy of horror." *NEW STATESMAN* 24-30.
- H.P. Lovecraft, Zealia Bishop. 1929. "The Curse of Yig." *Weird Tales*, November: 625-636.
- Heather Long, Kelly Chakov. n.d. *Social Evolutionism*. Accessed November 26, 2017.
<http://anthropology.ua.edu/cultures/cultures.php>.
- Joshi, S.T. 2001. In *A Dreamer and a Visionary*, 359-360. Liverpool University.
- . 1996. *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life*. West Warwick, R.I.: Necrominon Press. Accessed November 26, 2017.
<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/01.02.97/cover/horror1-9701.html>.
- . 2013. *I am Providence: The Life and Times of H.P. Lovecraft, Vol. 1*. Hippocampus Press.
- Lovecraft, H.P. 1927. "The Colour Out of Space." *Amazing Stories*, September .
- . 1936. "At the Mountains of Madness." *Astounding Sotries*, February.
- . 1921. "The Nameless City." *The Wolverine*, November .
- Numerous. 2017. *Wikipedia, H.P. Lovecraft*. November 27. Accessed November 27, 2017.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._P._Lovecraft.
- S. T. Joshi, David E. Schultz. 2001. *An H.P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Publishing Group, Hippocampus Press.
- Sturgeon, Theodore. 1948. "Book Revie." *Astounding Science Fiction*, November: 105-106.
- Tyson, Donald. 2010. In *The Dream World of H. P. Lovecraft: His Life, His Demons, His Universe*, 75. Llewellyn Publications.
2008. *Lovecraft: Fear of the Unknown*. Directed by Frank H. Woodward.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg9VCf5einY>.