

## **The Fate of Humanity and War in Selected Short Stories of H. P. Lovecraft**

**Dr. Smaranjit Singha**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Ram Krishna Nagar College

Ram Krishna Nagar

Karimganj, Assam

### **Abstract**

The fictional world of the American writer H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) essentially depicts humanity as a tiny and relatively insignificant constituent of the cosmic set up — a representation that undermines the Renaissance philosophy of the centrality of man in the universe. A pioneering figure in the genre of what is known as “weird fiction,” Lovecraft lays emphasis on debunking the popular belief that man is the most civilised being in the cosmos. By taking such a position, Lovecraft makes the reader critically question the underlying principles that have, throughout history, bolstered the human claim to be the most advanced creature. The focus of the present paper is to critically analyse this apparently pessimistic perspective in Lovecraft’s selected fictional works and to appreciate through them the fate and future of humanity as envisaged by the writer. In doing so, the paper will try to explore how the contemporary world events, especially the World War I, might have shaped the unique and often controversially perceived literary vision of Lovecraft. Thus, emphasis will also be laid on the representation of war and violence in the short stories of Lovecraft.

**Key Words:** Horror, War, Mankind, Death, Universe.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft is among those few writers who have garnered fame posthumously. He is well-known as a writer of weird fiction, horror fiction, science fiction and fantasy and his writings exhibit marked influences of Gothic fiction and Edgar Allan Poe. However, what sets him apart from other writers in this genre is the way in which he views the position of man in the universe. He remarks:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large...To achieve the essence of real externality... one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. (Joshi, “Introduction” xi)

It is this apparently pessimistic outlook on the role and fate of humanity in the cosmic scheme that has made Lovecraft's fiction intriguing as well as controversial. Based on this premise, the present paper seeks to critically analyse the apparently pessimistic vision of mankind that permeates in Lovecraft's fiction. By focussing on selected short stories of Lovecraft an attempt has been made in the paper to appreciate how the author has envisaged the fate and future of humanity against the context of a war-torn, violent world.

H. P. Lovecraft was born on August 20, 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island, in the United States of America. The only child of Winfield Scott Lovecraft and Sarah Susan Phillips Lovecraft, H. P. Lovecraft started writing short horror tales as early as the age of seven (Joshi, "Introduction" ix) and would later go on to become a cultural icon in the field of horror fiction. He was a cultural rebel who did not subscribe to the conventional notions of the moral perfection of the mankind. In fact, his philosophy and literary vision undermine any belief system—religious or humanist—in which the human mind is given the central position in the universe (Gray). His interest lay in exploring the uncanny and mysterious universe existing outside the human world. Thus, critics consider him as the pioneer of the Cosmicism movement which believes in the existence of interstellar beings outside the realm of human perception (Stefansky).

One of the most prominent themes in the fiction of Lovecraft is the destruction of mankind. While this may be a result of Lovecraft's own vision of the insignificance of the human species at large, the cataclysmic events of the World War I, which Lovecraft would have witnessed closely in his youth, might contribute to this seemingly nihilistic approach. Often in Lovecraft's fiction, one comes across an apocalyptic vision of the world where mankind can be seen nearing its doom. This idea is clearly present in one of his most popular stories "Dagon" which was published in the collection of *Weird Tales* in 1923. Set against the backdrop of the First World War the story is narrated in the flashback technique. The story's unnamed narrator is a naval officer fighting for the Allied powers and his cargo ship has been captured by a German sea-raider in the Pacific. He somehow manages to escape the Germans in a lifeboat only to find himself drifting aimlessly on the ocean and finally getting stranded on "a slimy expanse of hellish black mire" (H. P. Lovecraft 23). After the area has dried up, he walks around it and discovers a massive monolith which is carved with symbols and sculptures depicting human like creatures. All of the sudden, a creature resembling one of those figures carved on the monolith emerges from the water. Struck with horror the narrator returns to his boat and loses consciousness only to be rescued by a US ship later. As the story comes to its end, the readers see that he is still haunted by the vision of the creature and prepares to jump out of the window as he imagines the creature entering his room.

