

OUT OF SPACE AND INTO THE GROUND: CHEMICAL AND WATER POLLUTION IN H.P. LOVECRAFT'S NEW ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the influence of interwar environmental practices regarding chemical and water pollution in New England on H. P. Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) and "The Shunned House" (1937). It is argued that the literary Gothic tradition which Lovecraft builds upon is influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and remodeled by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962) as ecoGothic realism. It is discussed that "The Colour Out of Space" extends Lovecraft's personal writings regarding the gap between class and politics in the face of growing wealth disparity. It is commented how in "The Shunned House," Lovecraft presents anti-immigration sentiment while also advocating for integrated and preserved cities free of pollution, and the paper concludes that for Lovecraft, changes in landscape and ecology reflect fundamental changes in New England society that are evidenced by commercialism and lack of proper waste management policies.

KEYWORDS: ecoGothic, H.P. Lovecraft, pesticides, water pollution, wealth gap, Rachel Carson.

DEL ESPACIO AL SUELO: CONTAMINACIÓN QUÍMICA E HÍDRICA
EN LA NUEVA INGLATERRA DE H.P. LOVECRAFT

RESUMEN

En este artículo se trata la influencia que ejercieron las prácticas medioambientales del periodo de entreguerras en Nueva Inglaterra—tanto químicas como de polución de las aguas—en los relatos de H.P. Lovecraft "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) y "The Shunned House" (1937). Se argumenta que la tradición literaria Gótica sobre la que Lovecraft construye su obra está influenciada por *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) de Nathaniel Hawthorne, y es remodelada por Rachel Carson en *Silent Spring* (1962) como una forma de realismo ecoGótico. Se discute que "The Colour Out of Space" es una extensión de los escritos personales de Lovecraft en lo relacionado a la brecha generada entre clase y política al ampliarse la disparidad económica. Se comenta como en "The Shunned House" Lovecraft presenta sentimientos xenofóbicos junto a la idea de tener ciudades integradas y preservadas libres de polución. El artículo concluye que para Lovecraft los cambios en el paisaje y la ecología se equiparan a cambios fundamentales en la sociedad de Nueva Inglaterra, que se ponen en evidencia por la comercialización y la falta de políticas en el manejo apropiado de los residuos urbanos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ecoGótico, H.P. Lovecraft, pesticidas, contaminación del agua, brecha de ingresos, Rachel Carson.



INTRODUCTION

H.P. Lovecraft's work has been a longstanding emblem in the world of cult horror literature and weird fiction, a debated yet undefined literary genre or horror subgenre which tends to evoke "encounters with, and subsequent escapes from, inconceivable monsters whose mere existence drives people mad" (Ulstein 2017, 75). Lovecraft distinctly shaped his own style within the genre, called cosmic horror, which fuels from "an unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" (Lovecraft and Bleiler 1973, chap. I), and results in the fear of contemplating mankind's place in the vastness of the universe. Lovecraft was inspired by New England's history and its role in shaping the regional lore. The New England folklore of witchcraft, ghost ships, sea serpents, specters, a Portsmouth stone-throwing devil, pirates, and a headless horseman go hand in hand with Puritan figures which have stood over time as representations of religious contention and anticolonial sentiment, such as Anne Hutchinson, Paul Revere, John Winthrop, and the infamous Cotton Mather (Drake 1993). According to Timothy H. Evans, Lovecraft's strong awareness of the New England folklore that can be read in his stories grew from his fear of the destruction of traditional American culture on account of its adapting to new national ideologies. Evans claims that "throughout his adult life [Lovecraft] sought out survivals of colonial European cultures" (2005, 100) and refers to a letter written by Lovecraft in 1928 in which he writes that he has "no respect whatever for the hectic mechanical world which is supplanting the simpler, tradition-anchored world into which I was born" (Lovecraft 1968, 228). Lovecraft romanticized ideas of "preindustrial folklife" in New England, and particularly of its inhabitants of "pure Yankee stock" (108). For Lovecraft, New England's historic Protestant character was linked with the percentage of the population that was "pure American" (109) and he believed that the preservation of history and folklore was threatened by urban decay, development, immigration, and commercialism (110). The result was blatant xenophobia and racism that underlie most of his fiction and nonfiction. The folklore by which Lovecraft was so heavily inspired was, to his mind, susceptible to the social and political context of the time, and although he invented his own lore, this was connected to materials that were already out there, so he built on existing tradition (119).

The main argument of this paper is that Lovecraft embeds social ecological concern and acknowledgment of changing urban and rural policies into the landscape of "The Colour Out of Space" ([1927] 2011),¹ allowing for an exploration of the chemical pesticide industry and the New England environmental policies of the time, and situating it within the fear towards the unknown that is pervasive in the story. The cosmic unknown takes the form of the yet uncharted consequences of chemically polluting nature as well as the industrializing of New England, which for Lovecraft was synonymous with breaking away from traditional colonial lifestyle. As Lovecraft's cosmology was reliant on the intrusion of urban worldviews into

¹ Lovecraft used the British spelling for color (colour) rather than the American spelling.



