

**MAGNA MATER: WOMEN AND EUGENIC THOUGHT IN THE WORK
OF H.P. LOVECRAFT**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Science and Technology Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

March 2016

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Abstract

H.P. Lovecraft is considered one of the most influential and important speculative writers of the 20th century. Despite the eugenic concerns inherent in many of his stories, much of his output has not been analyzed against the pervasive “scientific racism” of his time. This thesis looks at Lovecraft’s depictions of women and sees them as strongly related to eugenic thought, representing in various ways the biological dangers associated with unfit women. Lovecraft’s women embody the worries of miscegenation, show the results of the unfit giving birth, and ultimately showcase the collapse of society under the weight of monstrous Others. Therefore, though Lovecraft does not feature many women in his stories, he nevertheless manages to construct them as agents of biological chaos, much in the same way eugenicist thought commonly portrays unfit women as highly dangerous to the fabric of the nation.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Silvia Moreno-Garcia.

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to my supervisor Margery Fee for her patience and assistance in the writing of this thesis. Thank you, too, to my thesis committee members Adam Frank and John Beatty for taking the time to read and discuss my first draft with them, and for all their valuable comments. I also wish to thank the department of Science and Technology Studies at UBC for the support offered by all faculty and staff.

Thanks also to writer and Lovecraft scholar Bobby Dee, who assisted me by getting a hold of numerous letters and materials required for this thesis. His vast library and equally vast knowledge helped point me in the right direction more than once.

Thank you too to Chris Balma, my supervisor at the Faculty of Science at UBC, who encouraged me to pursue my degree part-time.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends for listening to me as I babbled about my research.

Introduction

This thesis argues that H.P. Lovecraft's depiction of women is strongly related to eugenic thought and that the biological and social concerns associated with women initially raised in his printed stories continue to be reflected in modern adaptations and media inspired by his work.

H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) is considered one of the great American fantastic speculative fiction writers and he has exerted "an incalculable influence on succeeding generations of writers of horror fiction" (Oates n. pag.). A science enthusiast and sometime amateur science writer (*Collected Essays: Volume 3: Science*), Lovecraft wrote in a variety of genres, tackling what we might call fantasy, science fiction and horror, but which in his time was referred to as the "weird tale." Named by *Publisher's Weekly* as the most important U.S. horror writer since Edgar Allan Poe (Anon, n.pag.), Lovecraft's work has continued to inspire a new generation of authors, spawning everything from video games to movies, even attracting the attention of philosophers (Harman n. pag.).

Several of his stories (perhaps most notably "The Horror at Red Hook") and his personal letters contain references to racialized groups, painting them as inferior and even dangerous elements of society. Many modern critics focus on Lovecraft's racializing portrayals and thoughts for this very reason (Djeli Clark; "Politics and the Fantastic"). For example, *New Cthulhu 2: More Recent Fiction* (which collects stories inspired by the work of Lovecraft) notes in its introduction that "HPL's racism has lately become a topic of discourse in the fantasy writing and publishing community" (Guran 13). Lovecraft's writing certainly contains racist

elements, as well as a complex amalgam of biological horror, reflecting the scientific concerns of his era, but his tales concern themselves with more than just race. Race, class, mental health and gender are woven together in Lovecraft's stories. It is not surprising that such a broad array of elements are brought into his fiction as these were all part of the discourse of eugenics of his era.

Little of Lovecraft's work, though, has been analyzed against the background of eugenic thought, even if it is crucial to his understanding of the construction of the Other. Lovecraft's stories can be interpreted as a vector of certain ideas of the Other, his biological fears delineating differences between the "fit" and "unfit" members of society. Indeed, Lovecraft might be one of the most important exponents of eugenic thought in speculative fiction, though he was not the only author writing fiction inspired by eugenic ideas: H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), contain many eugenic elements.

Three authors have tackled the issue of eugenic thought in Lovecraft's work. Bennett Lovett-Graff's "Shadows over Lovecraft: Reactionary Fantasy and Immigrant Eugenics," deals with the racialization of foreigners in Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" and his "Lovecraft: Reproduction and its Discontents: Degeneration and Detection in 'The Lurking Fear'" focuses on the degeneration of a New England family. Mitch Frye addresses the topic in "The Refinement of 'Crude Allegory': Eugenic Themes and Genotypic Horror in the Weird Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft," but does not dwell on issues of degeneracy or devolution in the wider context of Lovecraft's fiction, focusing only on three short stories ("The Rats in the Walls," "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family," and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"). Finally, "The Genetics of Horror: Sex and Racism in H.P. Lovecraft's Fiction" by Bruce Lord provides a good overview of some of Lovecraft's biological concerns.

Less attention has been directed towards the portrayal of women in Lovecraft's fiction. A perusal of *Lovecraft Annual*, the journal dedicated to Lovecraft Studies, shows that since the creation of the publication in 2007 two papers, Robert H. Waugh's "The Ecstasies of 'The Thing on the Doorstep,' 'Medusa's Coil' and Other Erotic Studies" (reprinted in *A Monster of Voices: Speaking for H. P. Lovecraft*) and Joel Pace's "Queer Tales? Sexuality, Race, and Architecture in 'The Thing on the Doorstep'" deal extensively with Lovecraft's female characters. The only other notable recent study of women in Lovecraft's fiction, by Gina Wisker, looks at several women in Lovecraft's fiction, however, it does not dwell on the eugenicist implications of his stories.

No study has looked in depth at how women in Lovecraft's fiction reflect eugenic thought, an omission which this paper attempts to rectify. Women in Lovecraft's output are scarce but they do make an appearance, especially in his collaborations with Zealia Brown-Reed Bishop¹, an author who hired Lovecraft as a story "revisionist" and writing teacher. When women do not appear, even their absence is revelatory. This thesis argues that Lovecraft's depiction of women is strongly related to eugenic thought and that biological and social concerns related to women, though initially raised in his printed stories, continue to be reflected in modern adaptations and media inspired by his work.

To understand how eugenic thought makes its way into Lovecraft's fiction it is important to realize the pervasive presence of this social discourse – a discourse bolstered and complemented by theories of degeneration, Social Darwinism and scientific racism – in vogue during his lifetime.

¹ Women also appear in some of his work with Hazel Heald.

The word eugenics was coined in 1883 by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. It was defined as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage” (1). Eugenacists believed that physical, mental and even social problems were the result of inferior “germ plasm”² and therefore could be curbed if “fitter” people were encouraged to reproduce while the unfit were limited in their reproduction.

Degeneration theory, often alluded in Lovecraft’s work, was part of eugenic thought. It was the theory that individuals can not only evolve, but also go backward down the evolutionary scale (Fulford et al. 892). At the end of the 19th century, degenerationist themes were combined with the new science of evolution giving rise to books such as Cesare Lombroso’s *Criminal Man*, 1876. Lombroso theorized that some people were “born” criminals, that criminality could be inherited and that criminals could be identified by their physical features.³

Fitter Family Contests, the publication of books such as *Eugenics and Sex Harmony* (1933) and legal cases like *Buck v. Bell* (1927), which established the legality of compulsory sterilization of the unfit in the United States, including the intellectually disabled, all took place in the 1920s and 30s (*The Eugenics Archives; Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement*; Bashford and Levine). Eugenics practices did not end after World War II. In North Carolina alone 7,600 people considered “feeble-minded” were sterilized from 1929 to 1974.

² The term germ plasm was originally coined by August Weisman in the late 19th century. The germ plasm theory refuted the Lamarckian concept that organisms can pass down characteristics acquired during their lifetime to their offspring, supporting Darwin’s theory of evolution. The term germ plasm was later utilized by eugenics proponents.

³ Jarkko Jalava’s “The Modern Degenerate: Nineteenth-Century Degeneration Theory and Modern Psychopathy Research” (2006) has argued that although the theory of degeneration became obsolete by the end of World War II, its basic concepts have survived into mainstream scientific work regarding what is nowadays known as the psychopath.

Efforts to compensate victims of these sterilization programs are still ongoing (McCormack n. pag.).

In the popular imagination eugenics is strongly associated with racist ideologies and the rise of the Nazi movement. But as Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine's *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* notes, "eugenics and racism have become almost interchangeable terms, but the association is perhaps too simplistic" (6). Though eugenic thought often ignored racialized groups or cast them as inferiors, eugenics preoccupations were also present in these communities, demonstrating just how pervasive these ideas were. African American civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois declared that "The Negro has not been breeding for an object; therefore he must begin to train and breed for brains, for efficiency, for beauty" (qtd. in Dorr and Logan 75). In countries like Mexico, campaigns focused on undesirable groups, for example, prostitutes (Stern, "The Hour of Eugenics," 437-39). The socialist realist work of Erskine Caldwell, centering on poor white Americans in the rural south, has recently been connected to eugenics (Holmes; Keely; Lancaster "Weeding Out"), further demonstrating the extensive scope of this discourse.

Eugenics discourse, just like Lovecraft's stories, linked gender to eugenics concerns. As Marouf Arif Hasian points out in *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*, the eugenics movement "seemed to recognize the importance of reproduction in the creation of social, economic and political relationships" (73) and women were drawn to eugenics arguments to support arguments for women's rights. Indeed, eugenic thought bolstered health care for women and children, but it also served to limit their activities and roles.

Havelock Ellis, the sex researcher and eugenicist, noted that “Woman's function in life can never be the same as man's, if only because women are the mothers of the race. That is the point, the only point, at which women have an uncontested supremacy over men” (86). Women were valued because of their “mothering” abilities and because they “played a crucial role in the moral education and reform of society” (Moss et al. n. pag). Knowledge of hygiene, child health-care and cooking was deemed essential for young women, but any other kind of education could make a woman become “unfeminine” and prevent her from fulfilling her role as a mother (Ziegler 217).

