

Jan Oliva, *H. P. Lovecraft's Fear of the Unknown and Unimaginable*

BA thesis

Supervisor's Report

Lovecraft, one of American masters of the horror story, or the weird tale, actually redefined the character of this popular genre and introduced a new kind of sensation called cosmic fear. Jan Oliva's thesis focuses on this defining feature and examines its use in Lovecraft's fiction. As such, it is a study of the rise of a modern literary form inspired by the progress of science in the early 20th century, specifically by new exploration of the universe and the new facts of its expanse. Lovecraft's innovation consists, basically, in the replacement of the traditional source of fear in popular literature, such as ghosts, vampires and other monsters, by a notion of the unknown and unutterable, which is recognized as "cosmicism". This fact prompts Oliva to reflect several questions: first of all, how does Lovecraft's work relate to the literary production of his contemporaries, particularly to the Modernists (such as Eliot), when it seems to be nourished by the same scepticism concerning man's positions in the cosmos and relevance of human life, but uses the form of expression generally rejected by them; how does it extend the despair of the cosmic immensity discovered during the scientific revolution of the 17th century and expressed by e.g. Blaise Pascal; how does his conception of fear correspond with Burke's theory of the sublime and his introduction of fear as an aesthetic quality; etc.? His treatment of these problems is more or less satisfying, as the student tries to point out the specificity of Lovecraft's conception, with detailed commentary on his own two essays dealing with the horror genre. Concerning the issues of historical perspective, one only feels Otto's theory of the "numinous" should be correlated with Burke's concept of the sublime (here the two theories are treated as isolated entities). What also should be distinguished more accurately are the terms "immensity" of the universe (the fact confirmed by the invention and use of the telescope) and the cosmic "void" (a subject of long-going disputations among astronomers and philosophers before its acknowledgement) – this void being, paradoxically, filled with the unknown and horrifying for Lovecraft. On the other hand, Oliva's assessment of Todorov's philosophy of the fantastic and Noel Carroll's philosophy of horror shows the student's ability to apply theoretical conceptions to concrete literary texts (especially when showing the limitations of these conceptions vis-a-vis Lovecraft's fictional world).

If the above-mentioned parts are indisputable and rather insightful contributions to our understanding of Lovecraft's position in the history of the genre, there are, unfortunately, chapters that are less satisfying. Thus the short section dedicated to Lovecraft's use of language is purely illustrative of the fact that Lovecraft tended to use archaic or otherwise odd words to make the language of his stories "very peculiar, artificial, and perhaps even theatrical" (25). Instead of long passages demonstrating this, the chapter should have attempted to present an analysis of Lovecraft's style. Also, the chapter presenting the visual effects in the films inspired by Lovecraft's fiction (and thus discussing the possibilities of imagining the unimaginable) reads like a peculiar detour in the middle of the thesis, as it concerns the Lovecraft legacy rather than the work itself. And the following chapter, 3.5. Cosmic Philosophy, definitely promises more than it actually brings (Lovecraft's atheism perhaps deserves special and more detailed attention). These weaker parts might have been reduced or dropped entirely (the required length of the thesis would not have been affected by it), or revised thoroughly.

From the formal point of view, I miss pagination referring to Lovecraft's own fiction. Pages of the passages quoted from an edition of his work could have been simply indicated in the parentheses following each quotation, not necessarily using footnotes, but we don't get even

this. Apart from this omission, the thesis is presented in a clear and careful way, using rich language with just a few inaccuracies which perhaps eluded the final editing of the text. I recommend the thesis for defence and suggest its preliminary result to be “excellent” (výborná) or “very good” (velmi dobrá), depending on the success of the defence.

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