traditional rural spaces which was a lasting effect of World War I and the onset of World War II, his fictional work was affected in more regards than a purely social or political one. He centers his stories on little known villages, far-flung country farms, or run-down ports or cities that have long since reached their commercial peak and are now in disrepair and have declining populations. Considering the context of war and the ensuing death, pollution, experimentation with mass weaponry and biological warfare that was taking place regionally in the early twentieth century, it seems highly likely that Lovecraft would draw upon these problems when addressing his concern for the welfare of his region. For example, in “The Colour Out of Space,” the nature of the effects of the strange meteor are akin to the chemical pollution through pesticides that was just becoming a known issue affecting water and crops in negative ways, and this is further explored in the urban landscape of “The Shunned House” (1937). Adam W. Rome in “Coming to Terms with Pollution: The Language of Environmental Reform, 1865-1915” (1996) describes the awareness of pollution in the late nineteenth century as arising firstly in central urban areas, and then progressively turning to suburban parts. Rome mentions that as early as the 1850s, the problem of pollution became evident through the water contamination of rivers and streams through waste from factories and tanneries (9), prompting studies of sanitation and waste in working-class areas and reviews of public policies of water pollution. The results of these studies and the growing environmental consciousness were then framed as an argument against the benefits of industry (10).

It is important to note that Lovecraft’s attention to the environmental policies that surround urban and rural life find basis in the political and Puritan backdrop of Lovecraft’s New England upbringing, and his subsequent cosmicist imagination inherently evokes the Puritan Gothic idea of New England as an unbridled wilderness with which society must contend. Tom J. Hillard writes that for Puritans like Cotton Mather the earthly world and the Bible were texts, “one filled with God’s created wonders, and the other with the literal word of God—available and open to interpretation” (2013, 107), and consequently was able to call the world a “Publick Library” (Mather and Solberg 1994, 18). The important framework of a fallen and cursed world born of original sin shaped the Puritan view when first encountering the American wilderness that seemed to them to be untamed and unsettled, and Hillard argues that this anticipates the settings for the Gothic literary mode a century later. The Gothic is about “the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the *buried secret* that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself” (Lloyd-Smith 2004, 1; quoted in Hillard 2013, 111-12, italics in original). To Puritans, every encounter with nature provoked fear and served as a reminder of a shameful and guilty heritage (112). The Lovecraftian theme of the cosmic unknown lurking in the wilderness of dark forests, farmland, or an abandoned house is embodied in the Puritan typology used to find allegorical connections in the traditional dichotomy of human vs. nature. Ultimately, Lovecraft portrays humans as inseparable from nature through the process of change. Lovecraft’s prevailing theme of knowledge hidden away in forbidden places for the sake of humanity also carries distinct traces of the Puritan fear of nature present in the Gothic tradition.



Lovecraft's place in the American Gothic and his distinct social discourse on nature and conservation positions his literature squarely in the lens of the American ecoGothic, which is the study of Gothic literature through an ecocritical lens. According to Andrew Smith and William Hughes:

debates about climate change and environmental damage have been key issues on most industrialized countries' political agendas for some time. The Gothic seems to be the form which is well placed to capture these anxieties and provides a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory and political process. (2013, 5)

It is slightly different from its European counterpart as "America was already a haunted land: the ghosts born of colonialism and its attendant environmental perversity grew entrenched in the very soil of North America's contested ground" (Keetley and Sivils 2018, 1). The fear of nature and ambivalence towards human authority in the natural world is deeply embedded in New England Puritanism, which in turn influences the American Gothic and ecoGothic studies. The ecoGothic has experienced a recent surge in literary studies within the past ten years, and one prevalent focus of discussion in this research area is centered in the intersection between ecoGothic and ecophobia.² This refers to the fear of natural environments which is studied through the role of human agency in the natural world, which is a form of storytelling that is discussed in Lovecraft's nonfiction as well as in his stories. Lovecraft himself has featured in some ecoGothic studies (see, for example, Alcalá González and Sederholm 2022; Evans 2005).

An environmental reading of H.P. Lovecraft's stories alongside some of his letters and essays provides valuable insight into the progress and development of American regional policies in allowing/restricting pollution and how this connects with a regionalist sentiment which Lovecraft permeated with xenophobia. Rural spaces and natural landscapes in Lovecraft's fiction are described in a way that inspires uncertainty and are inextricably tied in with social and environmental politics of the time. He addresses different anxieties regarding these politics; chemical pollution is a featured concern in "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) while "The Shunned House" (1937) speaks on the perceived dangers of urbanization and immigration. The fantasy and science fiction of these stories offer a valuable approach to the struggles of early twentieth century interwar environmental politics and the social attitudes towards the foreign "other" inculcated in Lovecraft's regard to the environment, and serve to strongly criticize a particular ecosocial aspect of the politics of Lovecraft's time. As Alcalá González and Sederholm relate in *Lovecraft in the 21st Century: Dead, But Still Dreaming* (2022), a late increased interest in Lovecraft's works is

² The largest studies in the area come mainly from Andrew Smith and William Hughes' 2013 anthology *Ecogothic*, a 2014 issue of *Gothic Studies* edited by Emily Alder, and Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' 2018 *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, as well as upcoming collections from the International Gothic Association.



associated to the desire to understand the process of how the Anthropocene has come to be and “to what extent we are both responsible for it and directly affected by it” (2) and they remind us that “adaptations of the writer’s thought and monsters in our *Anthropocenic* times can make us remember that we are not alone on this planet, but surrounded by countless life forms who are affected by our actions and whose existence is directly related to ours” (3; italics in original). In general, the contemporary approach to Lovecraft has shifted from the aesthetic appreciation of cosmic monsters and shared universes to the anthropocentric approach to ecology. The ecoGothic view leads us to question the apparent duality between human/earth and natural/cosmic forces, and to regard the purpose of fear not only as an element in the cosmicist horror genre but also as a tool with which to approach politically charged environmentalist discourse.