Eugenic thought therefore had a number of concerns. Many proponents of this movement were worried about the presence of immigrants or racialized groups they deemed inferior, but they were equally worried about people with disabilities, the poor, and women who might be detrimental to society. Similarly, in his fiction, Lovecraft is not solely preoccupied by the presence of supposedly inferior and undesirable racialized minorities in the United States. Lovecraft's stories often mention eugenics issues affecting “white” men who do not understand their genetic legacy (“The Lurking Fear,” “The Rats in the Walls” and “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family”). In his introduction to *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft writes “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (12). The unknown, for Lovecraft, is not limited to an external “cosmic” horror – though the phrase “cosmic horror” is inexorably linked in popular culture with Lovecraft. The “unknown” for Lovecraft is often an “inner” horror rooted in biology and the site of the “unknown” ceases to be an abstract space and becomes the human body, including the white male body, a body which is always in danger or under siege. Lovecraft's men are engaged in a biological battle either with themselves (because they do not understand their

family's monstrous histories and fail to recognize themselves as partially Other) or with ghouls, hybrids and monsters (the full-fledged Others).

The anxiety transmitted in some of Lovecraft's stories comes from this clash between forces, but it is also the anxiety brought on by the blurring of categories, between the ideal upper-class white, male body and the Other. In "Pickman's Model" (*The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories* n. pag.) Lovecraft hints that the disturbed painter Richard Upton Pickman might not be "strictly human" (he might be a member of an entirely different species, vaguely canine, which simply resembles humans). A man who has recently taken up "comparative pathology" and has knowledge "about the biological or evolutionary significance of this or that mental or physical symptom" notes that Pickman's features seem to be changing, "developing in a way he didn't like; in a way that wasn't human" (*The Thing on the Doorstep and Other* n. pag.). It is no coincidence that Upton lives in Boston's North End, which is "swarmed" by immigrants. Pickman, though male and *in appearance* white, is dangerously close to both animals and immigrants; he represents the Other, intruding into the world of the fit, "passing" as an ordinary man.

Order in Lovecraft's fiction is precarious and white men are in constant danger of being infected or destroyed by these Others. What role do women fulfill in this world? Since the ideal is constructed as white and male, women are placed in the realm of the Other. A negative realm, for Lovecraft women represent a connection to this "dangerous, destructive, aberrant Otherness" (Wisker 33). The Other in Lovecraft's work therefore becomes not just a racialized or classed space, but a *gendered* one. Since the ideal in Lovecraft's tales is constructed as white and male, it is no wonder women are placed in the realm of the Other and their role seems to be to constantly undermine the very foundations of fit, white, male society.

The stories with gendered elements I tackle here are “The Dunwich Horror” (1928, published 1929), “The Curse of Yig” (1928, published 1929), “Medusa's Coil” (1930, published 1939), “Dreams in the Witch House” (1931, published 1933) and “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933, published 1937). Eugenics concerns do not appear in all of Lovecraft’s large body of work; some works contain only brief comments. The tales I have selected, however, reflect eugenic concerns and feature women more prominently than other tales.

Lovecraft began publishing in 1917, but became most active in the 1920s and 1930s. “The Outsider” and “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family” are Lovecraft’s first eugenics stories, penned in 1921 and 1920 respectively. Other works with eugenics elements include “The Rats in the Walls,” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” Lovett-Graff states that “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is Lovecraft’s “last tale of degeneration with a subtext about immigration” (n. pag).⁴ In addition to the aforementioned tales, two of Lovecraft’s novellas “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936) and “The Shadow out of Time” (1936) also contain eugenic ideas. Both fall squarely into the period when Lovecraft is writing a number of shorter works which contain elements of biological horror.

Note that Lovecraft had no formal affiliation with eugenicist practitioners; however, he was aware of this movement. In a 1935 letter he explains how “steps toward the improvement of the biological level might be taken through rational eugenics,” favoring child subsidies or free university education for families of good biological stock. Lovecraft, however, concludes that “the improvement ought to come from both directions – increase in the sound stock, & limitation of the unsound stock through birth control & sterilisation” (*Letters to Robert Bloch* 261-62).

⁴ I believe, however, that “The Thing on the Doorstep,” written in 1933, should be considered Lovecraft’s last eugenics short story.

A great deal of Lovecraft's view of biological improvement likely stems from the men S. T. Joshi identifies as his "chief philosophical influences": Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, and Ernst Haeckel (*I Am Providence* n. pag.). Some of Lovecraft's knowledge of Darwin might have been second-hand, for he apparently did not possess a copy of *The Origin of Species* (Joshi, *Providence* n. pag.). Nevertheless, Joshi believes Lovecraft absorbed evolutionary ideas through the work of Haeckel (*Providence* n. pag.) and it is possible he found other sources⁵ as well, for evolution was a highly influential concept.⁶ George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists* shows how a multitude of writers, even those whose education was not scientific, absorbed Darwin's vision and expressed it in their work, and Virginia Richter in *Literature After Darwin* says "we are all post-Darwinians...evolutionary theory, in its sum and substance or in selected tidbits, is disseminated through all the media" (n. pag.).

Similarly, eugenicist thought was pervasive in the time of Lovecraft, disseminated in a myriad of ways. He was post-Darwinian, yes, but also, likely without realizing it, an eugenicist writer. Lovecraft struggled to erect borders, to contain and define himself as fit using biological notions, and to define the borders of the fit in his fiction. Women were not allowed in this space yet the "monstrous" bodies of women manifested in his fiction even as he attempted to exclude them. This paper seeks to find the fingerprints of eugenics upon Lovecraft's fiction and his female characters. As to why this remains important: Lovecraft's concepts, ideas and stories continue to interest readers and to inspire new works. Within the marrow of contemporary fantastic fiction and Lovecraftian fandom circulate problematic and outmoded ideas of biology

⁵ Lovecraft also had knowledge of eugenicist Havelock Ellis. In one letter he mentions Ellis's *Little Essays in Love & Virtue* (1922), for example. See page 60, *Selected Letters III*.

⁶ In *Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, and Ray Bradbury: Spectral Journeys* William F. Touponce notes that by his twenties Lovecraft had absorbed most of the major thinkers who "de-centered" man's place in the universe: Darwin, Freud and Nietzsche.

and science inherited from Lovecraft's tales. Lovecraft's cultural progeny lives on, sometimes unaware of the genetic material it inherited from its father.

Chapter 1. Fearful Symmetry

In this section I will point towards Lovecraft's portrayal of women and their links to eugenicist ideas concerning miscegenation and deviant behavior. A quick perusal of Lovecraft's stories reveals they are populated by men. Rarely does a woman appear and even more rarely does a woman play any kind of important role; the most notable woman in all of Lovecraft's stories is likely Asenath Waite. Aside from the aforementioned Asenath there are Lavinia Whateley of "The Dunwich Horror" and Keziah Mason of "Dreams in the Witch House."

Women also appear in a few of the "collaborations" he engaged in with other writers, some of which were merely ghostwriting jobs with his name removed. In fact, Lovecraft attempted to earn his living by mainly rewriting, revising and ghostwriting rather than through his original work (*Medusa's Coil* 7-16; *Crawling Chaos* 7-17). Though many of these revisions are hardly noteworthy, several of the stories are curious because Lovecraft worked with original ideas by women. These include three revisions he undertook for Zealia Brown-Reed Bishop, which all feature female characters: Marceline Bedard of "Medusa's Coil," T'la-yub of "The Mound" (1930, published 1940) and Audrey of "The Curse of Yig." The last story is the only one of his revisions undertaken with Brown-Reed Bishop with a woman as the protagonist⁷. As Joshi indicates, it is unlikely Lovecraft would have written these stories on his own, but they are Lovecraftian in style and mood (Intro. to *Medusa's Coil* 10). In these revisions and the aforementioned stories by Lovecraft we find women personifying several of the biological concerns of eugenicists. However, since analyses of Lovecraft's characters and themes zero in on the men and the male sphere, the eugenics themes represented by women have not been dissected.

⁷ His revision work for Hazel Heald resulted in "The Man of Stone," which also features a woman protagonist.

In these tales Lovecraft defines the normal, the fit, establishing it as a white, male body and in doing so he not only rejects the non-white body, but also the female body. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject can allow us to understand how Lovecraft dismisses yet ultimately constructs a space for these female bodies. As Kristeva notes, the abject is what one rejects and excludes, yet it is never banished altogether even if it is dangerous to acknowledge. Barbara Creed further defines the abject as:

The place of the abject is 'the place where meaning collapses the place where I am not.' The abject threatens life; it must be 'radically excluded' from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. ... Although the subject must exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic (46).

Creed draws a connection between the "monstrous woman" and Kristeva's concept of the abject. She states that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (44). Lovecraft's work illuminates what is abject and terrifying about the women of his time and does so utilizing eugenicist notions. The reproductive capacity of women, the moral or immoral proclivities supposedly inherent in their bodies, and their physical appearance were all dissected by eugenics proponents, and these concerns are manifested in aspects of Lavinia, Asenath, Marceline, Audrey and Keziah. Lovecraft's "exclusion" of women therefore renders them visible in unexpected ways, for, as Lovecraft struggles to manifest the "fit" he must also manifest the "unfit."

1.1. Eugenicist Notions of Womanhood

Lovecraft's women seem to be subdivided into a few loose categories: the mixed "fatal beauties" (Asenath, Marceline), the hideous, monstrous mothers (Lavinia, Audrey), the anti-mother (Kezziah). In this chapter I will focus on Marceline and Asenath, reserving the next chapter for the monstrous mothers and the anti-mother. Before discussing the "fatal beauties," however, it is useful to review how scientists working with eugenic notions figured the female.

As Mary Ziegler notes, Richard Dugdale, in his influential genealogical study *The Jukes* (1877), made explicit a gendered element to eugenic notions (214). Dugdale studied the records of inmates in thirteen county jails in New York State, as well as poorhouses, and researched the family ancestry of these inmates. He traced the source of their criminality back to their ancestors. One of these was Ada Juke (a pseudonym), a "harlot" better known as "Margaret, the Mother of Criminals" (Dugdale 15). Dugdale concluded that "chastity and profligacy are hereditary characteristics" (16) and prostitution in women was "the analogue of crime and pauperism" in men (26). Inspired by Dugdale's study, several hospitals began classifying female patients who exhibited what was deemed "immoral behavior" as "high grade" imbeciles, even if they were of ordinary intelligence (Ziegler 215).

