

An Ecofeminist Reading of H. P. Lovecraft's Selected Works with Reference to Catherine M. Roach's Theory of Mother/Nature

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Abstract

Ecofeminist discourse is experiencing its peak importance with the rise of both feminism and ecocriticism to the summit of cultural and literary studies. Going back and revisiting authors and texts which helped shaping the current cultural forces through ecofeminist lenses may help us understand how nature and femininity both are viewed separately and together. As one of the most prominent and influential figures in horror and science fiction (and perhaps pop culture in general), Howard Phillips Lovecraft presents a thought-provoking portrait of women and femininity in his texts and since nature plays an integral role in worldview, femininity and nature almost blend into a single concept throughout his fiction. This paper intends to analyze the works of H. P. Lovecraft through Ecofeminist lenses and apply the Ecofeminist theory of Mother/Nature, developed by Catherine M. Roach, on Lovecraft's life and fiction. The researchers intend to find a correlation between the idea of Bad Nature presented by Roach and the almost always evil representation of femininity in H. P. Lovecraft's fiction.

Keywords

Ecofeminism; Ecopsychology; Mother/Nature; H. P. Lovecraft; Ecocriticism.

1. Introduction

Hailed as the undisputed father of modern horror (Duquette 2014), H. P. Lovecraft was born in 1890 to a wealthy family. A tumultuous and peculiar life was inevitable as Lovecraft's father was sent to an asylum in Lovecraft's early years and his relationship with his mother was odd and unfortunate. His chaotic fate continued to haunt him well into his adulthood as his adult relationships were also ill-fated and his marriage did not last long (Halldórsson 2010). Lovecraft's grim childhood and teenage years

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perhaps had a lot of impact on his contradictory and uneasy personality and also his writings.

Extremely enthusiastic in astronomical and cosmological matters, young Howard Phillips Lovecraft would take part in activities related to these subjects. He could not cater to his interest in astronomy and space related matters because of his self-proclaimed lack of ability in math as he states in one of his letters to Robert E. Howard (Tyson 48). However, his love of astronomy did not wither. His stories later on became a reflection of his immense affection for astronomy and all cosmic related things. *Weird Tales*, a niche magazine featuring weird literature, helped Lovecraft (and many other weird literature writers) to rise to fame. He started by submitting five stories such as "The Cats of Ulthar" and "Dagon", although the first work of his to be published in *Weird Tales* was a letter. Lovecraft quickly became a permanent writer of the magazine, appearing in five of the six issues from October 1923 to April 1924 (Joshi, *A Dreamer* 168). Weird fiction rose to a cult status popularity among the fans of horror and macabre literature, making Lovecraft one of the pioneers of the genre and perhaps the most influential of them all in the 20th century.

In recent years, Lovecraft has been heavily criticized for his offensive and borderline problematic representations of minorities and women. Lovecraft's openly xenophobic, misogynistic and racist attitude in his writings has sparked outrage in recent years, with the most recent one being the decision to not use his image as the prize image of *World Fantasy Awards* (Flood, *theguardian.com* 2015). Lovecraft's representation (or misrepresentation) of women is certainly one of the problematic points in his legacy. Moreno-Garcia (2008) puts Lovecraft's recurrent stock female characters into a few loose categories: the mixed fatal beauties, the hideous, monstrous mothers and the anti-mothers. Although Lovecraft and weird fiction did not receive major critical recognition in the literary criticism scene in their time, in the 21st (and late 20th) century they were open to a wider range of literary criticism. One of the more recent literary schools which opens new gates to interpret Lovecraft is Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism itself branches out to various sub-categories, one of which being Ecofeminism. This paper intends to analyze femininity and fertility in Lovecraft's works (specifically two of his characters, "Lavinia Whateley" from "The Dunwich Horror" and "Shub-Niggurath", a fertility Goddess in his pantheon of Outer Gods) through the Ecofeminist theory of Mother/Nature by Catherine M. Roach.

2. Background of Study

Howard Philips Lovecraft is a prominent figure in the world of speculative fiction; therefore, extensive research has been done on his legacy as well as his personal life. It

would be impossible to analyze Lovecraft's work without mentioning S. T. Joshi and his thorough research on Lovecraft's legacy. Joshi's *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H. P. Lovecraft in His Time* provides a deep insight into Lovecraft's personal life and his *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft* delves deep into his thoughts and worldview. The aforementioned works (and many others) do draw conclusions from Lovecraft's personal life to explain his behavior and worldview, yet the role of Lovecraft's female family members and acquaintances is often overlooked by Lovecraft scholars, and even though scholars such as Moreno-Garcia try to analyze Lovecraft's female characters and their role in his fiction, they leave much more to be desired.