“THE COLOUR OUT OF SPACE”

Marine biologist Rachel Carson begins *Silent Spring* (1962) with “A Fable for Tomorrow,” a small passage that is heavy with foreboding and draws upon fantasy-like horror elements (Lovecraftian, even) which drive home the point of how idyllic pastoral suburban Midwest America is affected by the silent effects of the current state of environmental policies. She uses wording like “a strange blight,” an “evil spell,” and “mysterious maladies” that bring forth the “shadow of death” (2). Keetley and Sivils place *Silent Spring* as a book that is “squarely under the domain of the Gothic” (2018, 2). Through her subtly disturbing prose, Carson pursues a literary mode which can be read as ecoGothic realism.³ She addresses at length the indiscriminate use of pesticides in crops and how this disrupts the natural life of soil, its metabolic activity, and its productivity; stressing how “potentially harmful organisms, formerly held in check, could escape from their natural controls and rise to pest status” ([1962] 2002, 57). She predicts that in the future even unsprayed crops will absorb enough insecticide “merely from the soil to make them unfit for the market” (59). Carson also insisted that nature was fluid and in a constant state of adjustment, and since humans are also part of this balance, it is inevitable that all too often human-provoked activities shift the scales to our disadvantage (245).

It is possible to regard Carson and Lovecraft as belonging to a similar eonnarrative tradition. Carson’s writings appeal to the rational mind of her readers through her explanations of chemical processes behind toxicity; she also relies on the reader’s capacity for empathy towards the landscape in its process of disrepair.

³ At the end of “A Fable for Tomorrow” Carson goes on to say that “no witchcraft, no enemy action” had silenced nature, but that “the people had done it themselves” ([1962] 2002, 3). She denies the supernatural gothic overture of the passage (as well as the Cold War paranoia that put the blame on communism) yet goes on to point to human action as the perpetrator of an uncontrollable ecological evil, which connects the passage to the idea of human lack of control which is so essential to ecophobia and the Gothic.



An important resource of *Silent Spring* lies in its imagery of ecohorror realism that is shown as the inevitable path if no steps are taken towards rectifying the already existing devastation and industrial farming policies. For instance, Carson begins her conclusion by writing:

the road we have been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one ‘less traveled by’—offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth. (276)

Carson also says that our current stance on the idea of nature was conceived during “the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man” (297). She adds that “it is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth” (297). There is a quasi-apocalyptic vein underlying her writing that relies on the reader’s familiarity with ecohorror aesthetics and knowledge of haunted landscapes and so builds on the Gothic tradition that was already known to the reader through fictions that include Lovecraft’s. Carson places the focus on the uncertainty of changing environments and in this she resembles Lovecraft’s storytelling. In the same way that Lovecraft depends on a shared dread of immigration and industrialism to portray a supposed loss of tradition, Carson anticipates that changes to known natural landscapes will induce an anger and thus an activism aimed at changing current industrial practices. This depiction of uncontrolled change portrayed by both writers intensely criticizes rapid modernization and the ruling government that allows it. Lovecraft’s work precedes Carson’s fictionalized nonfiction by at least a decade, and parallels between the two can most importantly be traced in different veins of the Gothic tradition that use similar language and techniques to convey apprehension and unease via pre-established horror imagery.

Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” uses the Gothic language that is also common to *Silent Spring*. The story focuses on a traveler passing the “blasted heath,” which stands out for its lack of vegetation and “fine grey dust or ash which no wind seemed ever to blow about” ([1927] 2011, 4). The narrator is told about how the blasted heath used to be a wooded farmland community until a meteorite crashed into the farmed lands of Nahum Gardner in June 1882, and it is described as never cooling down, constantly shrinking, of an ultraviolet color of no previously known spectrum, and unable to be thoroughly examined by the scientists at Miskatonic University. The meteor is soon destroyed by bolts of lightning but leaves behind a residue that seeps into the soil and causes the crops and surrounding woodlands to obtain the unknown stellar color, move of their own accord, and grow luminous and abundant. Animals also begin to behave strangely and become deformed; namely, cows decaying while still alive, rabbits leaping unusually long and high, and a woodchuck with proportions “slightly altered in a queer way impossible to describe, while its face has taken on an expression which no one ever saw in a woodchuck before” (15). Vegetables and meat possess an “unwonted gloss”—luscious but inedible—and the water from the well becomes poisonous (13). A year later this



environment begins to decay, and the animals start to decompose while standing. The Gardner family are also affected, starting with the insanity of Mrs. Gardner, who is locked up in the attic by Nahum; the subsequent madness of Thaddeus, who is also put away and dies in the attic; the disappearance of Merwin and Zenas; and the inevitable collapse of the home after Nahum's demise. Miskatonic professors discover children's bones in the property and witness the unknown color infiltrate luminously through the land before it collects itself and flees into space, but one orb of color is seen to fall back into the ground, settling into the well.