Another influential writer, H. H. Goddard, who published *The Kallikak Family* in 1912, utilized Dugdale's "gender-based definition of moral defect" when writing his own study of a family (Ziegler 215). According to Goddard, the Kallikak family (another pseudonym, used to conceal the identities of the real family members) descended from an American Revolutionary War hero who met a "feeble-minded" woman and fathered an illegitimate child, producing more than one-hundred and forty descendants who were said to be feeble-minded including "thirty-

three sexually immoral persons, mostly prostitutes” and many more criminals, paupers and the like (Goddard 18). The “feeble-minded” descendants in Goddard’s study were compared to the legitimate, healthy and moral descendants of the war hero, born of his marriage to a good Quaker woman, in an effort to prove that heredity was a crucial determinant not only of health, but of moral qualities.

Goddard and Dugdale’s studies – although in theory neutral, since pedigree charts cannot assign a lower grade to a woman – find fault or virtue in the bodies of women. Sexual intercourse with the wrong woman produces morally defective children; therefore, the ultimate fault seems to lie not in the man but in the woman. The blame is directed towards the female body. This assigning of blame to women continued into the 20th century. In 1927, Goddard’s study was entered into the record as evidence in *Buck v. Bell*, the case that allowed compulsory sterilization of the unfit in the United States. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., delivering his concluding arguments, declared that “three generations of imbeciles are enough.” The three generations of imbeciles Holmes was referring to were three women: Emma Buck, her daughter Carrie and her granddaughter Vivian.

The idea that surgery could be used to eradicate sexual deviance and mental illness had been present since the nineteenth century, but such surgery became much more acceptable with the rise of eugenics in the 20th century. In the case of Carrie, she was accused of fits of bad temper, moral delinquency and of being the single, teenage mother of a baby. The baby was in fact the product of rape (Lombardo n.pag.). Blame, here, once more was removed from the male and placed on the woman. The circumstances that led Carrie to become a teenage single mother were not analyzed or questioned, and her sexuality and autonomy were violently controlled.

Even upper-class women were subjected to control based on these “scientific” principles. Heiress Ann Cooper Hewitt sued her mother in 1936 for having her sterilized without her consent. Hewitt was sterilized after she was declared a “moron” by specialists based on her “erotic tendencies,” which were seen as proof that she was defective (Kevles 346). Hewitt’s case, unlike Bell’s, received much attention from the press due to her social position. Around the time of her trial a popular song mocking her was circulated, earning her the nickname “the sterilized heiress” (Smith, *The Life and Legend of Gene Fowler*, 232):

I'm only a sterilized heiress,

A butt for the laughter of rubes,

I'm comely and rich

But a venomous bitch—

My mother ran off with my tubes!

It was therefore not only the biological characteristics of women – for example the presence of a congenital disease – which could render them “unfit” and good candidates for sterilization. As a result, “immoral” women quickly became the subject of scientific study. Charles Davenport, founder of the International Federation of Eugenics Organizations and director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, where he founded the Eugenics Record Office in 1910, studied 350 “deviant girls,” and concluded that prostitution was caused by an “innate eroticism,” said to be a Mendelian dominant trait (Kevles 53).

Thus biological issues were often mixed with moral concerns and notions of gender. Eugenics provided not only a path to creating a better human race, but also offered an avenue to

controlling female sexuality in a period when notions of proper female behavior were changing. Unfit women were increasingly seen as dangerously sexual and the spread of the unfit became a “girl problem” which could be fixed via sterilization (Kluchin 15-17). Kline believes that a shift from segregation to sterilization occurred in the 1920s because eugenicists found that shunning immoral women was not an effective measure of containment (*Building a Better Race* 32-33; 60). Ordover notes that *Buck v. Bell* was part of this deliberate effort to establish women as the prime candidate for sterilization because women were being perceived as “de facto regulators of the gene pool” (135).

Men had been sterilized since the beginning of the 20th century, but they were submitted to the procedure much less frequently than women after the 1930s (Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 121). Rebecca M. Kluchin states that women accounted for 58 percent of all sterilizations between 1920 and 1940. The increase occurred because women were forced to undergo the procedure in order to obtain release from prisons and medical facilities (17-18) and because medical advances made it easier to perform such procedures (Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 121). And sterilization, aside from being a more effective method of preventing the reproduction of unfit women, also offered the ability to punish and curb anti-social behaviors such as masturbation and violent tempers (Ordover 136). This together with the changing attitudes which found the unfit were a “girl problem” placed the burden of inadequate reproduction on women, therefore men’s role in the creation of unfit children was further minimized. For example, Gosney and Popenoe stated that the feeble-minded man was undersexed, passive and unable to compete with fit males for mates (39-40), which made him less of a risk than women.

Considering the popular conception of women at the beginning of the 20th century it is not surprising that Lovecraft “viewed women as being secondary and somehow lesser beings

than men” (Lord, n. pag.). In 1923, Lovecraft wrote that women’s minds had less merit than men’s minds and that poet Dorothy Roberts was quite talented, *despite* her inferior gender (Derie, *Sex and the Cthulhu Mythos*, 39). Bobby Derie notes Lovecraft became more egalitarian later in life (*Sex and the Cthulhu Mythos* 39-40), which might be attributed to his marriage and his contact with a number of women writers. Indeed, despite his conservative views Lovecraft married a woman older than him, Sonia Haft Greene, who was not only Jewish – ironic considering Lovecraft’s hatred of Jews – but a businesswoman and the breadwinner of the household.

Whatever Lovecraft’s opinions were on the mental capacity of women, the concept of normality for Lovecraft remains a gendered one in “The Thing on the Doorstep,” “Medusa’s Coil” and other stories. As Simone de Beauvoir indicates in *The Second Sex*, women are “the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (6). Creed states that all cultures have gendered horrors, a “monstrous woman” who “as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration” (1). For Lovecraft, however, *all* women appear to be Others, all women are “monstrous.” Only men are normal. And only certain men, at that.

We might speculate on the biographical sources of this monstrous conception of the woman for, after all, Lovecraft’s mother, Sarah Susan Phillips Lovecraft, died in an insane asylum; the same asylum where his father had died when he was a young child, probably from syphilis. Lovecraft was both spoiled and overprotected by Sarah, though at the same time his mother complained that her son was “hideous.” Joshi believes Lovecraft’s mother “was transferring the disgust she felt at her husband after he was stricken by syphilis” to her son (*Providence* n. pag), resulting in Lovecraft’s feelings of inadequacy. However, one need not rely

on Lovecraft's family history to find the source of his "monstrous women," though personal experiences might have contributed to these notions and to his overall interest in the biological sciences. That women should be seen as monstrous would not have been unusual considering the biological notions of deviancy which had circulated since the Victorian era and then coalesced into eugenics narratives. Cesare Lombroso, founder of the Italian School of Positivist Criminology and proponent of the theory of degeneration, said all women are "born criminals," their intelligence closer to an animal or a child. According to Lombroso immorality lies "latent" in every woman and the natural expression of their criminality is prostitution (Hurley 97-98). Critics have noted the influence of Lombroso on Lovecraft's works, zeroing in on "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" and "Pickman's Model" (Hughes 81) though Lombroso's view on women and its expression in Lovecraft's output seems to have escaped scrutiny.

1.2. Femme Fatales: Monstrosity, Race and Sexuality

All of the women I analyze in this paper are monstrous but Asenath and Marceline, the two beautiful, femme fatales Lovecraft constructs are also mixed-race women, a fact which seems tied to their monstrosity. In addition, Lovecraft's most well-known female creation, Asenath, the villain of "The Thing on the Doorstep" poses a bevy of gender issues which might have led some scholars to see her as a transsexual character⁸ and therefore conclude she should not be classified as a woman at all. I shall, in this paper, refer to Asenath as a woman, though I will explain how I arrive at that conclusion. I will also explore notions of sexuality and beauty, and show how these tie to concerns regarding deviancy.

⁸ In "Great Phallic Monoliths," *The Unique Legacy of Weird Tales: The Evolution of Modern Fantasy and Horror*, Bobby Derie wonders whether Asenath is transsexual, homosexual, bisexual and concludes such questions do not have definitive answers.

At the beginning of “The Thing on the Doorstep,” Daniel Upton, the story's narrator, has murdered his friend Edward Derby. Years before, Derby met Asenath Waite, daughter of Ephraim Waite. Eventually we learn that Ephraim, an occultist, found a way to become immortal by transferring his mind and had thus placed his mind into his daughter’s body. It is then Ephraim in Asenath’s body who marries Derby. However, unsatisfied with Asenath’s body – Ephraim regards her body as inferior – Ephraim seeks to transfer his mind once more, this time into Derby’s body. Derby, realizing what was happening (and that Asenath has been Ephraim all along, a fact which seemed to escape him although he realized his wife could switch bodies but not that she was Ephraim), murders “Asenath” and buries her in the cellar. Ephraim manages to transfer his mind once again. Thus, Derby finds himself trapped in the rotting body of Asenath while Ephraim inhabits Derby’s body. Near the end of the story Derby rises from the grave and reveals the truth to Daniel, who murders “Derby,” putting a stop to Ephraim’s body-hopping.

Physically and intellectually, Asenath is an attractive woman. She is “dark, smallish, and very good-looking except for overprotuberant eyes,” though “something in her expression” alienates sensitive people. She also seems to be rather precocious. During her school days she utilized language that was shocking for a young girl, and frightened her schoolmates with “leers and winks of an inexplicable kind.” She also gazes at her future husband with “an almost predatory air” (*New Annotated* n. pag.).

In short, Asenath is corrupt both physically (her expression and her eyes serve as warnings) and mentally (her body is inhabited by her evil father), with hints of sexually deviancy (her leers and winks). As the story advances we are told she looks older, with more wrinkles, as if her interior evil is taking a toll on her physical body – an inferior body.

She [Asenath/Ephraim] wanted to be a man – to be fully human – that was why she got hold of him [Derby]. She had sensed the mixture of fine-wrought brain and weak will in him. Some day she would crowd him out and disappear with his body – disappear to become a great magician like her father and leave him marooned in that female shell that wasn't even quite human. Yes, he knew about the Innsmouth blood now. There had been traffick with things from the sea – it was horrible... (*New Annotated* n. pag.)

