Terror and shock in H. P. Lovecraft

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Howard Phillips Lovecraft was a hard-working and prolific writer who published a large number of tales. His stories refuse any kind of realism and the supernatural is the thematic line of most of this work. His characters do not live a common life. They are constantly tormented by dreams, obsessions and delirium. They cannot escape from the inevitable encounter with the inexplicable and as far as the reader is concerned, there is nothing he can do but to let himself to be carried away in the darkness of this world and embrace the fear and horror that comes with it.

“The outsider” is one of these tales. It was written between March and August 1921, it was first published in *Weird Tales*, April 1926. It is the story of a mysterious creature which has been living alone in a castle for as long as it can remember until it decides to break free in a quest for light and human contact; however, the experience does not go as planned and the narrator has to deal with the fear and the horror caused by his own appearance. For that reason, this study aims to analyze how Lovecraft explores this emotional state in the text, having as theoretical basis his own concepts on writing horror stories and also the ideas proposed by Nöel Carroll in his book *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, among others scholars.

According to H.P. Lovecraft there are two kinds of fears. The first type is defined by the chain of mere physical reactions provoked by any kind of danger. The second category of dread is the one he calls “cosmic fear”, that is, the phobic potential innate in each and every human being. It is the sort of awe derived from atavistic sources, automatically triggered whenever men are forced to confront the inexplicable. It is the ancestral fear, transmitted culturally from generation to generation, representation of the disturbing awareness human beings have of their own finitude and smallness in the middle of the magnitude and the secrets of the universe.
Differently from the superficial distress, the “cosmic fear” implicates deep psychological activities and it is, in Lovecraft’s opinion, one of the greatest literary theme for it allows

‘the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprisons us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic space beyond our radius of our sight and analysis’

The author goes further and says that

‘These stories frequently emphasize the element of horror because fear is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of Nature-defying illusions. Horror and the unknown or the strange are always closely connected, so that it is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law or cosmic alienage or “outsideness” without laying stress on the emotion of fear’

In order to explore this feeling in a narrative and achieve the desired effect, the writer has to work on some specific literary resources. As believed by Lovecraft, the ‘Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation’. Atmosphere, according to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, in their book *Understanding Fiction*, is the ‘total feel or mood of a story’. In other words, atmosphere is the combination of a series of elements arranged in a way that should give a certain tone to the plot. In agreement with the ideas proposed by Lovecraft in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, this tone is supposed to carry a ‘breathless and unexplainable dread of outer unknown forces’ and malignly suspend or defeat the regular laws known by mankind.

In “The outsider”, the atmosphere is dark, tense and heavy. One of the elements that highlights the ghastliness of the atmosphere is the
setting. The first place the reader comes across is the castle where the creature dwells and it is described as an eerie, lifeless and mournful underworld, a place where no human being would like to live. The building is completely isolated, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by nothing but an awful forest.

‘Wretched is he who looks back upon lone hours in vast and dismal chambers with brown hangings and maddening rows of antique books, or upon awed watches in twilight groves of grotesque, gigantic, and vine-encumbered trees that silently wave twisted branches far aloft (...) I know not where I was born, save that the castle was infinitely old and infinitely horrible, full of dark passages and having high ceilings where the eye could find only cobwebs and shadows. The stones in the crumbling corridors seemed always hideously damp, and there was an accursed smell everywhere, as of the piled-up corpses of dead generations. It was never light, so that I used sometimes to light candles and gaze steadily at them for relief, nor was there any sun outdoors, since the terrible trees grew high above the topmost accessible tower’.

It is clear that the setting was designed to create an ideal environment for the supernatural to arise and provoke astonishment and fear. And it becomes clearer when the narrator is surprised by another feature of the place: it looks like the castle comes from the underground and ends in a graveyard. This new discovery, combined with the other characteristics, suggests that the creature lives in some sort of catacomb bounded by death and desolation.

‘Most demoniacal of all shocks is that of the abysmally unexpected and grotesquely unbelievable. Nothing I had before undergone could compare in terror with what I now saw; with the bizarre marvels that sight implied. The sight itself was as simple as it was stupefying, for it was
merely this: instead of a dizzying prospect of treetops seen from a lofty eminence, there stretched around me on the level through the grating nothing less than the solid ground, decked and diversified by marble slabs and columns, and overshadowed by an ancient stone church, whose ruined spire gleamed spectrally in the moonlight”7.

It is noticeable that the overuse of adjectives and the extensive descriptions are two of the main stylistic resources employed by Lovecraft to emphasize the dreadfulness of the atmosphere, since they give the image of the location a certain dense and sinister power. Furthermore, the additional adjectives not only provide a better understanding of the scenario, they also reveal the feelings of the protagonist towards the setting. The narrator, obviously, is frightened, disgusted and suffocated by the dolefulness of the castle. These emotions infer that, in the creature’s mind, it does not belong there and the reader could easily sympathize with it, after all, who would deserve to live in such dwelling? The reader falls for the trick only to be stunned by the final revelation: the dismal underground mausoleum is exactly where the narrator fits in.

The overemployment of adjectives and the gradual increase of the tension lead to another literary element which goes hand to hand with fear: the suspense. According to Noel Carroll, suspense is ‘generated as an emotional concomitant of a narrative question that has been raised by earlier scenes and events in a story’8. The scholar also adds that, besides the emotional aspect and the anticipation of an event, the suspense is closed connected with morality and probability. Carroll argues that the suspense in fiction usually occurs when the moral acceptable result is unlikely (the salvation of a victim from an extreme danger, for instance), while the malevolent outcome is more probable (the victim in danger is destroyed).