This is the basic plot of the story, and it is interesting to note that "The Colour Out of Space" immediately resonates with Rachel Carson's warnings of contemporary pollution in "A Fable for Tomorrow" through elements such as Lovecraft's use of Gothic prose, the reference to mysteriously sourced pollution, its concern for small-town and rural life, and the overarching ecoGothic vision. For Lovecraft, the use of haunting imagery is a portrayal of the unnaturalness of pesticides and other chemicals used in New England agriculture which inflicts a lastingly fatal effect on the natural environment and human life, with particular emphasis on water. There is an assurance in the story that it is the farmers in the countryside who know well what has happened to the earth, but scientists and researchers are disdainful and oblivious. This creates a gap in the information that is presented to the reader concerning whom and what to believe, and it is over this breach that the sense of the unknown is played upon. For Carson, this same struggle is between nature and factories, and in the form of scientific research and environmental legislation both local and national, and in this gap is where bad policy of overproduction and overfarming would arise. Although the origin of the toxicity in "The Colour Out of Space" comes from a spatial residue which is studied by scientists at Arkham, the phenomenon is explained by the Arkham researchers alongside the folklore and witch legends which are recounted by the farmers. The local farmers and witnesses of the meteor impact are ridiculed in the narrative by police and professors but are ultimately more accurate in their description of the event as otherworldly. There is a love/hate relationship with scientific explanation, but it is popular hearsay that conveys the cosmic horror which carries forward the story and conveys the sense of the unknown.

The gap in knowledge between witch tales and research, or between farmers and authoritative voices regarding harmful substances dumped in the environment, is referenced in Lovecraft's personal writings. His letter to the *Providence Journal* on Roosevelt's *New Deal* in 1934 reveals his dislike of the wealthy chemical industry moguls which made up the extreme right of the American Liberty League in the 1930s.⁴ This was an organization of business elites which prospered during World War I with the making of explosives, toxic gas, coal tar, plastic and artificial fibers, dyes,

⁴ The American Liberty League included John F. Queeny, founder of Monsanto, and firms such as DuPont, American Cyanamid, Hooker Electrochemical, among many other mostly chemical manufacturers; see Ross and Amter 2012, 18.



and a variety of solvents and industrial chemicals (25) and who were strongly against government interference in the economy and pursued a monopoly of economic power (22). Lovecraft condemned these opponents of Roosevelt's *New Deal* as representatives of the least admirable qualities of "the American way" (Lovecraft and Joshi 2006, 115), who were "getting ahead" (115) through their greed, ruthlessness, and duplicity; he further argued that their "distance covering organizations" (115) had concentrated all markets within a few potent hands, which are:

the real governing forces of the 'free' republic so hypocritically lauded by their possessors. We know that this centralisation of wealth and power has resulted in the unspeakable oppression and starvation of millions of the unfortunate—and this in the most prosperous times. It is not merely the depression which has proved the dying order unworkable. And we know that the private holders of the needlessly concentrated wealth and power will never voluntarily rectify the conditions which their restricted greed for profit creates. They have had their chance and failed. So the only thing left to do is to regulate them through the pressure of the whole social order. What society has supinely allowed them to [do] in the past, society must control and modify in the future. (115)

Lovecraft calls for rectification of the unchecked wealth gap, increasing day by day in the interwar period of 1930s America. The effects of the production of chemical warfare did not go unnoticed either economically or ecologically by New England society but were ignored by the existing authorities. The widening gap in class wealth and politics is echoed by the Lovecraftian breach between what is whispered among the farms and what is thought to be true by academics. The effect of industrial chemical production and rapidly increasing production plants (over seventeen electrochemical plants in the New York tri-state area by 1918)⁵ and the wide-ranging use of pesticides throughout the 1920s and 1930s is incorporated as tragic lore. Water pollution is a common theme in Lovecraft's fictions (which can be exemplified in parts of this story as well as in "The Shunned House"), which incorporate criticism on the synthetic chemical processes concomitantly affecting urban and rural spaces as a byproduct of increasing industry. The following quote suggests that the chemical pollution which governs the ground is also incorporated into the Lovecraftian aesthetics of madness through the consumption of water:

But it was Ammi, on one of his rare visits, who first realized that the well water was no longer good. It had an evil taste that was not exactly [*fetid*] nor exactly salty, and Ammi advised his friend to dig another well on higher ground to use till the soil was good again. Nahum, however, ignored the warning, for he had by that time become calloused to strange and unpleasant things. [...] Thaddeus went mad in September after a visit to the well. He had gone with a pail and had come back

⁵ The New York tri-state area consists of the states of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey.



empty-handed, shrieking and waving his arms, and sometimes lapsing into an inane titter or a whisper about 'the moving colours down there.' ([1927] 2011, 22-23)

Lovecraft's perception of modernized New England is a driving force behind his environmental horror. The story plays alongside similar chemical incidents also observed by Rachel Carson, for instance in the case of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. A chemical manufacturing company in the Rocky Mountain Arsenal leased its facilities to a private oil company for production of insecticides, and then "farmers several miles from the plant began to report unexplained sickness among livestock; they complained of extensive crop damage. Foliage turned yellow, plants failed to mature, and many crops were killed outright. There were reports of human illness, thought by some to be related" (Carson [1962] 2002, 43). In the farms described by Carson, shallow wells were the source of irrigation, as it also is in the Gardner farm. The Denver farm wells were found to contain "an assortment of chemicals" (43), as "the groundwater between the arsenal and the farms had become contaminated and it had taken seven to eight years for the wastes to travel underground a distance of about three miles" (43). Organic yet synthetic substances can be harbored and nurtured in the arms of a natural environment and turned into a cosmic terror that encompasses a local ecological problem such as the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, or Lovecraft's Gardner farm. This is an indicator of how quickly the conceptualization of nature can mutate from a source of tradition and sameness into a form of strangeness simply from local chemical and political action. It is an idea that can be likened to Leo Marx's concept of a machine in the garden;⁶ in this case, a mysterious chemical mutator works as an intrusive machine of industry working against Lovecraft's idea of a traditional and pastoral New England, and this creates a new landscape in which the unknown is expressed. Lovecraft's cosmic horror is based on a broadening of the local conception of the world through the destructive intrusion of the cosmic into the regional. This exposes the dangers of which humans are ignorant via highlighting the interrelatedness between the local and the global (cosmic) and the idea that what humans do to their environment is an irrevocable change at global scale. Lovecraft's idea of New England's unique dark folklore has a basis in the expansive cosmic backdrop of the unknown from which Cthulhu and the Elder Ones have come.⁷ Yet, he presents the idea that the cosmic unknown starts at rural and local levels, even individual.

