

An Examination of the Racial Views of Howard Phillips Lovecraft

In the early morning of March 15th, 1937, the author Howard Phillips Lovecraft died following a long illness. He left behind him a small body of fictional work which has drawn millions of readers from all over the world in the sixty years since his death. Also left behind were a large number of friends and companions, many of whom only knew Lovecraft through his extensive amounts of letters. However, although many readers and fans of Lovecraft view him as a friendly gentleman, this was not always the case, and there existed a definite darker side to his personality. This was Lovecraft's racism, especially towards foreigners and immigrants, whom he viewed as inferior. These racist ideas which Lovecraft held throughout his entire life were not unique. His philosophy of inferior races and the plight they caused in America, as expressed through his letters and fictional writings, can be seen as a reflection of a larger prejudice and racial tension that was present in America throughout the early decades of the twentieth century.

Born on August 20th, 1890, Howard Phillips Lovecraft spent almost the entirety of his early life in his hometown of Providence, Rhode Island. It was here that many of Lovecraft's early ideas regarding race developed, due primarily to the lack of minorities in Providence in the early twentieth century. As editors S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, two of the premier Lovecraft scholars, state in their collection of Lovecraft's correspondence, "Many of Lovecraft's views were developed as a result of the conservative and racially homogeneous environment" (Lord of a Visible World 63). Lovecraft himself realized this fact, and commented on it in a letter he wrote in 1915, when he was twenty-five years old. "You may better understand my repulsion to the Jew

when I tell you that until I was fourteen years old I do not believe I ever spoke to one or saw one knowingly” (Lord 63). This lack of association with minority groups extended beyond just the Jewish, as the vast majority of inhabitants in Providence were white Anglo-Americans, and contact with all minority groups was minimal at best.

Lovecraft did, however, have some minor contact with minorities, although this contact would further compound his racist views. In his early years there were some small amounts of African-Americans living in Providence. These few people, however, worked as servants to the more affluent white families, which conditioned a young Lovecraft into believing that African-Americans were inferior to their employers. As Lovecraft writes, “The only non-Saxons were niggers whose parents work for our families or cart our ashes, and who consequently know their place” (Lord 63).

Lovecraft did not base his early racism solely on social constraints of the 1890s and early 1900s. He made the attempt to back up his prejudice with biological evidence, which was proven to be incorrect even during Lovecraft’s lifetime. When Lovecraft was fifteen years old he dedicated a poem to the author William Benjamin Smith. Smith, as S.T. Joshi explains in his biography of Lovecraft, “maintains that the inherent biological inferiority of blacks, their physiological and psychological weaknesses, will cause them to perish over time” (69). The young Lovecraft obviously saw this as a factual explanation for his racist ideas, although later in life would become increasingly hard pressed to defend this view. Early on though, he could ignore the scientific rebuttals to this faulty proof, as it was only beginning to gain strength amidst the racist views of the late 1900s. “The scientific refutation of racism was only beginning at the turn of the century” (Joshi 71).

All these early associations Lovecraft held during this early period would remain for the most part unchanged throughout his entire forty-six years. These childhood experiences ended up cementing Lovecraft's racist ideas into place by the time he was in his early twenties. He makes this quite clear in that earlier letter from 1915: "The more I study the question, the more firmly I am convinced that the one supreme race is the Teuton" (Lord 63). The power that Lovecraft's childhood society had on him and his later racist views cannot be underestimated. These early years were instrumental in the development of his philosophy and views on race, but they would eventually prove to matter less than another experience Lovecraft had during his life: The experience of moving to New York City.

In 1924 two events occurred which would profoundly change Lovecraft's entire life. It was in this year that he married his friend and correspondent Sonia Haft Greene, and supplemented that change with an even greater one: moving to New York. For a man who lived almost all of his early life in the conservative town of Providence, this change was of unparalleled magnitude.

Much has been written about Lovecraft's decision to move to New York City, and the high expectations he held. As S.T. Joshi states, "With a new wife, many friends, and even reasonably good job prospects Lovecraft had reason to believe that a promising new phase of his life was beginning" (324). A new phase of Lovecraft's life was certainly beginning, but it would not be nearly as promising as he hoped. The appeal of New York wore off very quickly, and as a result Lovecraft's racial prejudice was brought to a new height. Sonia H. Greene elaborates in her account of their marriage. "Although he [Lovecraft] once said he loved New York and that henceforth it would be his 'adopted state', I soon learned that he hated it and all its 'alien hordes'" (Davis 11).

Lovecraft's marriage to Sonia has also drawn a large amount of speculation, primarily because she was a Russian Jewish immigrant. Although apparently incompatible with Lovecraft's racist views, he explained this discrepancy away to Sonia. "H.P. assured me that he was quite 'cured'; that since I was so well assimilated into the American way of life and the American scene he felt sure our marriage would be a success" (Davis 26). Other friends Lovecraft held during his two years in New York were Jewish, including Samuel Loveman, and yet Lovecraft writes no racial or derogatory comments about them, again believing that they were of an intelligent class who had cast off the associations of their racial group.