The ecofeminist attempts to correlate between an author's personal life (and their relationship with the women of their life) have also been scarce, with the most notable example being Roach's *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics*. Others, like Plumwood, have tried to cover such ideas while explaining ecofeminism as a whole, but their attempts are not as detailed as one might hope. Scholarly literature has seldom focused on the women of Lovecraft's life and their influence on his personality and his works. This paper, in an attempt to offer a fresh perspective on both Lovecraft and ecofeminist studies, tries to connect Lovecraft's troubled childhood, his relationship with his mother, his aunts and his wife with the underlying misogyny found in his work through the lenses of ecofeminist literary theory.

3. Theoretical Framework

Humankind's relationship with nature is in the spotlight more than ever before. In the last decades of the twentieth century, with the alarming emergence of ecological crisis, modern environmentalism was born. According to Garrard (2004), "A Fable for Tomorrow", in Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" started modern environmentalism, which heavily emphasized on the pastoral and idyllic forms of nature writing which traces the place of humans in nature back to the old sources such as the Bible (1-2). Other definitions for Ecocriticism have also pointed out how it seeks to find out how nature is represented in literature. As Richard Kerridge contends, "The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear" (5). To put it simply, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty et al xviii). With the attitude that early Ecocriticism had towards literary representations of nature, it was no surprise that it was drawn to Romanticism.

Wordsworth, Shelley and the rest of the Romantic poets became patron saints of Ecocritical studies. In fact, as noted by Garrard (2004), two of the most important works

of Ecocriticism (“Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition” by Bate and “Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind” by Kroeber) in the 1990s were studies of Wordsworth and Shelley. The Romantic focused view soon changed and new concepts such as pollution and ecological crisis emerged (although Romantics are still a great part of how we have interpreted and represented nature in our literature). Ecocriticism has always had a close relationship to the science of Ecology (Garrard 2004), so it is no surprise that the concerns of these two fields would gradually merge.

Ecocriticism, following an even more interdisciplinary pursuit, has been expanded throughout many schools of thought and philosophical viewpoints; one of which is Feminism. Ecofeminism has been defined as: “...myriad forms of feminist and environmental theories and activism intersected” (Taylor 533). Deeply rooted in the discussion of masculinity, patriarchy and socio-political hierarchy, Ecofeminism seeks for such definitions and relationships in ecological discourses. Ecofeminism is a broad term in itself; exploring many fields such as cultural, political and religious. The issue of Androcentrism can be traced back to the ancient mythologies. As civilizations progressed towards city-like cultures, theorists such as Gimbutas and Lerner believe, the values shifted towards a more patriarchal system; whereas in pre-Indo-Aryan societies, the life-valuing and matriarchal societies existed that valued fertility goddesses and nature symbolism prominently (Taylor 534).

The femininity of nature has always been a sensitive topic among feminists and Ecocritics alike which can be observed through discussions and debates surrounding phrases like “Mother Nature” or referring to nature as a “she”. It is undeniable that nature (at least in western societies) is considered a feminine figure. As Roach contends: “Throughout Western history, the answer to the question What is nature? has been, not infrequently, some version of ‘like a female’” (27). This view ultimately falls under a certain mentality which critics call “Dualism” which has been defined as “an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm” (Plumwood 42). Dualism puts humankind in a dualist relationship with nature. If male/female, master/slave and mind/body are duals, then humankind/nature also falls under this category. The essence of the relationship between humankind and nature becomes a feminist issue when it is interpreted as a situation in which a masculine force (humankind/man) tries to oppress and metaphorically *enslave* a feminine force (nature/woman). Therefore, humans trying to change or abuse nature becomes another form of subordination of women to a patriarchal figure. Renouncing this notion has been requested by feminist critics such as Mies and Shiva (2014):

It is time that we renounced this fruitless and destructive dualism of 'good and bad' nature, 'rationality vs irrationality' subject vs object, 'nature vs society or culture'. Nature is, as the American Indians say, our mother, not a mere source of raw material, she is a subject, animated matter, materializing spirit. We forget that what we do to her we do to ourselves. (161)

In her book *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethic*, Catherine M. Roach (2003) explores the notion of nature being a mother in our daily lives and popular culture stating that it “refers to the environment, but it is also intended to evoke “mother-nature,” or the nature of the mothering experience — both of being a mother and of being mothered” (12). Roach (2003) proposes the theory that Mother Nature has been presented as a “Good Mother”, a mother who nurtures and nourishes her children; “Bad Mother”, a mother who is threatening and wrathful towards us, and “Hurt Mother”, a mother we have hurt and now try to heal.