⁶ Marx's idea of a machine in the garden (published in 1964 in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*) expresses that the American pastoral ideal, what he calls the American Garden, has never been an unbridled wilderness, but neat cultivated fields and calmly grazing herds of domesticated animals. And yet, industrialization byproducts such as trains, roads, and boats affront the Garden for the sake of scientific progress to a point in which the machine overpowers the Garden. The pastoral ideal remains a "mythical goal" amidst "rampant industrialization" (Woodman 1965, 662) and it is this contradiction which provides the setting and dynamics of American life.

⁷ Cthulhu and the Elder Ones are the basis of Lovecraftian folklore, although they are not explored in "The Colour Out of Space." The Elder Ones, of which Cthulhu is presumably part



“The Colour Out of Space” presents continuous commentary on the water problem in relation to the soil and the animal and human inhabitants who drink and eat from it. In particular, the problem of the well and its toxicity is amplified when it is made bottomless because of an unfamiliar and poisonous substance that affects organic matter, either living or dead, highlighting the connectivity of underground water throughout the area:

The wood of the well-sweep was shining now, and presently a policeman dumbly pointed to some wooden sheds and bee-hives near the stone wall on the west. They were commencing to shine, too, though the tethered vehicles of the visitors seemed so far unaffected. [...] ‘It spreads on everything organic that’s been around here,’ muttered the medical examiner. No one replied, but the man who had been in the well gave a hint that his long pole must have stirred up something intangible. ‘It was awful,’ he added. ‘There was no bottom at all. Just ooze and bubbles and the feeling of something lurking under there.’ (Lovecraft [1927] 2011, 42-43)

The manifestation of the residue that has spread from the immediate locality to the further reaches of New England speaks to the uncertain process of continuous change of nature, which is presented through growing limitations of local authorities on problems experienced by the rural community. Water pollution in rural areas carries an inherent separation between farmers and scholars that puts into question the validity of science when pitted against lived experience, and in this argument the Gothic overtures of facing the unknown within the wilderness arise. Lovecraft underlines the disparity between ideology and reality. As climate scholar Robert D. Bullard states, historically, “if you are poor, working class or a community of color, [...] you get less enforcement of pollution laws” (Bullard 2018). Bullard also points out that toxic dumping has followed the path of “‘least resistance,’ meaning black and poor communities have been disproportionately burdened” (2000, 3).⁸

of, are sets of monsters/aliens which arrived in Earth long before the existence of humankind and have kept physically to the unexplored places of the world (such as Yog-Sothoth in Antarctica in *At the Mountains of Madness*; originally published in 1936). They can be summoned through invented occult magic which characters often practice in their search for cosmic knowledge.

⁸ As a Black scholar, Robert D. Bullard’s work carries a particular significance when discussed in relation to H.P. Lovecraft. For Lovecraft, representations of minority communities were done through a “monstrous embodiment” of a “swarming, undisciplined, racially diverse body” (Hudson 2022, 187). Anthony Camara posits that an efficient way in which to approach Lovecraft’s racism is by exploring how “writing within the mythos itself can be deployed as a subversive strategy of rewriting” (2017, 24) and that to write within Lovecraft’s universe constitutes “an act of ‘repetition with difference’ that evolves the mythos by exposing it to racial heterogeneity and techno-scientific change” (25). By introducing Bullard’s perspective, we can argue, against Lovecraft’s belief, that racial or class differences are monstrous and that there is but a single white-dominated narration of the world, and instead argue for a more nuanced vision by which “shifting focus from fears of difference (whether racial, gendered, or otherwise) to the conditions that foster those fears, omnipresent anxiety and danger are relocated to every level of life, not only the universal” (Barbour 2022, 203). As such, we can draw a similarity between current/historical problems faced by Black and poor communities (such as the path of least resistance) and Lovecraft’s own perception of eco-classism through disparity



He emphasizes that poor communities as well as communities of color receive inequitable relief funds which are all too often incentivized away from vulnerable areas who are the most affected by pollution and climate change (Buckley 2022). Lovecraft recognized the vulnerabilities of ineffective legislation, and although his racism did not waver, over time his own views on class distinctions became less traditionally conservative. In 1936, he wrote to a friend:

the more I observe the abysmal, inspissated ignorance of the bulk of allegedly cultivated people—folks who think a lot of themselves and their position [...] the more I believe that something is radically wrong with conventional education and tradition. [...] They have never been taught how to get the full benefit of what they have. (Joshi 2013, chap. 23)

That same year, he also wrote:

