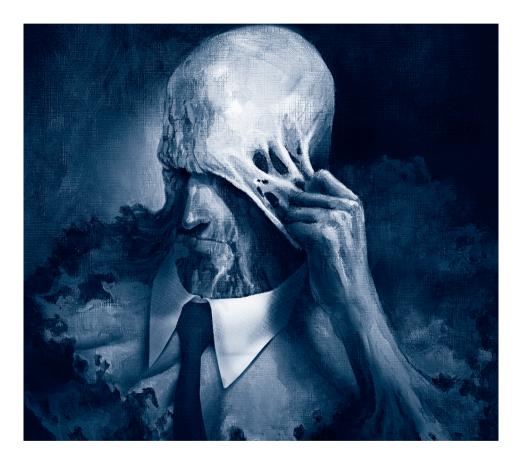# Ideology and scientific thought in H.P. Lovecraft

Juan L. Pérez-de-Luque

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Colección fundada por: Emilio Ortega Arjonilla y Pedro San Ginés Aguilar

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Chapter 1
Introduction

H.P. Lovecraft (Providence, US, 1890-1937) is known as the creator of the so-called Cthulhu Mythos. This generic name, coined after Lovecraft's death by August Derleth, is used to designate a group of fictional texts written by authors other than Lovecraft himself, including Derleth, Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, Clark Ashton Smith, Arthur Machen, and Robert E. Howard, among others. These texts deal with the existence of alien races and god-like entities that either dwell on our planet "now" or millions of years ago, and how they are discovered by an individual character or, at most, by a reduced group of people.

In the specific case of Lovecraft, his texts are impregnated with a powerful sense of the past in different ways (family lineages, biological inheritance, geology, tradition, mythology, etc.), as well as a latent sense of menace provoked by the discovery of the truth that lies behind our reality. This truth, i.e. the existence of alien creatures living on our planet, is often reached through science and its technological applications, and normally reveals a cosmos which is completely indifferent to mankind, whose rules do not take humanity in consideration, and, most importantly, is a truth that relegates us to a position of insignificance in the vastness of the universe.

The sheer volume of work written by H.P. Lovecraft makes it impossible to devote a comprehensive analysis to each text, so I have been forced to select a representative group from his fiction. The main problem one encounters when approaching Lovecraft's narrative oeuvre is that he cannot be regarded as an author stuck in a particular genre. His tales move from the classic gothic tradition to science fiction to form a genre that was roughly defined by Lovecraft as "weird fiction", when he stated that "There is no field other than the weird in which I have any aptitude or inclination for fictional composition" (*SL III* 395). Therefore, I will pay special attention to *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (1936), "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1933), "The Dunwich Horror" (1929), "The Quest of Iranon" (1935), and "The Moon-Bog" (1926).

Apart from his fictional work (and poetry, which falls outside the scope of the present study), Lovecraft developed his philosophic and metaphysical thought in his non-fictional writing, which consists of a fair amount of essays and uncountable letters.[1] In spite of centering my analysis on his fictional narrative oeuvre, I will also pay special attention to his letters and essays in order to establish connections between the ideological background derived from his fiction and the philosophical background of the author. The references to letters and essays will be, then, constant throughout the present monograph.

The standard story by Lovecraft deals with the discovery of a reality beyond reality. Using this premise, I will try to establish a theoretical framework that will help me to grasp the ideological implications that his narrative oeuvre might be hiding under the appearance of a mere horror or science fiction narrative. I will base my analysis on the ideas proposed by Slavoj Žižek, especially on the conception of the Real and reality, as exposed in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). In this book, Žižek identifies reality (that will be defined later as the symbolic Real) as a pure ideological construction. Ideology is the "support for our 'reality' itself" (45), and offers us the way to escape the traumatic real Real that cannot be tolerated. Later in his career, the philosopher proposes a division of the Real in *On Belief* (2001). Here Žižek reformulates the concept of the Real proposed by Lacan by creating a division into three new categories: the *symbolic Real*, the *imaginary Real* and the *real Real*. This division, originally used by the Slovene philosopher in religious terms in order to classify the Holy Trinity, aligns perfectly with Lovecraft's fiction because it can be used to describe the reality in which the characters think they live (the symbolic Real), the moments in which this reality starts to shake and collapse (a symptom of the irruption of the imaginary Real), and, finally, the underlying truth behind the symbolic reality dominating the narration, which corresponds with the real Real itself. This real Real will be the final goal of each analysis, as my hypothesis is that Lovecraft tries to reflect his personal anxieties and worries in his literature, and that the symbolic level is unwittingly permeated by his fear of the immigrant, his elitist political views, his traditionalism and, above all, his pessimistic cosmicism.