Asenath's body is not fully human because she is the product of miscegenation, coded as human/inhuman sexual contact in this tale. Ephraim took as a wife a woman of Innsmouth and thus fathered Asenath. In Lovecraft's stories Innsmouth is a town inhabited by half-human, half-fish people. These hybrids were created be after a New England sea captain came in contact with Polynesian natives who worshiped a marine deity and interacted with amphibious creatures known as Deep Ones. The captain decided to strike a bargain with the Deep Ones: gold in exchange for the chance to mate with the humans of Innsmouth. The inhabitants of Innsmouth are thus of mixed white, non-white and non-human ancestry. The grandson of the sea captain is the son of "some kind of foreigner – they say a South Sea islander" (*New Annotated* n.pag.). People from the seaside community have the "Innsmouth look," facial characteristics which identify them as the product of such unions, though they try to pass as normal humans. As one character in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" notes "folks here and hereabouts always try to cover up any Innsmouth blood they have in 'em," (*New Annotated* n. pag.) a remark which seems to echoe fears of "white-passing" minorities.

Asenath/Ephraim wants to be a "man" which may mean a desire to become a human of pure racial stock instead of a hybrid. But it also indicates that the inferiority lies in the gender of the body Asenath/Ephraim inhabits. Asenath's "crowning rage" is that she is not a man because

the “male brain had certain unique and far-reaching cosmic powers” (*New Annotated* n. pag.). It is therefore likely that Asenath/Ephraim wishes to switch bodies for both reasons: the fit body must be the body of an educated, wealthy, white man. Nothing else will do.

Some fans of Lovecraft’s stories have questioned whether Asenath should be considered a woman since it is her father who inhabits her body. There is also the fact that Lovecraft complicates Asenath by referring to her as both “she” and “it,” her husband declares “I’ll kill her if she ever sends me there again. . . . I’ll kill that entity . . . her, him, it . . . I’ll kill it! I’ll kill it with my own hands!” (*New Annotated* n. pag.). Lord identifies her as “a complex and not entirely female character” (n. pag.). In a way, Asenath function’s as a literary Schrödinger’s cat: she can be interpreted as a man and a woman at the same time. But her body is that of a woman and Ephraim is enraged by the fact that he inhabits a woman’s body. In looking at Asenath from a biological and performative perspective we may call her a “woman” and thus find in her a number of gendered eugenicist elements. At the same time, this melding of bodies, of the male and the female, also echoes Asenath’s racial ancestry. She is not quite a “woman” because she carries in herself male characteristics and also because she is of mixed racial stock.

Lovecraft’s other attractive femme fatale, Marceline, of “Medusa’s Coil” is, like Asenath, not quite human and not quite white. The character is the product of a collaboration between Zealia Brown-Reed Bishop and Lovecraft. Bishop and Lovecraft began corresponding because she wished to write stories for magazines such as *Woman’s Home Companion* in order to support herself as a single mother. Lovecraft steered Bishop away from the lighter, romantic fare she was most interested in and convinced her she might sell some stories to the speculative fiction magazines of the era (*Spirit of Revision* 9-11). As a result she came up with “synopses for three stories of a weird nature...the synopses, as far as we can gauge them, are quite weak and

conventional; and Lovecraft has done an admirable job of expanding and elaborating upon them to make them genuine weird tales in their own right. Of all his revisions, the first two of the Bishop tales, 'The Curse of Yig' and 'The Mound,' are closest in texture and quality to Lovecraft's original stories" (*Crawling Chaos* 15). Though Joshi praises "The Curse of Yig" and "The Mound" he views "Medusa's Coil" as a much inferior piece. It is, however, one of the stories included in this analysis due to its important biological themes.

"Medusa's Coil" is the story of a young, wealthy American who is sent to study at the Sorbonne and meets a magnetic, mysterious woman named Marceline. He marries Marceline, returns to the United States with her, and murders her, though he is depicted as justified in doing so since she is revealed as both a monster, with Medusa-like hair, and a black woman passing as white.

The story is mostly the product of Lovecraft's imagination. Brown-Reed Bishop provided the concept, but he executed it and "virtually all structural elements, character portrayals, and the prose" (*Spirit* 8) belong to Lovecraft. However the final "horrific" revelation of the tale, which concerns Marceline's African ancestry, was probably present in Brown-Reed Bishop's original notes to Lovecraft (*Medusa's Coil* 8) so it might not have been an element he concocted by himself. Nevertheless, Lovecraft certainly utilized and emphasized the element of Marceline's blackness.

Like Asenath, Marceline is also attractive. She is "beautiful," has an "air of breeding" which must indicate some "strains of good blood in her." Slim, graceful, in her early twenties, with a complexion of a deep olive and dark eyes, she possesses classical features "though not quite clean-cut" and "the most singular head of jet black hair" (*Medusa's Coil* 28-29).

Lovecraft constantly exoticizes Marceline, mentioning distant locales and mysterious elements of her physical persona. With a certain hairdo she might be an “Oriental princess,” for example. Marceline makes the narrator think of: “Babylon, Atlantis, Lemuria, and the terrible forgotten dominations of an elder world; her eyes struck me sometimes as the eyes of some unholy forest creature or animal-goddess too immeasurably ancient to be fully human” (*Medusa’s Coil* 29).

But just like Asenath, Marceline exudes something repellent. By the end of “Medusa’s Coil” we learn that the narrator’s misgivings are correct, since Marceline is a monster and more than that, a “negress.” In fact, the revelation of Marceline’s blackness is supposed to be more shocking than the discovery that Marceline’s hair has a life of its own (thus the ‘Medusa’ of the title) and is able to attack people.

It would be too hideous if they knew that the one-time heiress of Riverside—the accursed gorgon or lamia whose hateful crinkly coil of serpent-hair must even now be brooding and twining vampirically around an artist’s skeleton in a lime-packed grave beneath a charred foundation—was faintly, subtly, yet to the eyes of genius unmistakably the scion of Zimbabwe’s most primal grovellers. No wonder she owned a link with that old witch-woman Sophonisba—for, though in deceitfully slight proportion, Marceline was a negress. (*Medusa’s Coil* 68).

There was much anxiety among proponents of eugenics about the physical body as a manifestation of the interior quality of people. Sound minds in sound bodies was the motto of the time, couching itself on increasingly rigid standards of beauty popularized by the media (Kline, “A New Deal,” 23). I will look in more detail at how physiognomy was seen as a manifestation

of tainted bloodlines in Lovecraft's fiction in my next chapter, but for now I wish to emphasize one of the concerns of eugenicists: the conundrum of what they might do when a defective mind did *not* appear to inhabit a defective body. That is, when physiognomy was not a tell-tale sign of abnormality.

Since the nineteenth century eugenics proponents were plagued with the problem of identifying the unfit. Although physical appearance was seen as proof of good character, eugenicists feared it was not sufficient, as the unfit could pass as healthy. H. H. Goddard warned against being deceived by external characteristics of girls. As he explained, good-looking girls could seem "bright in appearance" but ultimately prove to be hopeless "high-grade feeble-minded" persons, "morons," and "delinquents" (11-12). Recessive genes might create a large pool of asymptomatic carriers, meaning one needed to look back at several generations of a family (Pernick 47-48). Genealogical studies and historical records were therefore crucial to establish good character (Richardson 81). Eugenic proponents such as Francis Galton envisioned "anthropometric laboratories" in which all men and women were to be measured, photographed and classified (Pearson 346).

Yet, despite its perceived limitations, aesthetics played an important role in eugenics. As the book *Eugenics and Sex Harmony* by Herman H. Rubin indicated, health is the basis of true beauty (59) and thus one might imagine that the absence of health would mean the absence of beauty. Conversely the presence of beauty would indicate health.

Galton believed superior racial types were naturally more beautiful (Maxwell, "Eugenics and the Classical Ideal," 1) He also produced a "beauty map" of Britain, intent on determining where the most physically attractive women were clustered (Mitchell and Snyder 93). Albert E.

Wiggam considered physical beauty as the best external indicator of fitness. In 1929, while judging an American beauty pageant, he stated that “beauty is woven into the protoplasmic fabric of the race with all that is admirable and excellent” (qtd. in Cogdell 23). Other eugenics researchers thought young people should be trained to choose attractive mates. For some eugenics proponents, ugliness could even be labeled as a disability (Mitchell and Snyder 93).

Race and economics were also linked to aesthetics and fitness. European immigrants from undesirable parts of the continent were labelled as unattractive and thus unfit by American eugenics advocates (Mitchell and Snyder 94). Finally, as Sander Gilman notes in *Health and Illness: Images of Difference*, in the late 19th and early 20th century beauty and health also became synonymous with “superior” citizens: “This New Man (and New Woman) is seen as the natural improvement of the species through the alteration of the social system. These new systems produce not only better citizens, but more beautiful ones” (66).

If eugenicists believed that moral goodness was “inscribed on the body” (Gilman, *Creating Beauty*, 43), then what happened when the body told a lie? Lovecraft has the answer: the destruction of the family, and thus, of the wider society. Moreover, the most monstrous element of Marceline and Asenath may be the ease with which they are able to infiltrate the world of the fit. They are both successfully passing as normal, healthy women.

Even though Asenath and Marceline manage to infiltrate normal society, both manifest some elements of ugliness: the over-protuberant eyes of Asenath, Marceline’s not quite clean-cut features. These tell-tale details serve as a warning that they are not normal. Normalcy, Lovecraft seems to indicate, can be imitated but not quite duplicated. For example, Asenath’s intense will, her decisive personality, brand her with premature wrinkles (*New Annotated* n. pag.). Their

behavior also makes the women suspect. Asenath's reputation makes people shun her and Marceline is also shunned by the women who might be part of her social circle. They are treated as outsiders because their behavior is somehow inappropriate, though not so blatantly wrong that they are absolute outcasts.

In the case of Marceline, her husband Denis knows she was, before they married, the priestess of some sort of cult "among the Bohemian element on the left bank" (*Medusa's Coil* 26). She was also "a petty artist and an artist's model before adopting this more lucrative magical game" (*Medusa's Coil* 27). The most damning element of Marceline's character, though, is her potential for sexual transgression. She begins to show an interest in a friend of her husband who is painting her portrait and the narrator naturally surmises that Marceline will soon sexually excite the artist. "I wondered how long it would be that only the artist, and not the primitive man, would be aroused by her mysterious graces" (*Medusa's Coil* 34).