Earth’s ability to produce food (flora and fauna alike) has certainly pushed the nurturing aspect of its femininity in human civilization and culture and many fertility and harvest goddesses are proof of that. The divine representation of nature as a mother, Roach (2003) contends, is “eternally loyal to her creation ... loving and beneficent” (32) who cannot be respected and revered more. Basically, “Mother” nature exists to benefit humanity by giving it resources, food and nourishments just like a mother would. She claims that there also seems to be an emotional relationship between humanity and mother nature. This relationship, she argues, “varies from being sometimes loving and respectful, to sometimes lustful, sometimes condescending and controlling, sometimes suspicious and fearful, and sometimes downright violently adversarial” (Roach 35).

It is undeniable that nature is cruel as it is nurturing. Numerous men, women and children die every year by nature’s hands. Floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados and other natural disasters are more or less inevitable and absolutely indifferent. This raises a series of questions: if nature was supposedly kind, nourishing and giving like a mother; are we ignoring the atrocities committed by it (or her)? Are we selectively revering mother nature or do we just separate all the cruelties and label them something that is not nature? Roach tries to discuss the role of the “Bad Mother Nature” in our culture. In her book, Roach (2003) analyzes two commercials and several other cultural instances in which mother nature is represented as a bad mother. She then compares these representations with a psychoanalytic theory by Melanie Klein which deals with the psyche of a child and his/her relationship with the mother. She draws a conclusion that if a child has negative feelings towards his/her mother, then he/she is more likely to view mother nature as a hostile figure:

[The argument I develop] is that a Kleinian analysis is particularly fruitful for the study of Bad Mother Nature, precisely because such a large part of Klein's theory concerns the ambivalence experienced by infants toward their mothers. ... I draw on Kleinian ideas to explain how fear, hate, and aggressive rage are felt from infancy and first projected onto and against the mother. These passions feed into societal images of nature as a mother who, if not currently wrathful, could easily become so. (103)

Roach goes on to explain the concept of Object Relations in which is about "the interplay of self and others, of internal and external worlds [and] it focuses on relations within the self and of self to others, and on how these relations are mutually constitutive."

She then explains the Kleinian "Phantasy" which is the "basic substance of all unconscious mental life [that] emanates from within and imagines what is without" (Roach 2003) and shapes our external world. Then she mentions the Paranoid-schizoid Position which:

...exist throughout life as patterns of organization for object relations. Positions are ways of organizing individual psychic reality, one-on-one relations, group dynamics, and cultural life. We never entirely give up the paranoid-schizoid position, for it persists and re-emerges later in childhood and in adult life in cases where the personality is not well integrated, in mental illness, and during times of stress. (104)

The last concept Roach explains is "Projection." According to Klein, Splitting and Projection are defense mechanisms: "Through phantasy, the infant splits both objects and ego in an attempt to protect itself against the hate and destructiveness of the death drive. Splitting results in idealized and demonized versions of an object" (Roach 2003). Roach (2003) deems this Kleinian theory to be fruitful for environmental discourse because how they seem to be applicable to nature (as mother) too: "the way that passion and phantasy split the human mother into good and bad parts is close to the way that passion and phantasy make nature into a Good and Bad Mother."