So, there are two different levels to be considered: on the one hand, Lovecraft's own plexus of realities; on the other, the networked projection of realities existing at the literary level (symbolic-imaginary) of his fictional texts. As proposed by Žižek, the writer's reality —the symbolic Real— is pure ideology that shapes and comprises the values and conventions that determined Lovecraft's mindset. It is shaped by New England and the historical events he experienced during the last years of the ninetieth

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[1]   Joshi estimates that Lovecraft wrote more than 80.000 letters ("A Look" 30), but the cypher drops to around 10000 when considering the surviving texts.

century and the first decades of the twentieth century. The real Real that the writer is unable to comprehend is a changing society that dismantles his ideal perceptions of social order and civilization: the decadence of classic values that he supported, the arrival of democracy, technology and capitalism, and the global melting pot. These are some of the many other aspects that I will survey in this dissertation.

Moving to the fictional oeuvre, Lovecraft's characters have their own symbolic Real. This symbolic Real is partly marked by the traditions, social conventions and locations Lovecraft creates for them, including real places (New England, the Antarctic, etc.), or invented locations (Arkham, Innsmouth, Dunwich, Miskatonic University, etc.) that were often inspired by real places that Lovecraft knew. The imaginary Real, on its part, is identified with the moment in the narration when the uncanny appears, and traces of the supernatural events to come are found. These moments that point to the imaginary Real present inconsistencies in the characters' symbolic Real. Finally, the real Real that haunts the fictional text is precisely what ideology (the symbolic level) seeks to repress.[2] Lovecraft, probably in a partially unconscious way, reflects his own ideological thoughts in his tales, and his own real Real underlies his narrative oeuvre.

Althusser argues that "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (*On Ideology* 36). Reading Lovecraft through the lens of this definition highlights how the writer enhanced the imaginary dimension of his ideological representations through his fictional texts. The creation of his symbolic-imaginative literary universe allowed the writer to repress his reality, the reality of a socially, politically and economically changing country into which he was unable to assimilate. The country in which Lovecraft lived was undergoing a deep process of modernization, including population migration, acceptance of democracy, and emergence of modern capitalism. The writer, who yearned for the almost aristocratic past of his family, provided by the wealth of his grandfather, did not accept his personal decay and the changes that were taking place in his country. These changes, according to him, would result in the dismantling of a society that, in

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[2]   Jameson, in his ideological analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, puts forward how literature, especially modernist literature, represses older "content beneath the later formalized surface" (213). The critic asserts that "strategies of containment are not only modes of exclusion; they can also take the form of repression in some stricter Hegelian sense" (213). Lovecraft, who at first might be considered as a writer apart from the Modernist movement because of his supernatural and science fiction stories, nonetheless shares some common elements with the modernist literary movement. In this study, I will try to prove that Lovecraft also represses strong ideological content under the textual surface of his writings, and, in that sense, he fits into Jameson's account of the Modernist writer. In chapter 7, I will discuss further connections between Lovecraft and the movement, and how he dismissed some landmarks such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, probably ignoring that he shared many ideological proposals with other modernists.

reality, was no longer compatible with the twentieth century. He wanted to recover a past in which aristocracy held the cultural heritage and production of society, in which races were completely separated, and in which aesthetic principles ruled over economic goals.

Lovecraft's misunderstanding and misconception of his surrounding reality led him to create an ideological shield that protected him from reality's onslaughts. Paul Ricoeur defines the most basic, primitive concept of ideology as "dissimulating processes by which an individual or a group expresses its situation but without knowing or recognizing it" (1). Ideology as a "procedure of dissimulation" is, in the case of Lovecraft, the ultimate defense against a reality that was completely hostile towards him. The writer escapes from his reality by resorting to an already existing symbolic-ideological worldview and by enhancing it further through imaginative creation. However, traces of his ideological mindset are present and identifiable.

All the worries that the writer expressed —in a conscious or unconscious way— converge in the idea of *communal decay* that is omnipresent in his oeuvre. Lovecraft's obsession with the purity of the Teutonic race is constantly threatened by the apparition of alien entities that intermingle with humans, provoking a chain reaction in the race. But this global degeneration is also present by means of social degradation, the disappearance of culture, or the reappearance of obscure lineages. I will pay special attention to the moments in which these elements are present in the narration, and how they are represented in the text by means of processes of symbolization that hide an ideological real Real.

Lovecraft's ideological background has been already analyzed, and several texts that expose his ideology will be referred to and used throughout the present volume. However, my proposal will attempt to provide a systematic framework that allows readers to identify the traces of ideological thoughts to be found in most of his fictional texts.

