

The Grotesque Imagination in the Short Stories of H. P. Lovecraft

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Abstract

The paper deals with the treatment of the Grotesque in the short stories of H. P. Lovecraft and how grotesque is used in Literature and Art. The purpose of this article is to explore the representation of grotesque elements in Lovecraft's short stories. Grotesque is mainly an art form and it is used in literature too, in order to present the unusual nature and deformity of the universe. The writers of this genre depict their characters and situations in an unfamiliar manner to evoke interest, terror and strange supernatural experience to the readers. H. P. Lovecraft uses the grotesque imagination to maintain the horror and weirdness of the short stories. Through the environment and characters Lovecraft has portrayed the gruesome nature of the grotesque in his short stories.

Keywords: H. P. Lovecraft, Atmosphere, Creatures, Grotesque, Horror, Universe

H. P. Lovecraft is an eminent short story writer of Horror Literature of America. He is universally acclaimed for his uniqueness in the short stories. His treatment of stories is quite different from others, regarding the themes and narration. In his short stories he defamiliarizes the mundane activities of the world. Lovecraft was a voracious reader and was interested in science and necromancy. He believes that the universe contains numerous invisible things. He strongly affirms that there is another realm of this universe which is hidden from the eyes of man.

Lovecraft's treatment of stories is different because he gives a new structure to his characters and atmosphere which is unique in horror literature. The description of the story and theme is more peculiar than the other writers. He created a new literary world where things assume unusual forms. The predominant element in the stories of Lovecraft is the Grotesque imaginary creatures populating grotesque spaces.

Grotesque is primarily an art form which was first used in paintings and sculptures of the Roman Art. The grotesque is an artistic style of making flora, fauna, and the human imagery into exotic wall paintings. Later it was adapted by the great Italian Renaissance painters; they elevated the art into the next level, particularly in ceiling and wall paintings. Then this art form gets flourished

throughout the European countries from sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The famous painters who practised the grotesque style were Hieronymous Bosch, Pieter Breughal the Elder, William Hogarth, and Francisco Goya. The meaning of “Grotesque” in present day is absurd, strange, deformity, unreal, and fantastic.

In Literature the grotesque writing in general focuses on the human body and the mutilation and deformity of human beings and objects. It tries to evoke compassion and disgust simultaneously. Grotesque is like an uncanny experience, it draws its capacity from combining the known, new or the natural disfigurement. The Grotesque aspects are laid down through characters, narration, environment, and atmosphere. It is used to provoke horror and also black humour; grotesque is a fusion of human qualities with animal, natural creatures, and with unnatural artificial things.

In literature many writers used grotesque to bring out terror, humour, and pity. In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the monstrous creature called Caliban is a mixture of the human and the beast and also a fusion of both ridicule and horror. Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is a story of Gregor Samsa, who was transformed into a big insect. Samsa is the perfect example of the grotesque in his odd appearance and quality. The prominent work of grotesque is Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, a collection of fantasy and bizarre tales, which gives the experience of horror and terrific respectively. The deformed and detached element of the grotesque is seen in Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. The weird creature was created out of different human corpses and not controlled by its creator becomes a Monster in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. The technique is used by famous writers like Swift, Marlowe, Coleridge, Blake, and Keats to describe the unnatural things of the world.

Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* is the first systematic study of the Grotesque, about the growth and development of the grotesque in different centuries in art and literature. He explains the form and essential factors of the grotesque as follows:

The grotesque is a structure. Its nature could be summed up in a phrase that has repeatedly suggested itself to us: THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD. But some additional explanation is required. For viewed from the outside, the world of the fairy tale could also be regarded as strange and alien. Yet its world is not estranged, that is to say, the elements in it which are familiar and natural to us do not suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous. It is our world which has to be transformed. Suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque. (184)

Lovecraft used grotesque imagery to describe the landscape, atmosphere and characters of his stories to evoke horror. The writer uses bizarre things to elevate the dreadful mood and atmosphere of the story through the elements of grotesque. In the short story “Memory” Lovecraft describes the degraded human beings and employed grotesque while describing the entire setting and atmosphere of the story. A Demon informs the Genie about the extinction of human species and relics of their civilisation. Unlike other writers H. P. Lovecraft hates the sparkling light of the moon.

The moonlight enters into the valley of Nis, where trees are big and ruined palaces are covered with hostile creepers. A river flows in the bottom of the valley and its colour is red. The Demon of the valley is unaware of the redness of the river. At that moment the invisible spirit from the moon named Genie speaks to the Demon that he is too old enough to recall who built this palace and the grotesque stones found there. The Demon says that he has the little memory and could not understand the beings that lived in the past and their whereabouts was not known like the water of the river. But he recalls something that the beings are akin to the little apes in the trees. The beings of age old day were called as Man. Then the Genie flew back to the moon and the Demon watches the crawling apes.