I agree that most of the motive force behind any contemplated change in the economic order will necessarily come from the persons who have benefited least by the existing order; but I do not see why that fact makes it necessary to wage the struggle otherwise than as a fight to guarantee a place for everybody in the social fabric. The just demand of the citizen is that society assign him a place in its complex mechanism whereby he will have equal chances for education at the start, and a guarantee of just rewards for such services as he is able to render (or a proper pension if his services cannot be used) later on. (Joshi 2013, chap. 23)

Although these letters occurred several years after the publication of “The Colour Out of Space,” Lovecraft demonstrated an awareness of social inequalities, and whether he thought they came from racial inequalities, from unjust legislation or both, he saw a need for social and economic reform. In the case of the Gardners, Lovecraft ingrained the problem of poisoned water into the class struggle for political agency and access to knowledge between the local farmers and the scholars at Miskatonic. The family has adapted to the toxicity of their farm and over time the changes caused by this problem become less meaningful, as indicated by Nahum’s refusal to relocate the well. This relates directly to the path of least resistance in poor and Black communities referred to in contemporary urban planning literatures.⁹ Blame is frequently placed on the inhabitants of an area and their supposed choice to live in a space of pollution and discrimination instead of focusing it on government agency or corporate action/inaction. The amount of health problems that occur

of opinions between Miskatonic authority and poor farmers in “The Colour Out Of Space,” which can help in a small way to “contest the fallacious interpretations [...] of theory with which Lovecraft sought to buttress his racial beliefs” (25) by helping to evolve Lovecraftian mythos beyond Lovecraft himself.

⁹ Such as *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (edited by Bullard 1993), *A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and its Assault on the American Mind* (Harriet A. Washington 2019), and *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (Dorceta E. Taylor 2014).



from this form of urban planning is also disproportionate in poor communities in relation to richer areas (Washington 2019, chap. 2). The inability of the Gardner family to leave, even when warned that the slow toxification is killing them and they should search for groundwater elsewhere, resonates with contemporary problems endured by poor communities. As early as 1927 Lovecraft had written that “the future civilisation of mechanical invention, urban concentration, and scientific [standardization] of life and thought is a monstrous and artificial thing which can never find embodiment either in art or in religion” (Joshi 2013, chap. 23). Though he refers to art and religion, he finds it hard to unite the concept of industrialization with a good quality of life. In this story, the idea of water pollution is linked to the concept of irresponsible scientific activity. The first description of the meteor is given when the Gardners visit the landing site alongside three professors who initially assure the Gardners that their perception of the shrinking, glowing meteorite is not possible. They probe it and take samples to the university, where they subject the samples to various chemical tests which produce unprecedented results, which are described at length. (Lovecraft [1927] 2011, 8-12). From the start Lovecraft wishes the reader to perceive the meteorite as a scientific marvel which is approached with uncertain methods by both scholars and the local inhabitants. The scientific advancement that is represented by the meteorite does not work towards the benefit of the working class due to lack of any regulations. Neighbors of the Gardners know that there is a problem and call the Miskatonic University for help (which is the highest authority in this story). The inaction of both the Gardners and the scientists results in the abandonment of the area at large and its turn from woodland into heathland—specifically, a “blasted heath” (Lovecraft 2011, 2)—which is now planned to become a reservoir for the community. A sense of foreboding is placed on the fact that water pollution, regardless of its origin, dispels the familiarity of the environment and local events—in this case, the conversion of the bottomless well and surrounding farmland into a communal reservoir. This will ultimately result in the poisoning of the much larger New England area, something which can also be evidenced in the pollution by urban growth depicted in “The Shunned House,” a story that can be read as an extension of Lovecraft’s concerns regarding Rhode Island industrialization.

“THE SHUNNED HOUSE”

Lovecraft wrote to the *Providence Sunday Journal* in 1926: “any mushroom oil centre can have bright lights, skyscrapers and apartments blocks, but only a well-loved seat of centuries of pure taste and gracious living can have the urn-topped, ivied walls, the gabled and steepled vistas [*of Providence*]” (Lovecraft 1968, 74). Timothy H. Evans notes that Lovecraft saw towns and cities as “organic growths” (2005, 107). “Habitations of men should never be *made*—they should be sown, water’d, weeded, tended, and allowed to *grow*,” he once wrote (Lovecraft 1965, 287-88; italics in original). Evans remarks that Lovecraft’s reputed advocacy for the preservation of historic sites in Providence came from his “lifelong emphasis



on landscapes rather than isolated buildings, which in turn led him to emphasize historic character of neighborhoods and communities, including streets, gardens, hedges, fences, and so on” (2005, 112). Lovecraft’s advocacy for a historic and integrated city is not removed from his time; there was a ubiquitous water problem in New England at the time which brought forth the problems of urban planning in the rapidly growing commercial centers in economically depressed areas. There is a strong activism and socially pressured enforcement practices towards the rapidly polluting waters of the Narragansett Bay and the Providence River in the demand for antipollution legislation (Shea and Wright 1937, 493). Oily waste from cotton cloth dyeing, often chemical in origin, was one of the principal polluters of public waters which, together with the pressure of shellfish farmers, caused the doubling of the number of tidal waters closed to fishing.