One way of looking at the story "Dagon" is to read it as a symbolic tale that captures mankind's fear of its unknown fate. It is possible to describe this fear as a reflection of the internal conflicts and the sense of anxiety that plagued the mind of people during the First World War. Such an idea is indicated through the observation of the narrator of the story: "I cannot think of the deep sea without shuddering at the nameless things that may at this very moment be crawling and floundering on its slimy bed ... I dream of a day when they may rise above the billows to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of puny, war-exhausted mankind" (H. P. Lovecraft 27). The narrator here relates his prophetic vision concerning the future of mankind. He envisions the image of a self-destructive and war-torn human civilisation succumbing to the onslaught of a much greater cosmic force beyond human imagination. This apocalyptic vision of Lovecraft seems to convey the idea that engaging in

the war is a great mistake on the part of mankind; it is such wars that will pave the way for the destruction of mankind.

In “Dagon,” the region of the ocean where the narrator is stranded is a symbolic waste land where no known form of life exists. He says: “The region was putrid with the carcasses of decaying fish, and of other less describable things which I saw protruding from the nasty mud of the unending plain” (*H. P. Lovecraft* 24). The unpleasant muddy region filled with carcasses of fish and other creatures immediately conjures up an image of the battlefield of the war where innumerable corpses rot and decay. The region symbolises the catastrophic reality of warfare that only brings nothing but death and destruction. Quite similar to T.S. Eliot’s “waste land” where nothing grows and where there is “no water but only rock” (‘The Waste Land’), Lovecraft’s “slimy expanse of hellish black mire” (*H. P. Lovecraft* 23) marks the end of mankind.

Interestingly, Lovecraft’s “immediate reaction to the war”, as Joshi maintains, “was a curious one. He did not care what the actual causes of the war were, or who was to blame; his prime concern was in stopping what he saw was a suicidal racial civil war between the two sides of ‘Anglo-Saxondom’” (*A Dreamer* 95). Lovecraft saw the war as detrimental to the racial unity of the white civilisation. He was an advocate of the concept of white racial unity according to which all groups of white population in the world should be cordial and friendly toward each other. Lovecraft was saddened by the fact that the peoples of England and Germany, as well as Belgium, Holland, Austria, Scandinavia, and Switzerland who belonged to the same white race, fought against each other in the war (Joshi, *A Dreamer* 95-96).

A well-known story of Lovecraft based on the Anglo-German enmity during the First World War is “The Temple”. First published in the 1925 collection of *Weird Tales*, the story is narrated in the form of a found manuscript left by Karl Heinrich, Graf Von Altberg-Ehrenstein, a lieutenant commander in the Imperial German Navy during the First World War. The story recounts that after a British ship has been destroyed by Altberg’s submarine in the Atlantic Ocean, one of his fellow-officers finds a carved piece of ivory from the coat pocket of a dead crewman. Following this, several mysterious events occur and the whole crew is gripped with superstition, resulting in the suicide of two crew members. Thereafter, a mysterious explosion occurs in the engine room of the submarine. This restricts its movement inside the water and six crew members start a mutiny who are shot dead by Altberg. Towards the end of the story, only Altberg and his fellow-officer Klenze remain alive. Although Klenze eventually goes mad and commits suicide, Altberg lives on. As the submarine descends further into the ocean, he discovers on the ocean bed the ruins of an ancient city which he believes to be Atlantis. Despite faced with a certain death, Altberg’s curiosity leads him to explore the ruins of the ancient city and its temple from which he sees an emanating light.

In “The Temple” Lovecraft proposes a possible link between man’s self-pride and his downfall. The story is notable for its satiric representation of German officials during the First World War. In the story the target of satire is Altberg, the lieutenant commander of the German navy. Lovecraft seems to highlight the idea that during the War the Germans had a false pride in their perceived racial and cultural superiority. This is suggested through the character of Altberg. For instance, when some of the crew members descend into madness, Altberg remarks: “I regretted that no physician was included in our complement of officers, since German lives are precious” (*H. P. Lovecraft* 92). Again, it is notable that after the