Eventually Marceline's husband finds her posing nude, her "hellish hair all draped around her" (*Medusa's Coil* 49) and at last is able to see her true nature in the painting, since the artist has produced an authentic picture of the woman. It is thus, only through the objective use of paint, as opposed to subjective human eyes, that Marceline can be revealed for who she truly is. This passage resembles *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde, in which Dorian Gray remains angelically beautiful while his inner degeneration is covertly expressed in a painting hidden in his attic. In addition, one cannot ignore the element of sexual rivalry present in the unveiling of the painting. Marceline's monstrosity is revealed, but it is paired with her nudity, with the mention that she was "making all sorts of sheep's eyes" at the painter. Marceline's monstrosity is revealed in combination with her lewdness, a lewdness that had

already been alluded to as having the power to corrupt the artist, turning him from sort of higher man into a “primitive” creature.

Finally, both women’s lineage is questionable. Marceline is secretive about her past. She supposedly spent some time in Martinique, though she will not reveal much else. But her husband is aware she is an illegitimate child. This, of course, is a great flaw. Bastardy, seen as a moral offense, was thought to produce further transgressions, such as criminal behavior in the bastard (Yukins 172-75). Asenath is the daughter of a mysterious, veiled woman. “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” makes it clear that her mother is supposed to be a hybrid monster, one of the fish-like people who inhabit that town. Her wildly eccentric father is also unfit as he is a wicked sorcerer. The decadence of Asenath’s family is augmented by descriptions of the decadence of her home town and her house, its state an almost physical manifestation of her biological corruption.

There is also an element of classism present in the descriptions of Asenath and Marceline. Class, was, of course, of concern to eugenicists. Families like the Jukes were not only adjudicated on a number of physical and mental defects, but they were also maligned for their poverty. As Ordover remarks, eugenicists evidence “an ominous and overpowering preoccupation with the morality and sexuality of low income women” (133). I shall explore poverty as a deemed marker of biological inferiority and its entanglement with issues of motherhood in the next chapter as an important element of the Whateley family identity and of Lavinia Whateley, but it is worth noting that class also rears its head in connection to Asenath and Marceline. In the case of Marceline, the narrator remarks how lucky she was to marry into a wealthy American family. It is obvious Marceline does not have as much social prestige as her husband. Asenath, for her part, is from Innsmouth. The people there are shunned by the locals

and her home is in a state of disrepair. She has also married up, as it may be. It is therefore not only race or health which constitute normality, but also class and social standing.

The great failure of the men in these tales is their failure to analyze the physical, social and genealogical warning signs. Derby is “wildly taken” with Asenath’s appearance (*New Annotated* n. pag.), only to have his body stolen by “her.” Marceline’s husband seems besotted with his wife. Both men ignore their more clear-headed male friends or relatives who feel troubled by the women. These men are rational men, like Lovecraft, who indicated “eroticism belongs to a lower order of instincts. . . . The primal savage or ape merely looks about his native forest to find a mate; the exalted Aryan should lift his eyes to the worlds of space and consider his relation to infinity!” (qtd. in Joshi *Providence* n. pag.).

The fear of marriage to a possibly tainted woman and her physical allure also manifests in “The Mound,” a tale where a Spaniard arrives in an underground city inhabited by an ancient civilization which worships strange deities.⁹ The Spaniard grows fearful of these people and decides to escape with the assistance of T'la-yub, a native of the city. Though she is attractive, the Spaniard explains that upon to his return to civilization he will take for a wife a Spanish woman or an Indian woman “of normal outer-world descent and a regular and approved past” (*Crawling Chaos* 298). This, Lovecraft seems to indicate, is the proper solution to such situations, a rational choice of a fit mate, not the more irrational steps of the men involved with Asenath and Marceline.

Eugenics proponents would have agreed with Lovecraft. Many considered “ignorance” and “sexual slavery” the cause of social evils (Crane 18). Citizens should breed with the best

⁹ Although I will not tackle “The Mound” in this analysis it is worth noting the underground society described in the story is not only monstrous, but eugenicist, though it has become decadent.

stock and check their passions, but of course their self-control could be threatened by the “voluptuousness” of certain foreign races (Yukins 231). For example, in *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror*, Angela Smith identifies *Dracula* as a movie filled with eugenics concerns and sees Bela Lugosi, in the role of the Count, as both appealing and repulsive due to his foreignness and ethnic identity (48-54). Similarly, Asenath and Marceline are both appealing and repulsive, and both tainted with a foreign and racially unacceptable ancestry. When Lovecraft first met a homosexual man he remarked that he didn’t know whether to “kiss it or kill it” (qtd. in Joshi *Providence* n. pag.) a sentiment which his characters seem to share as they vacillate between repulsion and attraction when it comes to these women, deviancy in any form apparently establishing a dangerous snare. Enraptured, caught in an erotic web, Lovecraft’s men succumb to the monstrous influence of these Others. However, the fault lies not entirely with them. Just as eugenics is not only about individual choices, but about society’s choices and ultimate future, the final blame falls on society’s lax rules which have allowed these women to roam free.

The narrator of “Medusa’s Coil” indicates that he knew that Continentals have different standards from American ones, standards which may be worrisome. As Robert H. Waugh states in *A Monster of Voices: Speaking For H. P. Lovecraft*, Lovecraft hints that one of the dangers of French culture is miscegenation (308). Lovecraft believed that the French are “much more receptive to alien blood than is our colder and more Northern Teutonic stock” (*H.P. Lovecraft: Letters to Reinhart Kleiner* 26), which in turn made contact with French culture a source of contact with mixed people, a possibility which Lovecraft regarded with horror. Lovecraft was decidedly against such mixing. Although Germans and Scandinavians could be assimilated, he believed Jews, Italians and Slavs, should never be allowed to “taint the better classes” (*Letters to*

Rheinart Kleiner 52-53). When he journeyed to New York Lovecraft described the city, with its visible minorities and immigrants, as “a bastard mess of stewing mongrel flesh without intellect, repellent to the eye, nose and imagination” (*Selected Letters of H. P. Lovecraft I* 181). These views found their way into his tales. In stories such as “The Call of Cthulhu,” Lovecraft mentions “mongrels,” “hybrid-spawn” and “men of a very low, mixed-blood, and mentally aberrant type” (qtd. in *New Annotated* n. pag.).

Lovecraft’s fear of miscegenation was in line with the eugenics researchers of his time. In 1927 Rachel Fleming participated in an investigation of British mixed-race children. Her findings served to establish an association for the welfare of such children indicating that mixed-race parentage was a “handicap comparable to physical deformity” (qtd. in Bashford and Levine 219). Eugenicists such as Herman Lundborg, head of the Swedish State Institute of Racial Biology, Ruggles Gates and Alfred Mjoen believed that the mixing of races resulted in inferior children and cautioned against such unions (Kühl 59). The institute sterilized up to 63,000 people, 90 per cent of them women, under a racial purity programme approved by the state until 1976 (Bates n.pag.). In the late 1920s the Cold Spring Harbour Laboratory in the United States and the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Genetics and Eugenics in Germany decided to collaborate on a study of mixed races. The organizers of this effort concluded that despite the “biological significance” of race mixing few studies had been organized to better study this topic. The lack of research paired with the extent of such unions was to, them, “monstrous” (Kühl 60). Racism was therefore made “scientific,” even logical, by biological researchers.

European society in “Medusa’s Coil” thus is at fault for allowing such unions, which can have disastrous results. And it is also the decadent European society which probably ruins Derby, who is “quick to seize on the surface aspects of European thought and expression” (*New*

Annotated n. pag.). After a visit to the Continent he becomes wilder in his behaviour and more interested in occultism. It is then that he meets the decadent Asenath. Though she is American, Asenath still personifies the foreign taint: she descends from half-human foreign stock: the hybrid inhabitants of Innsmouth are supposed to be of Polynesian, European and non-human heritage.

Society also fails in providing the men in these tales with the clear-headed, scientific knowledge they require in order to procure themselves an appropriate mate. The book *Eugenics and Sex Harmony* encourages parents to teach their children the difference between a rose and a thistle in order to spare them grief (Rubin 198). That is, young people must be trained to differentiate between superior and inferior sexual partners. However, neither of the husbands in these tales have such knowledge. Marceline's husband is rather young and Derby is described as childish. In an ironic twist, he is much older than Asenath (he is thirty-eight and Asenath is in her early twenties), but weak-willed.

According to Joshi, Lovecraft believed man was a "machine" at the "mercy of forces beyond his control" (qtd. in Joshi *Providence n. pag.*). As a child he had learned about sex from anatomy and medical textbooks found in his family's library. After reading these:

The whole matter was reduced to a prosaic mechanism – a mechanism which I rather despised or at least thought non-glamorous because of its purely animal nature and separation from such things as intellect & beauty & all the drama was taken out of it. (qtd. in Joshi *Providence n. pag.*).

Marceline is strongly identified with animals. The serpent, of course – her evil hair with a life of its own is confused with a snake – but also other wild creatures. At one point, the narrator

calls her a leopardess, a tigress and ultimately a great black python. Asenath is, in turn, described as someone with a predatory air and her protuberant eyes give her an almost amphibian touch. They are both thus embodied with the animal characteristics Lovecraft assigns to the sexual act, and their animal traits further show their “lower” nature, as if they are one step below the evolutionary ladder. However, neither woman is lacking in beauty. This is the final and silent horror present in Lovecraft’s tales: as women who are attractive and seductive Marceline and Asenath have the power to obtain husbands, to procreate and ruin a whole family lineage like the “feeble-minded” mother of the Kallikak family did.

It is thus no wonder that Marceline and Asenath are so monstrous, so dangerous, and that they must ultimately be killed by their husbands – between kissing and killing Lovecraft established the only reasonable answer is to ultimately kill – thus restoring order and denying them the chance to deliver any monstrous progeny.

At the same time, the denial of procreation seems to doom the men in the tale. Asenath and Marceline’s husbands are both the only heirs of their family. When they succumb, as in the end they both do, to these women who cannot be stopped even from beyond the grave, their lineage is erased. The danger that Asenath and Marceline pose is not only to the individual but to the whole family line. As Marceline’s father-in-law states:

Clearly, there was nothing for a man of sense to do but to let Denis alone so long as his new wife conformed to de Russy ways. Let her have a chance to prove herself—perhaps she wouldn’t hurt the family as much as some might fear. (*Medusa’s Coil* 28).

