

HP Lovecraft: His Racism in Context



HP Lovecraft

There is no question that HP Lovecraft, influential writer of horror fiction and son of Providence, held views that were clearly racist, outdated outliers even by the standards of his time. My goal here is not to excuse his racism, but to place it in a context of Lovecraft as a human being with very real flaws.

I do not believe it is possible to separate the man from his work: Lovecraft the man was afraid of nearly everything unfamiliar, and that discomfort - dread, really - of the "other" is what permeates and distinguishes the world view expressed in his fiction. As does every horror writer, he exaggerated his own irrational fears in his stories: his phobia of seafood manifests, one might conclude, in his siting the lair of Cthulhu in the lost city of R'lyeh sunken under the Pacific Ocean. To what extent Lovecraft's social and political views influenced his created universe is the subject of the title essay in *Lovecraft and a World in Transition*, a collection by Lovecraft scholar and biographer ST Joshi. Are Lovecraft's space aliens and other-worldly creatures proxies or stand-ins for humans of color? *Lovecraft Country* by Matt Ruff is a 2016 novel that satirically explores that question, following an African-American protagonist who is a fan of Lovecraft in the era of Jim Crow.

Nearly every writer critical of Lovecraft on this ground cites as the prime example of his racism a particular poem supposedly written by him in 1912, but I regard that attribution of authorship as doubtful. (The poem itself is so offensive that I am choosing not to quote it, but you can read it on Wikisource.) The poem exists not in any of Lovecraft's extensive notes or correspondence, but only in a single extant copy made by hectograph duplication, a now-obsolete process using gelatin to make cheap copies long before the invention of photocopying - the 1912 version of forwarding a stupid joke by e-mail.

Lovecraft was well-read but not formally educated, leading him to be almost totally ignorant of subjects that were outside the range of books he chose to absorb. He never attended college, a matter of significant embarrassment and disappointment to him, and he withdrew from Hope High School without a diploma. The best information, according to the excellent definitive biography by ST Joshi, *I am Providence: The Life and Times of HP Lovecraft*, is that Lovecraft in 1906 at about age 16 suffered a minor breakdown and in 1908 at about age 18 suffered a major breakdown, making it impossible for him to continue in school. The nature of these breakdowns is unclear, but they seem to have involved "tics" and "seizures" in a way that suggests epilepsy, possibly resulting from a head injury as a child. He reported a sensitivity to light causing him to draw his shades in the daytime, consistent with a

traumatic brain injury.

What we do know is that 1908 to 1913 is a “blank period” where little information about Lovecraft’s life as a young adult survives, and he wrote very little. If Lovecraft did compose that notorious 1912 poem, it would have been during this period, and although Joshi accepts the attribution it seems to me open to substantial question. The poem “Providence in 2000 A.D.” was Lovecraft’s first published work, appearing in the Providence *Evening Journal* of March 4, 1912, a xenophobic satire that envisions streets and landmarks being given ethnic renamings, inspired, according to its introduction, by a proposal from “the Italians” to change “Atwells Avenue” to “Columbus Avenue.”

Regardless, there is a huge volume of material in Lovecraft’s correspondence where he vehemently defends his racist views to his friends, and this is where his idiosyncratic autodidacticism rears its ugly head. He was an ardent atheistic materialist, and he put his faith in scientific progress. Nearly everything he read of non-fiction was in hard sciences such as astronomy, chemistry, and biology, and as a result he was heavily - and unduly - influenced by the pseudo-scientific racism of the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, such as eugenics. As Joshi phrased it, “In every other aspect of his thought - metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, politics - Lovecraft was constantly digesting new information... and readjusting his views accordingly. Only on the issue of race did his thinking remain relatively static. He never realised that his beliefs had been largely shaped by parental and societal influence, early reading, and outmoded late nineteenth-century science... The brute fact is that by 1930 every ‘scientific’ justification for racism had been demolished.”

Often mentioned by his modern critics, Lovecraft’s most embarrassing comment about Adolf Hitler - “I know he’s a clown, but by God, I like the boy!” - is from a letter written in September 1933, just months after Hitler came to power through democratic process, two years before the restrictive Nuremberg Laws that stripped Jews of German citizenship and five years before Kristallnacht that burned down Jewish synagogues and businesses. At the time, it was hardly outside mainstream political thought in the United States for people to regard Hitler somewhat favorably as rescuing Germany from economic and political chaos. It is unfair to fault Lovecraft for not knowing what Hitler would do over the next 12 years.

Even setting aside his immature poetry and his uninformed commentary about current events, there is no shortage of ammunition for those who call Lovecraft a racist, and it is easy to find recitations of quotes drawn from his own later stories and correspondence. (See, for example, “The ‘N’ word through the ages: The madness of HP Lovecraft” by Phenderson Djeli Clark.) It is reasonable but obviously unprovable speculation that, had Lovecraft been able to continue his formal education, he would have been exposed to differing points of view during his formative years and might have recognized that his own views were grounded in personal prejudice rather than discredited science.

By the time his correspondents challenged his views in the 1930s, he had long ago solidified those prejudices. His intellectual honesty was such that he could not deny that the science had turned against him; in January 1931 he wrote to James F. Morton, “No anthropologist of standing insists on the uniformly advanced evolution of the Nordic as compared with that of other Caucasian and Mongolian races. As a matter of fact, it is freely conceded that the Mediterranean race turns out a higher percentage of the aesthetically sensitive and that the Semitic groups excel in sharp, precise intellection...” Lovecraft then made an argument grounded in culture with no pretense of scientific basis: “What, then, is the secret of pro-Nordicism amongst those who hold these views? Simply this - that ours is a Nordic culture, and that the roots of that culture are so inextricably tangled in the

national standards, perspectives, traditions, memories, instincts, peculiarities, and physical aspects of the Nordic stream that no other influences are fitted to mingle in our fabric. We don't despise the French in France or Quebec, but we don't want them grabbing our territory and creating foreign islands like Woonsocket and Fall River."