Lovecraft became increasingly intolerant of the minorities in New York during his stay, a result of his continual contact with them. Sonia writes; "When he saw the crowds in the subway, on the streets, and in the parks, he actually hated them and suffered through that hate" (Davis 12). Lovecraft himself makes no attempt to conceal his racism in his letters, one of which describes his encountering a large number of African-Americans. "I'll be shot if three out of every four persons – nay, full nine out of every ten – weren't flabby, pungent, grinning, chattering niggers! Help!" (Lord 179). It can be clearly seen that Lovecraft's early views on the inferiority of African-Americans has not gone away by this time, and if anything, became even stronger from his years in New York.

After a year of living in the city, Lovecraft wrote the short story "The Horror at Red Hook", a detective tale that occurs within New York. In this tale, perhaps more than any other he wrote in his entire life, Lovecraft's racism can be clearly seen. Lovecraft lived for a time in an apartment near Red Hook, and the story can be seen as a reflection of his experiences with minorities from this time. Lovecraft makes this influence quite

clear in a letter he wrote in 1925. “When you see my new tale “The Horror at Red Hook”, you will see what I make of this idea in connexion with the gangs of young loafers and herds of evil-looking foreigners that one sees everywhere” (Lord 176). This story can only be seen as a vitriolic stab at the minorities that Lovecraft detested.

Kenneth Sterling, a later correspondent of Lovecraft, further clarifies his reason in writing the story. “He had an unhappy period in New York, he found the melting pot and the crowding and living in Brooklyn unpleasant, and it’s reflected in the story, where he talks about subways and squat foreign types, which lumps together various minorities (51).

After two dreadful years in New York Lovecraft finally decided to leave it and come back to Providence. As he states in one of his many letters: “New York is dead, and the brilliancy which so impresses one from the outside is the phosphorescence of a maggoty corpse” (Lord 198). It was only when he returned here did he feel liberated at last from the dredges of New York and back in his home town, making the celebrated remark “I am Providence, and Providence is myself – together, indissolubly as one” (Lord 193). But although he was away from the vast minority populations, Lovecraft’s racist views did not diminish, although he was forced to alter them in later years of his life. S.T. Joshi clarifies the change that Lovecraft’s views took. “It is only in the 1930s that he attempted a more broad-based philosophical and cultural justification of his brand of racism” (369).

By this time the evidence that supposedly showed the biological inferiority of blacks and other minorities was proven wrong, and so Lovecraft was forced to find other reasons for his racist views. In doing so, he switched to a segregationist view that races and cultures should not mix, whatever the race. “This has nothing to do with intrinsic

superiority or inferiority...Even superior importations can harm our culture if they break up the equilibrium existing between the people and the institutions under which the people live” (Lord 327). It is from this idea that Lovecraft drew his reserved support for the homogeneous national ideas of Adolf Hitler, although he also felt that Hitler’s early tactics were a bit extreme. Lovecraft died in 1937 and so was not present to see Hitler’s “final solution”, but it seems he would have thought them too extreme as well. This was not unique to him. “Certainly, Lovecraft was not alone among the intellectual classes prior to 1937 in expressing some approbation of Hitler” (Joshi 589).

And so, H.P. Lovecraft’s racist views can easily be said to have stayed with him throughout his whole life. But as seen before, his views were not unique. The culture of the early decades of the twentieth century was rampant with racist themes and inferior views of minorities, large parts of which were a holdover from the previous century. “That culture had honored order, stability, and hierarchy...and assigned subordinate positions to immigrants, Native Americans, African Americans, white women, and workers” (Dumenil 145). New England views of race in the late nineteenth century were remarkably similar to Lovecraft’s. “In the 1880s, elitist New England patricians celebrated Anglo-Saxon superiority and traced America’s success in its English antecedents” (Dumenil 208).

With the beginning of the 1920s, large gains were made for minorities, although there were still massive racist undercurrents present within American society. One of the major gains in science, as detailed earlier, was the reversal of biological racist ideas. “After decades of American academics who contributed to racism by offering ‘scientific’ justifications for it, [anthropologist] Franz Boas and his students led the way in challenging hierarchical assumptions about race” (Dumenil 167). Lovecraft recognized

the validity of this new research, and was therefore forced to change his reasons for his prejudice later in his life. And yet racism was still present. As historian Howard Zinn writes: “There was some truth to the standard picture of the twenties...millions of people were not doing badly – and they could shut out of the picture the others – the tenant farmers, black and white, the immigrant families in the big cities” (382). Lovecraft was not alone in his anti-Jewish sentiments, especially during his period in New York City.. “Jews were plagued with a variety of indications that American society viewed them as second-class citizens at best, and highly undesirable persons at worst. Discrimination ... deepened in the 1920s” (Dumenil 262). African Americans were also discriminated against, and the Ku Klux Klan was revived in the 1920s. But the perceived inferiority of African-Americans spread beyond just the Klan. “The impossibility of the black person’s ever being considered equal in white America was the theme of the nationalist movement led in the 1920s” (Zinn 382). Lovecraft’s views on race are therefore quite similar to the general prejudice that was alive in the early twentieth century, and the 1920s in particular.

The life and letters of H.P. Lovecraft are exceptionally interesting to study, not just for consideration of his small amount of fictional work. When one considers Lovecraft as a person, all of his philosophical views must be taken into account, including those which are hard to justify. One of these is his racism, which as seen was prevalent during his entire life. Although nothing can be said to justify his views of African Americans, Jews, and other minorities, it can be said that these ideas were also reflected in society at large during Lovecraft’s life.

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