Marceline, of course, destroys her husband and in this manner destroys the family and even the mansion they inhabit. More than that, she destroys social order, a social order which

clearly justifies the enslavement of those deemed physically inferior. Riverside, the home of Marceline's husband, once housed 200 "negroes in cabin" all of them "singing and playing the banjo at night," their music expressing "the fullest charm of a civilisation and social order now sadly extinct" (*Medusa's Coil* 23). But the plantation has grown silent, the era of slave ownership has ended and to Lovecraft this is a mark of decay.

Asenath, for her part, literally entombs her husband in a corpse. Both women cannot germinate life, but instead grant only death. Since, according to eugenicists, the ultimate purpose of women in society is to produce healthy children, Asenath and Marceline are monstrous because they cannot breed anything wholesome but they can breed *something*: destruction. However, their immature husbands are also condemned by the narrative. They are as unfit as their wives, weak and malleable, when men's role is to dominate both their wives and their social inferiors.

Such concerns over masculinity and effeminate behavior appear in Lovecraft's letters (Derie, *Sex and the Cthulhu Mythos*, 40-44). Male virility was, of course, another topic for eugenics proponents. Soft, easy men were suspect. Men were supposed to engage in aggressive sports and maintain top physical health (Kane n. pag.). It is thus not surprising that as a child Asenath's husband had "organic weaknesses which startled his doting parents," and that he is ultimately overtaken by the stronger Asenath. At the end of "Medusa's Coil," Marceline's husband, having murdered her, commits suicide in an attempt to wipe out everything that had been connected to her. Both the unfit women and the unfit men are eliminated.

The result is that through Asenath and Marceline, Lovecraft makes manifest a number of eugenics concerns tied to women. Asenath and Marceline's racial ambiguity, deviant behavior

and sexual allure brand them as unfit and serve as markers of their Otherness. This Otherness threatens not only the bodies of individual white men, but annihilates the family structure as a whole. This, of course, was what eugenicists feared: the decimation of the family and ultimately the nation. Although Asenath and Marceline never speak a line of dialogue, their silent bodies ultimately narrate a story of biological terror and triumphant destruction.

Chapter 2. The Terrible Mother

Reproduction and motherhood were integral to the discourse of eugenics and they manifest in several of Lovecraft's stories. Asenath and Marceline are not able to pass on their genes, but other women do reproduce and in doing so embody perverse motherhood. They also serve as a warning of what may happen when the unfit give birth.

The eugenics movement developed a cult of motherhood which placed women as central to the nation, demanding they dedicate themselves to home and family, at a time when women were beginning to seek more opportunities outside the household and joining the workforce in growing numbers. Eugenics worked as a form of social control by emphasizing the need of the many versus the need of the individual. Women who did not want to reproduce or to behave in sexually appropriate ways were chided for trying to create a nation of spinsters or "slackers" (Hasian 77). Though the eugenics movement did not singlehandedly manufacture this focus on motherhood – the glorification of the mother's role began since the early 19th century and had solidified by the middle of it – it found new ways to emphasize that women must occupy this role (Baumeister 347).¹⁰

As the eugenics movement advanced throughout the 20th century motherhood was regarded as an "exalted, sacred profession" and helped provide women with a high status position in society (Gordon 264). Monetary assistance for mothers, prenatal care and proper health care for women became an ongoing concern for eugenicists (Adams 99-100). Feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman utilized eugenics discourse to promote more social freedom for women while at the same time calling for the removal or shunning of visible minorities who

¹⁰ Baumeister notes that in the 19th century women were seen as essential to raising virtuous and Christian children. Nancy M. Theriot indicates that the late 19th century concept of motherhood as a "professional status" distinguishes it from the early 19th century. One could argue eugenics continued this drive to professionalize motherhood.

might infect the white population (Seitler 67-69). Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson believed that allowing certain women to remain unmarried and childless could be a positive development, since it would remove women who lacked a maternal instinct – which they characterized as a “defect” – from the gene pool (320). Eugenics studies also provided women with jobs. The Eugenics Record Office, between 1910 and 1924, trained 258 students (85% of them women) so they could collect community data (Bix 634).

Therefore, some feminists of the time found themselves in an uneasy position: eugenicist policies could benefit women, but they also placed strict limits on their mobility and behavior. Reformers like Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy criticized the idea of “coerced maternity,” while other feminists struggled to separate the concept of sexual autonomy from eugenicist principles which emphasized reproduction (Allen 92).

Despite efforts by some feminists to allow a degree of autonomy to women when it came to reproductive choices, the eugenics climate encouraged an ideal of motherhood, a motherhood which had to be embraced by all women. The eugenically-minded woman had to behave in the proper “motherly” way and dedicate herself to house and home, therefore emphasizing traditional gender roles. For example, in Nazi Germany, girls’ education focused on preparation for homemaking and women who decided to enter the workforce had to undertake “womanly” careers such as teaching or childcare (Stephenson, n. pag.).

This emphasis on proper motherhood was often spread by nurses, health professionals and social workers, and through baby clinics, pamphlets and advice manuals¹¹ (Bashford and Levine 250), but the message was transmitted and popularized in other mediums. Some countries

¹¹ In Canada, doctor and medical pioneer Helen MacMurchy wrote a series of popular books aimed at mothers. They encouraged good hygiene and recommended mothers remain at home, indicating that “when the mother works, the baby dies.” MacMurchy was also a staunch supporter of eugenics policies and sterilization.

provided prizes for “fit” women who gave birth to a large number of children or the “best-reared” baby (Dugac n.pag.). In the United States and Canada “fitter family” contests measured and analyzed the composition of families, determining which one was the best, an activity which later gave way to baby pageants (Lovett 69-85). Eugenics proponents, in an effort to make the United States more “family-minded” turned to publications such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which celebrated femininity and homemaking. Eugenicist Paul Popenoe wrote for this magazine and his articles prescribed “subservient, affectionate, sexy and domestic behavior” for married women (Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 147). Books like *The Eugenic Mother and Baby: A Complete Home Guide* (1913) provided guidance to young mothers, showing them how to behave properly and care for their children.

Politicians also spoke about and spread ideas about motherhood. Theodore Roosevelt, in a 1905 speech titled “On American Motherhood” declared the United States could not prosper unless women was “able and willing to bear, and to bring up as they should be brought up, healthy children, sound in mind, body and character, and numerous enough so that the race shall increase and not decrease” (qtd. in Jensen n. pag.). A few years later Roosevelt wrote about women who remain childless, noting these women suffer from “coldness, love of ease, striving after social position, fear of pain, dislike of hard work, and sheer inability to get life values in their proper perspective” (263).

Motherhood was thus declared essential to women. Women who did not wish to be mothers and wives were to be viewed with suspicion or hostility.

However, if an idealized figure of the mother needed to be created, maintained and popularized in order to propagate eugenicist ideals, then another figure was also necessary in

order to warn of the dangers incurred when a woman chose to reproduce in a deviant fashion. Women should reproduce, yes, eugenicists said, but in the proper way. And only the proper women were to reproduce. Thus, the bad mother also appeared in eugenicist rhetoric. These depictions of bad women often featured working class women who ignored their responsibilities or did not engage in proper health practices (Hasian 76-77).

Immigrant and visible minority women were often part of this picture of bad womanhood and characterized as unfit mothers, retrograde, and sexually uncontrollable (Irving 36-42), but poor white women were also represented as dangerous to society. They were often portrayed as sexual deviants likely to breed delinquents (Lancaster, *The Angelic Mother*, n. pag.). The notion of the unfit poor white woman had been established ever since studies like those of the Kallikak family pathologized a segment of the population in the United States, to the point that some of the photographs taken of the Kallikaks were doctored to make the subjects look more menacing (Maxwell, "Picture Imperfect," 132-33). It is thus no wonder that poor white women were the target of sterilization efforts in the early 20th century, though by the 1960s black women in the United States had become the focus of sterilization campaigns (Kluchin 91).

2.1. Representing Unfit White Mothers

Lovecraft, not surprisingly, provides us an example of motherhood in his stories, and ties ideas of white deviancy into her construction: Lavinia Whateley, the albino daughter of Old Whateley who is briefly mentioned in "The Dunwich Horror." She is one of the "decadent" Whateleys, a "somewhat deformed, unattractive" woman, the daughter of a "half-insane father" who gives birth to a "dark, goatish-looking infant" called Wilbur. The child grows up to become "exceedingly ugly despite his appearance of brilliancy; there being something almost goatish or

animalistic about his thick lips, large-pored, yellowish skin, coarse crinkly hair, and oddly elongated ears” (*New Annotated* n. pag.).

Lavinia is unmarried and thus a single mother, the identity of the child’s father being unknown. She has not been properly educated and lives in a crumbling, old house. The one time Lovecraft has her speak we immediately realize that her use of language also places her apart from what the reader might deem as civilized, proper people:

‘They’s more ababout him as I knows than I kin tell ye, Mamie,’ she said, ‘an’ naowadays they’s more nor what I know myself. I vaow afur Gawd, I dun’t know what he wants nor what he’s a-tryin’ to dew.’ (*New Annotated* n. pag.)

By the end of “The Dunwich Horror” we realize that Lavinia had given birth not to one son as everyone thought – the dark, goatish Wilbur – but to twins, the second child appearing more monstrous than his brother. The revelation that Lavinia must have copulated with a supernatural entity in order to birth such creatures concludes the tale:

But as to this thing we’ve just sent back – the Whateleys raised it for a terrible part in the doings that were to come. It grew fast and big from the same reason that Wilbur grew fast and big – but it beat him because it had a greater share of the outsideness in it. You needn’t ask how Wilbur called it out of the air. He didn’t call it out. *It was his twin brother, but it looked more like the father than he did.* (*New Annotated* n. pag.).

We never get to hear Lavinia’s tale or know much more about her. Lovecraft doesn’t even dispatch her during the story, instead hinting she was murdered by one of her sons. The albino woman, placed at the periphery of the narrative, thus vanishes quietly from it.