4. Discussion

Women of Lovecraft's life had a significant influence on him. After the death of his father and grandfather, Lovecraft was solely raised by his mother, his aunts and his grandparents, meaning he was mostly raised by women. Although his aunts also play a major role later in his life, his view of femininity had formed mostly through his relationship with his mother. Susie Lovecraft, Howard's mother, both spoiled and abused him. As S.T. Joshi (2001) states in his book *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H. P. Lovecraft in his Time*, Lovecraft had toys, books and other youthful pleasures as a kid, but also was forced by his mother to cross-dress and wear girls' clothing, to the six years old Lovecraft's disapproval. Susie also wanted Lovecraft to attend dancing classes, which he also despised and refused to attend. Susie's abuse didn't end in

Howard's childhood. As Oates states, Lovecraft's mother was responsible for many negative feelings he later on experienced in life:

Lovecraft's mother, Susie, was an emotionally unstable person [who] instilled in Lovecraft a sense of claustrophobia based on an internalized view of himself as hideous and degenerate. ... the "widowed, ailing mother Susie, who seems to have made of her son's personal appearance (tall, gaunt, with a long, prognathous jaw and frequently blemished skin) an image of moral degeneracy" ... All of which might be considered to feed into Lovecraft's own terrors at moral and hereditary degeneracy. (Qtd in. Wisker 48)

Lovecraft's wife, Sonia Greene, also plays a crucial role in his life and attitude towards femininity. Lovecraft admitted to his wife that "his mother's attitude to him was (and this is his word) 'devastating'" (Joshi, *A Dreamer* 68). This marriage was ill-fated, as the couple got a divorce in 1929. At the end of his marriage, Lovecraft's aunt came into play again. After his failed attempt to enjoy living in New York, Lovecraft decided to go back to Providence. According to Burleson, Lovecraft's aunts did not support this: "Lovecraft's aunts Lillian and Annie, with an exaggeratedly proud sense of the status of their family in Providence, refused to have Lovecraft" (4). His views on sex and procreation (both of which are heavily associated with femininity) are also noteworthy. According to Lord: "Lovecraft places sex in direct opposition to intellect and the pursuit of intellectual ends" (qtd in. Wisker 49). S.T. Joshi, a well-known Lovecraft scholar, calls Lovecraft "sexually reserved" (*A Subtler Magick* 172) and his sexuality "sluggish" (*A Dreamer* 64).

Lovecraft's contact with women certainly influenced his later viewpoints, beliefs and even his fiction. Lovecraft's female characters and their representation of nature will subsequently be reviewed and analyzed through Ecofeminist lenses. Catherine M. Roach claims that in the Bad Mother imagery in our culture, nature is either being attacked or attacking and H.P. Lovecraft's fiction is not short of instances in which nature is (directly or indirectly) hostile and *attacking*. Lovecraft's Cosmicist nature deems human life and the whole planet earth insignificant (Halldórsson 9). If we were to take Roach's Ecofeminist interpretation of Kleinian Psychoanalysis into account, Lovecraft's hostile nature can be very well traced back to his relationship with his mother. As Roach interprets Klein, "the way that passion and phantasy split the human mother into good and bad parts is close to the way that passion and phantasy make nature into a Good and Bad Mother". Therefore, if a child "projects the split-off hate outward onto objects that will hold the hostility" (Roach 106), an abused child, this research argues, can take that projected hate to its most extreme.

In order to explore how femininity and feminine nature are both represented in Lovecraft's works, this study focuses on two of his female characters: Lavinia Whateley

from "The Dunwich Horror" and Shub Niggurath, the Goddess of fertility in Lovecraft's pantheon. Contrary to what many mainstream readers seem to believe, the number of female characters in Lovecraft's works is not low, although their role in the story might seem peripheral. Throughout his work, one can find many female characters ranging from Nabby Gardner from "The Colour out of Space" to Asenath Waite from "The Thing on the Doorstep" (although she is possessed by her father). Lovecraft seldom depicts a positive female character and as Gina Wisker (2018) confirms: "Lovecraft's women are more likely to spawn monstrous offspring from hidden relations conducted with creatures from the depths of the sea, depths of darkest Africa, or the outer limits" (New Critical Essays 36).

As one of the few major female characters of Lovecraft's stories, Lavinia Whately certainly is an interesting subject for a feminist discussion. In the story, she is described as a "deformed, unattractive albino woman of thirty-five" (Lovecraft 636) who got impregnated by an Outer God (Yog-Sothoth) and gave birth to two sons, one being Wilbur Whateley, the monstrous abomination. Lavinia can be interpreted as a surrogate of darkness and a gate through which evil comes into this world, because as Wisker (2018) explains:

Her father arranges for her to mate with a creature, one of the Elder Gods, Yog-Sothoth, a kind of powerful other or interdimensional being, producing two sons who quickly become huge, dangerous, cattle-consuming, physically constrained, nightmarish out-of-control teenagers. Both grow at several times the normal rate, and once one of the sons, Wilbur, is dead, the remaining son comes to represent a threat beyond the community, to mankind in its entirety. Lavinia hardly appears in the story after the birth of Wilbur and his twin brother. (New Critical Essays 48-9)