It is a far cry from advocating segregation, as many fringe lunatics continue to do, to argue that distinct cultures should maintain their distinctiveness: it is absurd to suggest a "great homogenization" that would eliminate French, Italian, and Chinese restaurants.

Put simply, by 1931 Lovecraft openly admitted that the scientific consensus said there was no intrinsic biological difference between races and ethnicities, and instead he focused on the entirely non-scientific preservation of culture: this is a theoretical intellectual position quite different from run-of-the-mill racism. It is still arguably racist, but Lovecraft was clearly drawing a line between his personal discomfort being around people of different races, which he did not regard as requiring any justification beyond the purely emotional, distinct from his objection to dilution of culture consistent with *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler, which sold hundreds of thousands of copies after its publication in English translation in 1926 despite being regarded by serious historians as nonsense from a crackpot; years earlier, Lovecraft evolved similar ideas that cultures have natural life cycles analogous to biological organisms, going through stages of birth, youth, maturity, decay, and death, so by the time Lovecraft read the first book in Spengler's two-volume series, he was receptive.

Logically, although Lovecraft himself never carried out this reasoning to such a conclusion, his objection to cultural dilution would apply equally in all cases, leading to what we would today identify as multi-culturalism rather than racism: an indigenous African culture, for example, would be diluted by the introduction of European customs and practices, losing whatever elements make it distinctive and recognizable as a culture. Of course there is a power dynamic, and Europeans through naked brute force changed African culture far more than African culture changed European culture, but the theoretical logic as distinct from practical reality applies equally in both directions.

That Lovecraft compartmentalized his racist views to such an extent that he repeatedly violated them in practice is a fact for which we have incontrovertible evidence. Despite his numerous expressions of antisemitism, he married the Jewish Sonia Greene, maintained a close lifelong friendship with the Jewish poet Samuel Loveman, and accepted a ghostwriting job through *Weird Tales* magazine for the Jewish magician Harry Houdini (whose real name was Erik Weisz). Lovecraft's expressed antisemitism only toward Jews who were not assimilated, again making his distinction between race and culture.

Lovecraft married under circumstances of unusual secrecy, telling his family and friends that he was traveling to New York City for a time, effectively pulling off an elopement at age 33. Clearly fearing her disapproval, he wrote his aunt a letter fully six days after the marriage telling her that the alternative to marriage was suicide due to boredom and financial despair. That should not be misread to infer that his marriage was an emotionless business arrangement as the couple had been genuine friends for years prior, but Sonia had a practical mindset that HP sorely lacked and from which he greatly benefited: She worked in the fashion industry and her income supported the couple while he proved persistently unemployable, although she had to relocate to Ohio leaving him in Brooklyn. The break-up of the marriage and unhappiness with his living situation led to stories such as "The Horror at Red Hook" and "He" that, according to Joshi, "written in the depths of his despair in New York, create a phantasmagoria of horror around the evil-looking foreigners in Brooklyn."

How out of touch, for the time, were Lovecraft's views on race and culture? He was uncommonly forthright, but mainstream politicians expressed substantially the same views in more obscured language, and they were able to implement their racism through public policy, especially immigration law. Daniel Okrent, the author of *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America*, explained in *The Washington Post* ("Kushner's immigration plan is a version of a discriminatory effort from more than a century ago", May 19, 2019) that Henry Cabot Lodge, representing Massachusetts in the US Senate, beginning in 1895 wanted to disadvantage "Italians, Russians, Poles, Hungarians, and Asiatics," and he finally got his way in 1917, with Congress overriding a veto from Woodrow Wilson.

When the D.W. Griffith film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 inspired the second incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan, by the 1920s the revived KKK had as many as four million members, about 15% of the national population eligible to join (that is, white Protestant men). In 1924, Okrent writes, the new Immigration Act "slashed immigration by means of brutal quotas" by 97% for Italians and 96% for Eastern European Jews. Those restrictive quotas remained in place until their repeal in 1965 and, according to David S. Wyman in *The Abandonment of the Jews*, significantly contributed to the death toll in the Nazi Holocaust.

The racism of Lodge and the KKK was motivated primarily by economics, concerns to which Lovecraft was totally oblivious: immigrants and African-American descendants of slaves were seen as competition in the labor market, especially by troops returning from World War I after 1918, leading to increasingly deadly race riots beginning in 1908 and culminating in 25 major racial conflicts during the "Red Summer" of 1919.

While so-called statesmen were advancing nakedly racist public policy supported by large majorities of American voters and based upon pseudo-scientific eugenics, affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands if not millions of people, in the same era HP Lovecraft, deprived of a proper education because of medical disability, was living a mundane and isolated existence in Providence, writing stories and letters but affecting no one's life for the worse. Yes, Lovecraft was a flawed man, but his compartmentalized intellectual racism was grounded in his commitment to scientific materialism, and he eventually recognized under pressure from his friends that science had evolved to discredit racism.

The big question is to what extent, if any, did Lovecraft's racism influence his writing? The essence of the Lovecraftian fictional world is fear and dread of an impersonal universe embodied by "elder gods" for whom mere mortal humans are an annoyance, like ants at their picnic. In my opinion, this commonality of the human condition inherently implies anti-racism: we are all the same, defined by our own insignificance in a vast, unfeeling universe, and this is the inevitable logical consequence of Lovecraft's world view even if, tragically, he never himself realized this.