In “The Shunned House,” first published posthumously in 1937, an old house of historical significance in Providence is avoided by the neighborhood residents because of its history of deaths, the “general sickish smell [...], the quality of the well and pump water” (Lovecraft 1937, 420), and more significantly, the “white [*fungus*] growths [...] which [...] rotted quickly, and at one stage became slightly phosphorescent; so that nocturnal passers-by sometimes spoke of witch-fires glowing behind the broken panes of the foetor-spreading windows” (421). The narrator, a friend of the owner fascinated by the house, spends a night there with his uncle, Dr. Elihu Whipple (likely based on Lovecraft’s Whipple family) after noticing a human-shaped yellow mold growing in the basement. While sleeping, Dr. Whipple begins to speak in French and sees the faces of the people who had died in the house. As the narrator falls asleep himself, he is awakened by a scream, and he sees a shapeless form of many eyes that emanates yellow light turning to smoke and vanishing up the chimney. His uncle has begun to decay while alive and is turned into a monster-like appearance which then dissolves into the faces of the previous tenants. The narrator runs away and returns the next day to excavate the cellar floor, armed with a gas mask and sulfuric acid. He discovers a strange substance with a very large shape which he believes to be the elbow joints of a monster. He empties the sulfuric acid into the excavated hole which brings up a “blinding maelstrom of greenish-yellow vapour” (436) and turns the fungi to ash, calming the stench of the house yet causing “virulent and horrible fumes” (436) to seep into the Providence River.

The house in appearance (and supernatural tendencies) resonates with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Gothic classic *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) through a number of elements; namely, its allusion to a dark atmosphere that is supernatural in essence, a past that is inextricable from witchcraft and persecution, the fact that it stands alone as a historic building in a town that has moved on with the times, and its integration into a natural landscape rather than an urban one despite being close to the town center. Hawthorne’s Gothic timeless house, however, is presented with nostalgia rather than with upfront horror. As Lovecraft said of Hawthorne in “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (originally published in 1927), “supernatural horror [...] is never a primarily object with Hawthorne; though its impulses were so deeply woven into his personality that he cannot help suggesting it with the force of genius when he calls upon the unreal world to illustrate the pensive sermon he wishes



to preach” (Lovecraft and Bleiler 1973, chap. 7). For Lovecraft, Hawthorne was “a gentle soul cramped by the Puritanism of early New England” (chap. 7) who would present fantasy as inextricable from realism. Lovecraft’s favorite work by Hawthorne was *The House of the Seven Gables*, and his own architectural inspirations found resonance in Hawthorne’s New England house, which was in turn described as:

One of those peaked Gothic affairs which formed the first regular building-up of our New England coast towns [...]. Of these old gabled Gothic houses scarcely a dozen are to be seen today in their original condition throughout the United States, but one well known to Hawthorne still stands in Turner Street, Salem, and is pointed out with doubtful authority as the scene and inspiration of the romance. Such an edifice, with its spectral peaks, its clustered chimneys, its overhanging second story, its grotesque corner-brackets, and its diamond-paned lattice windows, is indeed an object well calculated to evoke sombre reflections; typifying as it does the dark Puritan age of concealed horror and witch-whispers which preceded the beauty, rationality, and spaciousness of the eighteenth century. (chap. 7)

Hawthorne’s appreciation of pre-Georgian homes found an audience in Lovecraft, who identified with the weird atmosphere and historical meaning of these homes that he would also encounter upon his walks through Providence and the country. Lovecraft’s fear of eventual industrialization and loss of architectural identity would build upon his horror founded on pre-established New England folklore, and would add another layer of anxiety based on modern urbanity to his literary horror.

In his own fictional building in “The Shunned House,” the home used to be a farmhouse that followed the “average New England colonial lines of the middle eighteenth century” (Lovecraft 1937, 418). The urbanization of the area led the farmhouse or semi-farm building to be incorporated into a lane “winding amongst the graveyards of the first settlers” (419) and eventually into Providence itself above “crowded Cheapside” (422). Although this house is within the town center, it is the only one to suffer from toxicity. Its past of French inhabitants whose unpopularity in the town transcended “mere racial and national prejudice” (427) and built upon their “ardent Protestantism” (427) directly underpins the house’s physical downfall into an unsanitary residence. Lovecraft lamented the “decline of New England at the hands of foreigners” and would often express in both poetry and prose a “naive glorification of the past, [and] the attribution of all evils to ‘strangers’ (who seem to have ousted those hardy Anglo-Saxons with surprising ease)” (Joshi 2013, chap. 11). In this story, the main character digs a hole by the hearth and by filling it with sulfuric acid he causes a “vapor which surged tempestuously up from that hole as the floods of acid descended” (Lovecraft 1937, 436), admitting that this is what causes the “yellow day” (436) as it is later called in Providence. Despite public perception, the “yellow day” did not just come from fumes caused by factory waste dumped in the Providence River and/or from a “disordered water-pipe or gas main underground” (436), but from the narrator’s action of clearing the house of an ambiguous monster and purging the earth of any traces of its immigrant inhabitants. Lovecraft’s aggressive antipathy for other races that were not Anglo-Saxon is well