In addition to Žižek's triad of the Real, Graham Harman's *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012) is a landmark for the interpretation of the imaginary Real. According to Harman, Lovecraft shows a distinctive feature when he is trying to transmit the images of the creatures and aliens described in his oeuvre. This characteristic is defined by the latent impossibility of describing the monster that the narrator (normally a first person narrator, who is at the same time the protagonist of the story) is witnessing, usually in the climax of the story. This impossibility is present at two different levels: what Harman calls the vertical gap and the horizontal gap of language. The vertical gap is represented by the use of words that refer to the impossibility of describing the object, such as "unnamable", "unspeakable", "indescribable", etc. The horizontal gap occurs when the accumulation and overuse of adjectives in a description avoids any kind of interpretation of the object itself, since the language is so excessive that it completely distorts the sensual qualities of

the entity under description. I will pay attention to these moments in which there is a linguistic fracture in the narration, presumably the outcome of the irrepresentability of the Real.

Science is one of the cornerstones in Lovecraft's narrative. The writer showed interest in several scientific disciplines throughout his life, and many characters in his texts use science and technology to apprehend the truth hidden beyond their symbolic level or reality.

What science brings to those who acquire a higher level of understanding of reality in the Lovecraftian universe always has negative connotations. Madness, suicide, violent death or disappearances are the most common endings for the narrators and protagonists of Lovecraft's stories. They normally achieve advanced knowledge of reality via science, or thanks to forbidden and dark imaginary books that Lovecraft invented in his Cthulhu Mythos, such as the *Necronomicon*. According to Tyson, "the knowledge contained on the pages of these dangerous texts is the true science, beside which the science of mankind is but a plaything" (175-76).

Science, and its technological applications, is meaningfully connected with the triad of the Real. Science as pure knowledge usually appears as a threat to the symbolic level that comes from the imaginary Real. When Herbert West, the mad doctor from "Herbert West – Reanimator", acquires enough knowledge to start dealing with the afterlife, a threat appears in the symbolic Real of his friend and narrator of the story. Science exposes the contradictions that the symbolic Real builds around the main characters, as it reveals death to be something that, in theory, can be surpassed and overcome. On another level, the technological artifact produces a direct aggression against the symbolic level. This attack changes the structure of possibilities of reality, generally allowing for the existence of new entities. The researchers from the Miskatonic University, who defeat the Dunwich horror in "The Dunwich Horror", prepare a special dust that, once sprayed over the invisible creature, allows humans to see and attack it. From the very moment the monster is made visible, it completely alters the symbolic Real, since the abomination is symbolized, it is made present, and from that point forward the conditions of existence in the symbolic level change. Something that was impossible to represent before the spray affected the alien is now part of their reality.

Apart from the connections between science and technology and the triad of the Real just explained, Lovecraft was heavily influenced by the work of several scientists that he read during his life. The first name to be considered is Charles Darwin. The evolutionist theses of the British naturalist were present in Lovecraft's fictional universe. The writer was also strongly biased by the theories proposed by some intellectual inheritors of Darwin, who adapted the British scientist's arguments in order to formulate a social theory of natural selection: eugenics and social Darwinism, contemporary to H.P. Lovecraft, are particularly meaningful when dealing

with the writer's ideological background. The theses proposed by Francis Galton, Malthus or Ernst Haeckel gave Lovecraft a perfect scientific background to support his racial/racist ideas. On the other hand, the discoveries made by contemporary physicists such as Albert Einstein, Max Planck, or Werner Heisenberg fostered the writer's materialistic empiricism, as well as his assumption of the insignificance of mankind in the vastness of the cosmos.

Chapter 2 discusses most of the theoretical ideas present throughout this volume. Departing from Lacan, I put forward Žižek's theories of the Real, and how they can be applied to Lovecraft's tales. A discussion about ideology and its implications is also included in this chapter, since the ultimate purpose of the present study is to disclose the ideological Real that lies behind Lovecraft's fiction. Departing from Marx and Althusser, the final step will be, once again, Slavoj Žižek's studies of ideology.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the overview of the scientific context under which Lovecraft wrote his narrative work. This chapter includes an analysis of the different lines of thought, in scientific terms, that were predominant during the nineteenth century, and their impact in the first decades of the twentieth century, when Lovecraft wrote his narratives. Special emphasis has been given to the figure of Darwin, his supporters and critics, and the legacy he left among the scientific community.

The analysis of *At the Mountains of Madness* makes up chapter 4. This text, the only novella Lovecraft wrote together with *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, provides a powerful framework to introduce the vast majority of concepts I want to deal with in my study. The triad of the Real, science, and the past are three of the most significant elements that are considered in this tale. The presence of two alien races, the Elder Ones and the shoggoths, provide the grounds for performing a deep ideological reading. The importance of science, due to the personal goals of the main characters (scientists on a geological trip into the South Pole), is a major issue that serves to unravel the mysteries they find in a hidden polar city. A study of the evidence that they find there provides access to the understanding of a remote past before the creation of life on Earth.