Yet even this brief look at Lavinia provides a powerful understanding of Lovecraft's vision of women and the eugenicist connotations implicit in her persona. Described as ugly, deformed, older than a mother should be (she is thirty-five when she gives birth), Lavinia is also poor, "uncouth of dialect" just like her son and "fond of wild and grandiose day-dreams and singular occupations; nor was her leisure much taken up by household cares in a home from which all standards of order and cleanliness had long since disappeared" (*New Annotated* n. pag.).

Lovecraft therefore positions Lavinia as unfit in more than one way; she is in fact a collection of unfit traits and seems to embody every fear about poor white women espoused by eugenicists. Not only is Lavinia unable to care properly for a home, evidenced by her poor sanitation standards, but she unable to take control of Wilbur. Womanhood and motherhood are regarded as principles of order by eugenicists, but Lavinia cannot fulfill the eugenicist ideals of womanhood. Unable to deliver the order required of women, Lavinia is only able to produce chaos and become the mother to criminals, monsters.

As a poor white woman Lavinia is in an excellent position to birth monsters, but it must also be noted that these are not just any monsters: Wilbur's description hints at a racial otherness (his hair, lips, skin). He is described as dark in contrast to his albino mother, a contrast which serves to show Lavinia is white, but not the proper kind of white (her albinism makes her an Other, a deformed creature) and to emphasize his difference with the rest of the population of Dunwich. Wilbur's darkness stands out so much in the community that he is labeled "Lavinny's black brat" (*New Annotated* n. pag). Clearly, Lovecraft is once again warning the reader against the dangers of miscegenation. Wilbur is monstrous and he is black, or rather monstrous-black. Monstrosity and blackness here become one.

Unlike Marceline of “Medusa’s Coil” though, Wilbur can hardly pass as human. He is ugly, physically repulsive, obviously abnormal. Marceline, it is hinted, has some good blood in her and this good blood covers up her African ancestry. Similarly, “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family” tells the story of Arthur, the descendant of an African explorer who supposedly married the daughter of a Portuguese trader who was never seen by the servants. Due to her “violent and singular” disposition she occupied a remote wing of the household where she was tended only by her husband. At the conclusion of the story we learn that Lady Jermyn was not a Portuguese woman, but in fact, a white ape, an ape “princess.” Lovecraft explains that the Jermyns “never seemed to look quite right—something was amiss, though Arthur was the worst” (*The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories* n.pag.), implying that though the family’s white heritage has been able to conceal their monstrosity, it is becoming more obvious in the later generations.

Mitch Frye believes that “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family” functions as a literary retooling of the “one drop” rule, by which any amount of an undesirable genetic ancestry renders a whole family undesirable (246). However, the story can also be seen as a tale which also shows the capacity of white blood to conceal African ancestry to a certain extent. Wilbur, unlike Arthur, has an albino mother, a poor mother, and his monstrosity is obvious because there is no “good” blood in him. His twin brother is obviously monstrous and lives hidden in the old house, resembling his father closely. Whiteness, in this sense, cannot shield the child unless it is the *proper* sort of whiteness. Lavinia is not “properly” white because she is poor and defective. Like Asenath, her decadent home even mirrors her own decadent body.

Here Lovecraft warns us about the slim grasp even the white upper classes have on fitness. One wrong step and a family can end up at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder.

Lavinia's family, at one point, occupied a higher social position: the story mentions relatives of theirs, the "undecayed" Whateleys. The implicit message therefore is that Lavinia's branch of the family "decayed," fell into financial and social ruin. Likely, they also "fell" into biological ruin since Lavinia is described as "slightly-deformed" and an albino, therefore, she is a biological anomaly.

In a 1933 letter, Lovecraft wrote that rural populations were being overtaken by the "feebler elements in whom repulsive abnormalities are most easily developed," and farmers were "more & more in danger of slipping ... to the sordid condition of peasant or "poor white." (*O Fortunate Floridian* 79). This idea of the slippery slope of fitness is also tackled by Lovecraft in "The Rats in the Walls," where a man discovers his ancestors have secretly practiced cannibalism for centuries, some of them regressing and acting like animals, a revelation which eventually drives the man to attack and eat a friend of his. In "The Lurking Fear" the revelation of the story is that underneath the apparently deserted Martense mansion hides a family which after many decades has devolved into "dwarfed, deformed hairy devils or apes – monstrous" creatures who prey on each other and on humans (*The Dreams in the Witch House: And Other Weird Stories* n. pag.). In "The Dunwich Horror" degeneration leads to reproductive terror, to the birth of monster children who are racialized Others, and, in the end, to a violent rampage. Slippery, indeed.

2.2. Going Native: White Women in Peril

"The Dunwich Horror," as well as "The Lurking Fear" and "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family" highlight the danger of Otherness, viewing it as an almost infectious disease which can corrupt a bloodline, but it is "The Curse of Yig" which ultimately

highlights how easy it is for fit white people to become tainted and plunge into an inferior position. Like “Medusa’s Coil,” this story was mostly the work of Lovecraft, with Bishop providing the setting and some basic ideas, and Lovecraft fleshing out the scenario. Lovecraft indicated he came up with the snake cult featured in the story and with the ending, with its revelation of monstrous motherhood (*Crawling Chaos* 394-95).

The story takes place mostly in flashback form. The narrator, who is in Oklahoma seeking legends of snakes, goes to visit a Dr. McNeill who locals say possesses “a terrible relic” related to the snake cult of Yig. The doctor shows the narrator the “relic,” which is really a victim of the curse of Yig. The victim is kept locked in an observation room.

The moving object was almost of human size, and entirely devoid of clothing. It was absolutely hairless, and its tawny-looking back seemed subtly squamous in the dim, ghoulish light. Around the shoulders it was rather speckled and brownish, and the head was very curiously flat. As it looked up to hiss at me I saw that the beady little black eyes were damnably anthropoid, but I could not bear to study them long. They fastened themselves on me with a horrible persistence, so that I closed the panel gaspingly and left the creature to wriggle about unseen in its matted straw and spectral twilight. I must have reeled a bit, for I saw that the doctor was gently holding my arm as he guided me away. I was stuttering over and over again: “B-but for God’s sake, *what is it?*” (*Crawling Chaos* 175-76)

After observing this deformed creature, McNeill tells the story of how it came to be in that locked room and we learn more about Yig, a deity known to the “Indians” whose “chief trait was a relentless devotion to his children – a devotion so great that the redskins almost feared to

protect themselves from the venomous rattlesnakes which thronged the region” (*Crawling Chaos* 176) When someone harms a snake, Yig’s “vengeance” is to turn his victims into snakes.

In 1889 Walker Davis and his wife Audrey arrive in Oklahoma. Walker is terrified of snakes and when Audrey finds one, hoping to spare her husband a panic attack, she kills it. The snakes, of course, take their revenge. One night Audrey sees many snakes invading her home and a strange figure approaching her. Terrified, she grabs an ax and attacks and kills the shadowy figure. But the stranger turns out to be her husband.

The story jumps back to the doctor who explains that Audrey lived after that night. The narrator believe he understands: Audrey is insane and now lies in a locked room, hissing like a snake. But the doctor clarifies the situation:

“And Audrey – wasn’t it queer how the curse of Yig seemed to work itself out on her? I suppose the impression of hissing snakes had been fairly ground into her.”

“Yes. There were lucid spells at first, but they got to be fewer and fewer. Her hair came white at the roots as it grew, and later began to fall out. The skin grew blotchy, and when she died –”

I interrupted with a start.

“*Died?* Then what was that – that thing downstairs?”

McNeill spoke gravely.

“*That* is what was born to her three-quarters of a year afterward. There were three more of them – two were even worse – but this is the only one that lived.” (*Crawling Chaos* 193-94)

“The Curse of Yig” thus is a story about monstrous motherhood. Yig, the serpent, who protects its spawn, but also Audrey, the woman who gives birth to snake monsters. Audrey differs from Lavinia in the sense that she is a more “normal” white woman, not a deformed albino. Yet she ultimately gives birth to abominations, anyway.

As Virginia Richter explains in *Literature After Darwin*, the anxiety of “simiation,” of regression, can be projected in an individual body – for example Arthur Jermyn, who shows old ape-like traits – but this anxiety can also be “represented as a topographical movement, a journey through space, from the imperial metropolis to the fringe of the empire...cultural contact does not go in one direction only, as the gift of civilization brought to the savages. The empire strikes back by changing the coloniser’s manners, habits, diets, and finally their dreams and desires” (n. pag.). The coloniser, finding himself in a foreign land, is tempted into merging with the Other. This merging can occur via sexual association, resulting in miscegenation and the corruption of the white lineage, but this need not be the only way corruption occurs: the mere exposure to a foreign environment may alter white people. “Going native” meant that Europeans, far from home, “were prone to acquire attributes from other cultures and lose their racial qualities” (Ureña Valerio 182).

This is exactly what happens to Audrey. Yig is closely tied to the local “Indians,” to the Other, and Oklahoma represents the frontier, the edge of civilization. In Oklahoma “there was always a distant wind-borne pounding of tom-toms to lend an added background of the sinister. It was maddening to have the muffled clatter always stealing over the wide red plains” (*Crawling Chaos* 184). When Audrey comes in contact with this foreign influence she regresses, a regression which results in snake-like progeny. The foreign environment, tainted with an unwholesome culture, infects and transforms Audrey. Ironically this vulnerability to the Other

exposes the frailty of white people. In a 1926 Lovecraft wrote that some Jewish “elements” might be absorbed into society, provided they were “dominantly Nordic or even Mediterranean in their biological composition” (*Selected Letters of H. P. Lovecraft II*, 264-66). This idea that some racialized groups could be integrated into white society reoccurs in several of Lovecraft’s letters. It exposes the supreme malleability of racial categories (and the flexibility of the concept of the Other), but implicitly it also indicates how weak the white, male body Lovecraft envisions really is. At one point Lovecraft writes that to allow immigrants into the country amounts to suicide. This, of course, is a thought process shared by eugenics proponents who thought the influx of undesirable immigrants would cause the destruction of the nation. For Lovecraft, exposure to the Other, even to the land inhabited by the Other in the case of “The Curse of Yig,” is akin to a type of suicide.