It has been argued that Lavinia displays Lovecraft's general disgust and fear of sexual intimacy and human body in general, as he "connects anxiety over reproduction with the body's inevitable decline and death" (Sederholm and Weinstock 32). Overall, Lovecraft's portraits his unabridged disgust for sex (especially sex with the Other) throughout his work. In shorts stories such as "Facts concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family" (48), Lovecraft displays, according to Wisker (2013), his distaste for copulation with the Other. The concept of impurity and corruption through sex can also be traced in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (48), one of Lovecraft's more famous tales, which deals with inhabitants of a village in New England who mate with unearthly creatures and create monsters.

The next notable female character, Shub-Niggurath, the All-Mother and the Mother-Goddess, is hardly a fully-fledged character at all. The goddess of fertility in Lovecraft's pantheon of Outer Gods, Shub-Niggurath, though never directly described by Lovecraft himself, remains an interesting figure in his fiction. One of the few female

deities of Lovecraft's works (which interestingly is a fertility goddess) is first mentioned in the short story "The Last Test". Gina Wisker (2018) calls Shub-Niggurath "probably the most extreme case of Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos of procreative female monsters" (64). In a letter to Willis Conover, Lovecraft describes Shub-Niggurath as:

Yog-Sothoth's wife is the hellish cloud-like entity Shub-Niggurath, in whose honor nameless cults hold the rite of the Goat with a Thousand Young. By her he has two monstrous offspring—the evil twins Nug and Yeb. He has also begotten hellish hybrids upon the females of various organic species throughout the universes of space-time. (qtd in Steadman 65)

These two major female characters, both evil and both strongly associated with fertility and procreation, may not be the only instances in which Lovecraft's strong opinions towards femininity and procreation show themselves in his fiction, but are perhaps the most prominent ones. Lavinia Whateley and Shub-Niggurath both give birth to abhorrent abominations who threaten not only humankind, but also planet earth. Can Lovecraft's female harbingers of doom and destruction be traced back to his relationship with his mother? Roach (2003) believes mother and nature are bound together:

A psychoanalytic interpretation suggests that the close metaphorical relation, and even conflation, that binds mother and nature together—and that then portrays nature as either good or bad mother—has its deepest roots in the earliest stage of infantile development ... Given that women provide all or most of the care for children and especially for infants, mother is the most important part not only of the baby's emotional world but also of its physical world. (110-1)

Considering Roach's theory of Mother/Nature and the Kleinian concept of Object Relations, can Lovecraft's abusive mother be the reason why these characters are portrayed as destructors of nature and humanity? Roach (2003) states that the Good/Bad mother split "continues to exert influence in adult life" (113), so the notion of Lovecraft's abusive mother influencing his fiction (which he wrote during adulthood) is by no means unlikely. If Roach's take on Klein's theory suggests that the split-off hate is projected towards nature, then H.P. Lovecraft's troubled childhood can add up to the hate and take it to an extreme. The fact that he was mostly raised by women, his overall ill-fated relationships with two of the most important female figures of his life and an absence of male/father figures in his life leaves Lovecraft as a perfect yet extreme example of a case in which a bad mother eventually turned into a bad mother nature; a bad mother nature that deems not only human life, but planet earth itself to be insignificant. Lovecraft's bad mother nature transcends our planet, our solar system, our galaxy and even our dimension. His nature is the universe itself, a bad cosmic mother.

5. Conclusion

Howard Philips Lovecraft was one of the most influential figures in science fiction. His work has influenced many authors and our culture as a whole. Due to the fundamental role that nature plays in his works, it can be claimed that he has also influenced the way our culture thinks of nature. This paper attempted to analyze Lovecraft's works through Ecofeminist lenses by applying Catherine M. Roach's theory of Mother/Nature on Lovecraft's life and two of his characters (Lavinia Whateley and Shub-Niggurath). Intending to provide new information for both Ecofeminism and Lovecraft readers, this research tried to explain the hostile nature represented in Lovecraft's works by analyzing his relationship with his abusive mother and other women in his life and concluding that the ill-fated relationships he had with the women of his life ultimately led to the dark and brutal universe he created



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