The same style of grotesque narration is sketched in the short story “What the Moon Brings.” In this story the nameless narrator hates and afraid of moonlight because the sunlight comforts and things make friendly whereas the chill light of the moon terrifies and makes known things unfamiliar and even creates fear upon the elements of nature. Similarly the narrator feels hostility during the night time. One night he was wandering in the old garden and walked near the stream. Suddenly he was disturbed by something. He saw that the white flowers were fluttering in the dreamy wind and was frightened by the calm dead faces of the flowers. He then ran along the shore but the garden seemed endless in the night. Besides he was attracted by the stillness of the flower. During day time the walls of the garden were stretched by the horrid trees, flowers, stone idols, shrubs and so on. The lips of the dead lotus face whisperingly invited him to follow. He followed them till the stream became a river and joined into a nameless sea. When he longed to capture the lotus-faces to enquire the secrets that the moon brought into the night, the faces vanish suddenly. He saw old garlands, spires of sea weed in that night. He realised that the spirit of dead had come to these sunken place and wished to speak with the lotus-faces. Then he saw a black vulture from the sky to take rest on the reef and wanted to ask about the ancestors, but he was far away from the bird. The picturesque of horror night and murky mood of the narrator in the short story “What the Moon Brings” is the example of atmospheric horror given as follows:

Over those horrors the evil moon now hung very low, but the puffy worms of the sea need no moon to feed by. And as I watched the ripples that told of the writhing of worms beneath, I felt a new chill afar out whither the condor had flown, as if my flesh had caught a horror before my eyes had seen it. (455)

The narrator watched the tide and fading moon, the towers and roofs of the fallen city. The narrator felt the stinky smell of the dead world. The fleshes from the churchyards were gathered to decay by the puffy worms of the sea in that place. He was caught by a sense of fear and the Condor flown away from the cliff. The tide was very slow and his body becomes shivering. He saw the reef as a monster whose forehead now shown in the dim moon light. He screamed when he saw a hidden face rising above the water and its eyes looked at him. In order to escape from the terror he dived into the dark pool of water and let his body to decay by worms. The story is an example of Lovecraft’s description of nature evokes an eerie sense of the grotesque hidden in the nocturnal world. Lovecraft brings out the horror and solitary atmosphere in the gaze of the moon. He was

influenced by Poe's evocation of the grotesque through the description of an asymmetrical environment and abnormal objects.

Lovecraft explored the grotesque of hidden nature in creatures. He created them to show the horridness of the creatures. He shaped the deformed and disgusted creature out of natural phenomena. They become alive through his vivid description. The creatures are not like the usual monster but it is quite different from other by means of its appearance and qualities. They are spooky, and even gruesome. In the case of "The call of Cthulhu", the creature is a combination of human, octopus, dragon, and shell fish. It looks too horrible to imagine and disgusting to human vision. It is an underworld sea god who reawakens might harm the human race. In the second chapter from "The Call of Cthulhu" Lovecraft describes the horrid structure of Cthulhu statue as follows:

The figure, which was finally passed slowly from man to man for close and careful study, was between seven and eight inches in height, and of exquisitely artistic workmanship. It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind. (28)

In the first part of "The Call of Cthulhu", the narrator found his grand uncle's notes and a strange brass sculpture which look like an amalgamation of a man and a scaly sea creature with wings from his room, with a weird manuscript of "CTHULHU CULT". The group of people belonging to this cult worshipped Cthulhu because it was once a god and great ones before the humans were evolved but now it vanished and it was believed that it would reawaken from the ocean. The story ends with a note of the narrator about the prediction of his death. He thought he would die like his grand uncle because of knowing that Cthulhu is still existed and in future Cthulhu will come out to the light of the day.

The other creature Shaggoth is one of the Elder Races from the outer space and it appeared in the short stories of Lovecraft and his followers. It is a part of Cthulhu Mythos which appeared in "At the Mountain of Madness," "The Thing on the Door Step," and "The Shadow Over Inns Mouth." It looks like a large amoeboid creature with numerous eyes and do not have a concrete shape. It is thought of being alive in the mountains of Antarctica and aquatic regions; it can grow bigger and reach up to fifteen metres in length. This creature had no brain and later developed a brain through genetic modification. Shaggoth is a horrible creature with a disgusting grotesque appearance.

Through weird creatures and surroundings (Atmosphere) Lovecraft employs grotesque elements in portraying the qualities of the abnormal environment of his short stories. He employs archaic words and defamiliarized structures in his stories, which shows his mastery in rendering the gloomy and the grotesque in horror stories. The transformation of the well known world into an abnormal space is a conspicuous theme in grotesque. The grotesque creatures of Lovecraftian grotesque universe are subterranean mysteries invisible to ordinary human eyes. This gives an advanced estrangement on the bottom of level. The characters encounter an alien and estranged world filled with alien species. Lovecraft's short stories are a fusion of horror and grotesque.

Lovecraft is a consummate master of the verbal grotesque disclosing a gruesome and uncanny world populated with grotesque creatures in his short stories.

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