documented in his essays and personal correspondence. Anthony Camara refers to a letter written in 1924 in which he refers to the immigrant residents of New York City as “vaguely molded from some stinking vicious slime” (2017, 30), as one among many examples. He extended his personal feelings onto his concern for national welfare, saying: “the policy of inviting ‘oppressed’ races is fatal to national welfare, since these elements are almost always biologically inferior [and] therefore unfit to uphold the institutions established by elements of greater stamina” (Lovecraft 1976, 20). The fact that the main character is Lovecraft’s fictional relative (due to his connection to the Whipple family), or perhaps even Lovecraft himself, further underlines the story’s idealization of racial erasure in favor of the supposed Anglo-Saxon history of Providence with which Lovecraft identified himself. In this story, the main character does not just expel the immigrant past of a traditional house, but also cleanses the toxic waste dumping in the city waters by factories. It also happens that by the end of the story the house is exorcized and released from its ghosts now that it is owned by a family with the very Anglian name of Harris. Lovecraft reflects almost explicitly his belief that urban development, commerce, and immigration are the ruin of tradition, and at the same time displays the classist view that pollution is a product of the people who live there while also recognizing loose pollution policies in Providence. Unlike “The Colour Out of Space,” toxicity is built on the idea of tearing down old New England tradition for the sake of urbanization rather than on the devastation of natural landscape through chemical byproducts of industry (reaffirmed by the implicit references to Hawthorne and Puritanism throughout). Lovecraft explicitly references his personal perception of immigration as detrimental to society, and places it as a factor of water pollution in Providence to illustrate how growing commercialism provokes deficient urban planning and policymaking which not only tear down traditional buildings but also play a hand in uncontrolled factory waste dumping (Shea and Wright 1937, 493). For him, problems of water pollution and urban planning within a city are inextricable from the problems of pesticides in farmlands as they work in equal measure to modernize New England and introduce the region to new forms of social and ecological politics.

Much as in “The Colour Out of Space,” “The Shunned House” presents a pessimistic commentary on the unintended environmental consequences of human actions that are allowed by local policies and underlines the important role that society has in advocating for more conscious approaches to city planning, social securities, use of pesticides in rural areas and water planning and protection. Lovecraft admits that even though lore and tradition are important tools with which to abstractly prevent an industrialization of thought, there is an environmental crisis constitutive of a significant problem which humanity must confront. Lovecraft reminds his readers that the interconnections of the elements composing the environment do not care for the natural or unnatural origins of toxicity and that the pollution resulting from human activity has become inseparable from natural processes.



CONCLUSIONS

The unknown in the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, such as a color out of space or the supernatural haunting of an old house, is often a scientific or political event that is expressed as dangerous to the environment and is also a commentary on local waste policies. The degree of extermination reached by pesticides and pollution is labeled by Lovecraft as unprecedented and detrimental not just to the environment, but also to society at large, and is associated with a lapse in wealth distribution and increase of immigration. In “The Colour Out of Space,” the orb of color that does not return to space but instead remains in the locality suggests that what results from the interaction between a synthetic compound and organic nature is something new that produces unpredictable consequences from which there is no likely return. This idea is reminiscent of Leo Marx’s machine in the garden. In this case, the interaction between a looming cosmicist machine—or an urban machine of synthetics—and the pastoral garden results in the creation of an unbridled wilderness in which the unknown lurks.

The Gothic and ecoGothic literary traditions are unique markers of human relationships with the environment and through their longevity as artistic genres they can portray specific evolutions of ecological thought. For example, Rachel Carson writes about the effects of DDT on rural farmland, which came to popular use through heightened scientific research for the military during the World Wars, in particular World War II (Lear 2009, chap. 8). The changes in ecology produced by pesticides extend a criticism towards sociopolitical attitudes towards allowing unregulated federal enforcement of spraying practices. Inter-war environmental policies provide the circumstance in which to examine the state of the American chemical and agricultural research, and this can be studied alongside its influences into the horror genre and environmental humanities research fields. Lovecraft and Carson rely on inter-war and post-war periods to pinpoint a source for a kind of literary horror which emerges from technophilic practices that mirror the influence of embedded social ecophobia in policy making. Hawthorne, too, would manifest the social anxieties of the antebellum period before the American Civil War at the time of publishing *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which the secession of Southern States worked as the immediate sociopolitical tensor, reflected in the novel in terms of confusing social relations, uncertain authorities, and disputed land seizing.¹⁰ Like his literary successors, Hawthorne placed importance on awareness of societal change by contrasting the changes in known landscapes to shifting social relations in his Gothic fiction.

“The Colour Out of Space” and “The Shunned House” are auguries of environmental problems that are relevant to this day. The health-threatening toxic residue that arises in shunned spaces in the community due to negligence—the

¹⁰ Some of his thoughts are penned in his 1862 essay “Chiefly About War Matters by a Peaceable Man” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Miller 1991, 471).



Gardner farm or the old, shunned house—resonates in present-day environmental policies, and an environmental reading of these stories can provide a step towards tracking the progress of American regional politics and social attitudes of rural ecological concerns through literature. Lovecraftian horror allows the contemplation of whether the outcome of pesticides and pollution and their effects on society are avoidable. Arguably, Lovecraft was rather pessimistic about the future of New England when considering stories of hazard such as “The Colour Out of Space” and “The Shunned House,” but he was insistent on the power of change through social pressure and mass awareness of the political context, as is evidenced in his own personal writings to journals and published essays. “The Colour Out of Space” serves as a severe warning against spreading manufactured chemical substances in nature and proposes that their effects on Earth’s systems cannot be measured. Lovecraft’s cosmic horror depicts how the scientific involvement of humanity in the balance of our planet almost certainly results in disaster, whereas the cosmic unknown can be seen as an invitation to show humanity its powerlessness in the process of tampering with the Earth, and by extension, showcase the meaninglessness of our existence and our science in the face of the cosmos.

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