submarine stops functioning, Altberg ignores the option of saving himself and his crewman by taking help of lifeboats and come to the surface of the water. His sense of pride in the German nation stops him from choosing this simple option. He says: "To seek rescue in the lifeboats would be to deliver ourselves into the hands of enemies unreasonably embittered against our great German nation" (*H. P. Lovecraft* 93). The implication is that for the Germans it is better to embrace death than to surrender to the enemy who are far inferior to them. Even towards the end of his life, he sticks to this false sense of pride on being a German, as he remarks: "I shall die calmly, like a German, in the black and forgotten depths" (*H. P. Lovecraft* 101). It is this stubborn nationalism and self-pride that turned the Germans into ruthless opponents and earned them the name "Huns" during the First World War (DeSantis).

Lovecraft's story gives us enough hint that during the war, the German people were brainwashed in the name of nationalism. In the name of the German nation, the soldiers were encouraged to unleash their cruelty on the enemies. This idea is hinted at in Altberg's remark: "The fact of our coming death affected [Klenze] curiously, and he would frequently pray in remorse over the men, women, and children we had sent to the bottom; forgetting that all things are noble that serve the German nation" (*H. P. Lovecraft* 95). The implication here is that killing even the most innocent people is not unethical if the act is committed to serve the German nation. Towards the end of his life, hopeless and faced with his impending death, Klenze, the fellow-officer of Altberg, perceives the sad reality of war. He comes to realise that killing numerous civilians during the war has been a great mistake and that only through repentance and prayer can one free oneself of this sin. Much in the vein of the War Poets, Klenze emphasises the futility of war and the pity involved in it. But the cruel Altberg, on the other hand, has completely discarded such a humanistic approach as his aggressive nationalism has made him blind to the pain of his enemies.

The First World War revealed to the world how cruel and bloodthirsty human beings can become to meet their political ends. It would not be completely untrue to assume that the inhumanities of the war, in a way, contributed to Lovecraft's pessimistic view of mankind. He came to the conclusion that man is not very different from the other so-called uncivilised animals; beneath man's outward show of civilisation, a primitive and destructive instinct still lurks. In his essay "At the Root," Lovecraft maintains in this connection: "We must recognise the essential underlying savagery in the animal called man ... We must realise that man's nature will remain the same so long as he remains man; that civilisation is but a slight coverlet beneath which the dominant beast sleeps lightly and ever ready to awake" (*The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*).

The inner bestiality of man is presented in Lovecraft's stories like "The Rats in the Walls" (1924) and "The Picture in the House" (1921). In "The Rats in the Walls", Lovecraft depicts how an old English family practises cannibalism. The narrator of the story, who is the last descendant of the family, apparently becomes insane on learning about his ancestors' evil habit, but ironically he himself ends up killing humans and devouring their flesh. Similarly, the story "The Picture in the House" centres on a loathsome old man who has a strong desire for consuming human flesh. In both the stories, the persons who practise cannibalism try to hide the reality from society and pretend as if their acts were perfectly normal and morally acceptable. Thus, the theme of human civilisation succumbing to primitive bestiality finds an allegorical representation in both the stories. Viewed against a wider contemporary context,

such a theme reminds us of the bestialities of the war when soldiers killed many civilians with similar cruelty and cold-blooded violence.

On the whole, it can be said that Lovecraft's fiction, as exhibited by the above discussed short stories, contains a dystopian view of the world where humanity is trivialised and mocked at. The vulnerabilities of the human civilisation are exposed in the stories which depict how mankind's self-destructive tendencies have led to its downfall. Although H. P. Lovecraft's stories appear as mere tales of fantasy, they in fact serve a symbolic function by uncovering the weaknesses lying at the core of humanity. A genuine message to be driven home is that all the acts of violence that man has perpetuated against the fellow humans in wars call for introspection and reflection on the part of all succeeding generations. Thus, the readers of Lovecraft are left with a sense of uncertainty about the fate of mankind and forced to contemplate on the future of the whole human existence.

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### **Brief Bio-Note of the Author**

Dr. Smaranjit Singha has been engaged in the teaching profession for eight years. He is currently an assistant professor of English at Ramkrishna Nagar College, Karimganj, Assam. He received his Doctoral Degree in English from Assam University, Silchar, in 2019.