Chapter 5 is devoted to "The Shadow over Innsmouth". This text is suitable for an analysis of the concept of communal decay and degeneration. The invasion that the seaport of Innsmouth suffers by a race of creatures coming from the sea, the Deep Ones, leads to an intermingling with the town's inhabitants. Lovecraft reflects the decay of the human inhabitants of Innsmouth by means of descriptions of the village itself, emphasizing its ruinous buildings, the empty and dirty streets, the decadent façades, and the general rotten aspect of the whole place. Several concepts taken from evolutionist theories, such as that of "regression" or "hybrid" play an important role in the portrait of the city, its citizens and the events that take place in the story. Once again the importance of the past, this time a less remote past that is

more closely associated to family inheritance, is crucial for understanding the tale and Lovecraft's ideology behind it.

In chapter 6 I will analyze "The Dreams in the Witch-House". In this tale the protagonist accesses new planes of existence thanks to complex mathematical formulas, and he contacts a witch who was present in the Salem's Trials and who wants the main character to help her to perform a ritual. As in the case of the previous texts, this tale puts forward the idea of a past that haunts the present, and it provides a framework to explore Lovecraft's ideas about witchcraft and its social connotations. The role of mathematics as a catalyst for the encounter between the witch that hides beyond reality and the protagonist is also relevant from the perspective of science's influence on Lovecraft. Here, the presence of ideas taken from Einstein, Planck and Heisenberg, and other contemporary scientists, is particularly relevant.

Chapter 7, which focuses on "The Dunwich Horror", discusses another interesting case of *communal decay*, but this time the original source of conflict is to be found in Native Americans and, again, in the family heritage of a secret that has to be kept hidden from the world. This tale is connected with "The Shadow over Innsmouth" through its oppressing atmosphere of menace and sense of threat that emerges from the location. However, whereas in Innsmouth Lovecraft used architecture as the medium to depict the decadence of the town, in "The Dunwich Horror" this role is performed by nature and landscape. The animals, trees and hills that surround the village of Dunwich are the main source of menace, as they form a completely degraded *locus amoenus* that has lost all its potential pastoral implications. "The Dunwich Horror" also raises some interesting questions related to religion as symbolic construction, and the relevance of science and technology in order to dismantle beliefs.

Chapter 8 is devoted to "The Quest of Iranon". This tale, clearly influenced by Lord Dunsany, presents a challenge for my theoretical framework because there are no monsters or alien entities threatening mankind, and the sense of the uncanny or the weird is completely absent. The triad of the Real is complex to identify, since the presence of the imaginary Real is almost null and the real Real threatens the protagonist's symbolic Real at the very end of the tale. However, the implications derived from the narration raise a discussion on the attention Lovecraft paid to tradition and the dangers of neglecting the artistic side of mankind in favor of labor and a life devoted to work.

Chapter 9 focuses on the analysis of "The Moon-Bog". At first, this narration is connected with the most classic gothic tradition. However, as the plot unravels, there is a turn associated with the nature of the tale's monstrous creature, which Lovecraft takes from classical Greek mythology. "The Moon-Bog" provides a background for discussing Lovecraft's rejection of certain strands of folklore, particularly those without classical origins. At the same time, the tale reinforces and expands some ideas

already proposed in "The Quest of Iranon", such as the contrast between nature and civilization. The tale also puts forward an underlying criticism of the decadence of Lovecraft's contemporary aristocracy, more concerned with business and capitalism than with aesthetic production.

The present volume, then, aims to cast a light on the ideological background present in the narrative work of H.P. Lovecraft, and how the scientific framework that shaped Lovecraft's thoughts is intimately connected with the representation of that ideological profile. By paying attention to some major and secondary texts from his oeuvre, it is my goal to analyse the different tales by correlating them with the Lacanian binary reality/Real, as formulated through the lens of the Žižekian tripartite nature of the Real.

This book examines, from an ideological perspective, the narrative work of H.P. Lovecraft. To pursue that goal, the analysis is sustained in two different foundations.

To begin with, it is well known that the standard Lovecraftian tale deals with the discovery of a reality beyond reality. With that premise, this book establishes a theoretical framework that grasps the ideological implications that Lovecraft's narrative oeuvre might hide under the appearance of mere horror or science fiction stories, providing an original approach to the analysis of the Lacanian Real beyond the Lovecraftian fiction.

Secondly, science is one of the cornerstones in Lovecraft's fiction. Science, and its technological applications, are meaningfully connected with the triad of the Real (proposed by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, and composed by the symbolic Real, the imaginary Real and the real Real), since science is clearly depicted as a way of gaining access to the unfathomable real Real. At the same time, Lovecraft was heavily influenced by some scientists he read during his lifetime: Darwin, Galton, Haeckel, Planck, Einstein… and they had a strong impact in the writer's perception of the world. This volume pays special attention to scientific issues present in his narrative, in order to cast light on how different scientific disciplines might have influenced Lovecraft's ideological background.