In “The outsider”, it is possible to list several moments of suspense, such as the instant in which the protagonist is trying to climb up the tower, or when the people flee from the creature. However, the scene which generates the ultimate suspense is the
climax of the tale, when the creature realizes what it has really happened and what it really is:

‘As I did so I became suddenly and agonizingly aware of the nearness of the carrion thing, whose hideous hollow breathing I half fancied I could hear. Nearly mad, I found myself yet able to throw out a hand to ward off the foetid apparition which pressed so close; when in one cataclysmic second of cosmic nightmarishness and hellish accident my fingers touched the rotting outstretched paw of the monster beneath the golden arch’.

The tension of the scene is felt in the air: Is the monster going to attack and kill the protagonist? It is evident that the evil outcome (the death of the narrator by the monster) is more likely due to the proximity between the protagonist and the monster. Nonetheless, it is not what takes place and the answer to the previous question is shocking, totally unexpected and improbable. The monster is precisely the main character of the story. The very “person” the reader has been listening to all this time, and maybe even sympathizing with, is the reason of the problem. Since it has never seen its own appearance, it had no idea that it could cause this effect on people and even on itself.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren state that ‘the very fact that the narrator is limited in his opportunities for observations (…) provides a highly dramatic frame for the story – a device of suspense’\(^1\(^{0}\), which means that the reader is able to see only what the narrator sees. In “The outsider” the suspense is incredibly enhanced by the use of this specific literary resource for without it the reader would have a wilder vision of the plot and therefore would not be impacted by the final disclosure.

Finally, the ultimate element evoked by Lovecraft in “The outsider” to cause fear is the irruption of the supernatural in the real world, that is, the presence of a nameless creature in the middle of human daily life. The protagonist is, in his words, a monster.
According to Noel Carroll, monsters are ‘horrific creatures’ which are ‘regarded not only as inconceivable but also as unclean and disgusting’. They are supposed to cause not only fear but also repugnance. That is precisely the case in “The outsider”:

‘I cannot even hint what it was like, for it was a compound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable. It was the ghoulish shade of decay, antiquity, and dissolution; the putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation, the awful baring of that which the merciful earth should always hide. God knows it was not of this world - or no longer of this world - yet to my horror I saw in its eaten-away and bone-revealing outlines a leering, abhorrent travesty on the human shape; and in its mouldy, disintegrating apparel an unspeakable quality that chilled me even more’.

Carroll also says that the monsters generally ‘comes from marginal, hidden, or abandoned sites: graveyards, abandoned towers and castles, sewers, or old houses—that is, they belong to environs outside of and unknown to ordinary social intercourse’. This inference fits perfectly in “The outsider” because, as mentioned before, the creature comes from forsaken dungeons, implicating ‘that what horrifies is that which lies outside cultural categories and is, perforce, unknown’. Once more it is evident that Lovecraft orchestrated his tale in every little detail with the intention to induce scaring feelings.

Another point concerning the monster is what Noel Carroll calls *fission*, which is another popular means to create ‘interstitial beings’. Fission happens when contradictory identities are condensed or superimposed on a unified being. Doppelgangers, alter-egos, and werewolves are the most typical examples of fission. In “The outsider” the reader comes across a case of *doppelganger*, or double, emerged when the narrator visualizes his own image in the mirror and does not recognize himself at first. Lovecraft used one unified
being to expose two different identities. On one hand, there is this frightened and eager for light and friendship individual and all it wants is to establish some amicable contact with the party of people it encounters. On the other hand, inside the same being, there is this other, present in the mirror reflection – an atrocious creature that inspires nothing but horror, fear and repulsion.

The fission of the monster in “The outsider” can be understood as a prefiguration of further thematic oppositions. In this case, the double represents the shock and fear all human beings endure when they discern hidden sides of their personalities, secret actions and thoughts which they never imagined to be capable of. Many psychologists and sociologists agree that human beings have different sides: one they show to the society (the moral and socially acceptable surface) and another one they keep behind the mask (possibility, the monster, the evil facet that no one should see).

H. P. Lovecraft alleged that

‘The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space’

“The outsider” definitely has that “something more” since it offers an extremely interesting touch: the point of view of the monster; but the reader gets to realize that only at the very end of the story. This is the most appealing feature of the tale. The human beings inside the plot are merely puppets serving to a purpose, their presence is completely secondary and not at all the focus of attention. The story not only evokes the fear of the unknown, but also does that in a
brilliant way, leading the readers to sympathize with the creature only to shock them with the ghastly revelation that they are facing a monster. And as far as the narrator goes, it tries to enter back to the dark dungeons from where it came. Nevertheless, it is sealed, which makes the entrance impossible. There is nothing the creature can do but to wonder around, avoiding light and human contact, doomed to be forever an outcast, forever an outsider.


2 Lovecraft, *Supernatural horror in literature and other essays*, 113.
7 Lovecraft, ‘The outsider’, 43.
8 Noel Carroll, *The philosophy of horror and or paradoxes of the heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136.
11 Carroll, *The philosophy of horror and or paradoxes of the heart*, 21.
13 Carroll, *The philosophy of horror and or paradoxes of the heart*, 35.
14 Carroll, *The philosophy of horror and or paradoxes of the heart*, 35.