2.3. The Witch: Hideous Old-Age

In addition to Lavinia and Audrey, Lovecraft provides us with another female figure, one who represents anti-motherhood. She is Keziah Mason of “Dreams in the Witch House.” As in other stories, Keziah is the antagonist and the protagonist of the tale is a man, Walter Gilman, a mathematics and folklore student who takes an attic room in the so-called “witch house,” an old house in the fictional city of Arkham which is believed to be cursed. The house once was the home of Keziah, an elderly woman accused of witchcraft who disappeared from a Salem jail in 1692. The student is puzzled by the strange proportions of his room and begins to have odd dreams where he finds himself in other places. He eventually theorizes that Mason found a way to travel between dimensions, a travel which she accomplished due to her knowledge of physics, a knowledge far ahead of her time. As the narrative advances Gilman realizes that he has not been dreaming at all, but travelling through other dimensions like the witch did, and that Keziah

is intent on sacrificing a child in a ritual. At the end of the tale the house has been abandoned for many years and the bones of many children are found hidden within its walls.

The idea of an evil witch who eats children is, of course, not a novel concept. Witches appear in fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and are often represented as old, hideous creatures. Keziah is described using this traditional imagery:

Her bent back, long nose, and shrivelled chin were unmistakable, and her shapeless brown garments were like those he remembered. The expression on her face was one of hideous malevolence and exultation, and when he awaked he could recall a croaking voice that persuaded and threatened. He must meet the Black Man¹², and go with them all to the throne of Azathoth at the centre of ultimate Chaos. (*New Annotated* n. pag.)

Keziah, like the “terrible mothers” of fairy tales who devours instead of nurturing is a perversion of nature and of all womanly characteristics (Arnds 80-81). Some scholars believe older women were overrepresented in witch trials of the Middle Ages precisely because they were old. They represented lost fertility and even a threat to fertility since they were said to eat children. Since women’s power was associated solely with procreation and fertility, an inability to have children was a challenge to male authority, which old women made manifest with their post-menopausal bodies (Toivo 189-90).

Witches and eugenicist theories were associated in the 1930s when psychiatrist Percy R. Vessie claimed that the women who had been accused of witchcraft in 17th century New England were affected with Huntington’s disease. He traced back the disease to the inhabitants of one village who had migrated to the United States and intermarried, their “persistent stupidity”

¹² The “Black Man” in this text is Nyarlathotep, a polymorphous entity who Lovecraft consistently identifies as dark-skinned and Other: Nyarlathotep once existed in Egypt, in the time of the pharaohs.

dooming their descendants (qtd. in Wexler n. pag.). Vessie declared that the women were the “lamentable means of transporting a family disease” which demonstrated the urgent need for sterilization (qtd. in Wexler n. pag.)

Soon after appearing in *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Vessie’s paper was praised by *The Lancet*. *The Literary Digest*, a popular US magazine, summarized the paper under the title “The Witchcraft Disease.” Later on, neurologist MacDonald Critchley expanded on Vessie’s theory. Critchley’s and Vessie’s papers on Huntington’s disease were the two most popular papers on this condition, their assumptions going unchallenged for decades. Huntington’s disease became one of the most common emblems of bad heredity and women were further linked with danger, witchcraft and disease (Wexler n. pag.).

Lovecraft may not have been utilizing such papers as the basis for “Dreams in the Witch House,” but he was mining old archetypes in his description and construction of Keziah, the same old archetypes which scientists were also mining for eugenicist purposes. Therefore, we may still identify Keziah as embodying the eugenicist fears of the time because, as we’ve seen, eugenics was not only about biological concerns: in many cases biological notions served to preserve the status quo and traditional gender roles (Gordon 263). Keziah, who seems to have figured how to travel via dimensions through the use of physics, is an embodiment of the dangerous woman, the anti-social woman and finally the anti-mother. Though Keziah understands science – it allows her to travel through dimensions – this is a perverted science, just as she is a perversion of womanhood, a warning of what may go wrong when women acquire improper knowledge (physics and mathematics, which people incorrectly assume is magic) and lack the ability to mother children. In this sense, she is perhaps the most monstrous of all the women Lovecraft envisions.

2.4. The Twisted Family

In several of Lovecraft's other tales we seem to observe a perverse distortion of the American family and though women may not have central roles in these stories, their specter, the taint of the terrible mother, seems to loom over them. "The Mound" makes brief mention of the deity Shub-Niggurath, known as The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young in Lovecraft's tales. In "The Mound" she is called the All-Mother, a deity Lovecraft identifies as a version of Astarte. Another female deity tied to motherhood appears in "The Rats in the Walls." The protagonist of the story discovers: "That indescribable rites had been celebrated there, few doubted; and there were unpleasant tales of the transference of these rites into the Cybele-worship which the Romans had introduced" (*The Call of Cthulhu and Other* n. pag.).

By the end of "The Rats in the Walls" the protagonist seems to be in the thrall of his family's genetic memories, turned into a violent, insane man, who utters the words Magna Mater. He has succumbed to his genetic heritage, he is now one of them, a member of this animalistic clan.

Lovecraft's descriptions of the vicious underground creatures in "The Rats in the Walls," "The Horror at Red Hook" and "The Lurking Fear" seem to echo his thoughts on immigrants and visible minorities in New York City. Both groups are too numerous and animalistic. It is likely Lovecraft is drawing parallels between the perceived monstrous fertility of "inferior" groups – eugenicists often accused immigrant women of reproducing too quickly and giving birth to too many children – and the subhuman creatures of his stories. Furthermore, as Lord indicates, for Lovecraft "the implication is not only that female and immigrant sexualities are somehow connected and ergo mutually degenerate, but also far more potent than any other sexuality" (n.

pag.). In a 1935 letter Lovecraft wrote that “the limitation of growth among the literate & cultivated, & the concomitant unlimited multiplication of the inferior, ignorant, & unfit, is certainly something about which we may be alarmed. It is rapidly producing a race of lower & lower level – not really extinguishing civilisation, but retarding it & injuring it seriously” (*Letters to Robert Bloch* 306-07). Lovecraft’s unfit women and twisted families highlight this capacity for multiplication. Ultimately, this is what makes monstrous mothers so dangerous to Lovecraft: they are bountiful and uncontrollable, and will overwhelm fit society.

Implicitly Lovecraft may also be indicating that the existence of a terrible mother and conversely the absence of a good mother is at fault in this state of affairs. This terrible mother, in the case of “The Rats in the Walls” or the “Lurking Fear” would have to be a white woman, for both families in these stories descend from European stock. But as we have seen, eugenicists assign different levels of fitness, of acceptability, to white women and in doing develop gradients of whiteness. Thus the biological mothers of the cannibal monsters in these stories are white women but they are degraded, abject women and in that sense their whiteness may be revoked.

In “Pickman’s Model” Lovecraft mentions a painting called ‘Subway Accident’ in which a group of underground creatures can be seen rising through an opening in the floor an onto a Boston Street subway platform, attacking the commuters there. This image seems to encapsulate Lovecraft’s fears, and the fears of eugenicists. The absence of the good mother and the rise of the terrible mother – who is rendered non-white, an Other – will culminate with the destruction of the family and society as a whole. Perhaps birth and control sterilization – as Lovecraft pointed out in one of his letters – could solve this issue, but the running thread of fatalism in his stories seems to indicate the opposite conclusion: the Other will win the battle.

Conclusion

This thesis focuses on a few of Lovecraft's short stories and their connections to women and eugenics discourse. I argue that Lovecraft's vision of women is closely tied to eugenics notions of the female body and that women are automatically Othered in his narratives due to their sex. Further studies should tackle how the biological notions inherent in Lovecraft's fiction may continue to reappear in modern adaptations and works inspired by him, for even though Lovecraft died in 1937, his literary legacy carries on in both books and other media. In this sense, though Lovecraft's women encompass a small fraction of his output, they occupy more prominent spaces in works produced after his death.

For example, a 1970 adaptation of "The Dunwich Horror" opens with a scene showing Lavinia giving birth, then jumps forward in time. The story then becomes the tale of Nancy, a character invented for the movie and played by Sandra Dee. Nancy is a young woman who falls under the hypnotic spell of Wilbur Whateley, who in this version is white, normal looking and able-bodied. A drugged Nancy is taken to a stone altar where a long sex sequence takes place. At the conclusion of the movie Wilbur is defeated and Nancy is saved, but before the credits roll the camera lingers on Nancy's stomach and shows us a superimposed image of a fetus, indicating the Whateley's monstrous lineage lives on. Thus, nearly thirty years after Lovecraft's death we still have a connection between reproduction, sex, womanhood and evil, though in this case the rendering embroiders and modifies the tale to suit the time period: Nancy's rape on a stone altar is depicted like some sort of New Age orgy, with lingering shots of Nancy's thighs.

Rape is one of the novel additions to Lovecraft's output, an element which reoccurs in modern media. Other Lovecraft adaptations like Stuart Gordon's *Dagon*, released in 2001, feature the rape of, not one, but two women, by monsters (the women decide it is better to die than to give birth to the offspring of hideous creatures). An even more recent example of a Lovecraft story, this time not a direct adaptation but a comic book inspired by his mythology, which also combines biological issues, rape and women, can be found in the *Neonomicon* by Alan Moore. The comic book follows FBI Agents Lamper and Brears, who are investigating a copycat killer and end up being kidnapped by a cult of the Esoteric Order of Dagon. Lamper, who is African American, is killed, but his partner is raped first by the cultists, and then by a fish monster. Eventually, the monster lets her escape. Later, we realize the agent is pregnant with the child of the monster. She decides to give birth to it because it will destroy all of humanity, the trauma of her rape causing her to wish the destruction of her own species.

Lovecraft does not provide us details about the reproduction of his inhuman and human characters, so we cannot determine if sexual contact is coercive or non-coercive in his stories. However, it seems doubtful Lovecraft is thinking of rape in his tales. Part of the terror which runs through the stories is the thin line which seems to separate the human from the non-human, and how the blurring and blending of the fit and the Other can have disastrous results. Marceline and Asenath do not appear to be coerced by the men in their lives. Lavinia is proud of her son and the circumstances regarding his conception are never explored. The fish-people who come in contact with the inhabitants of Innsmouth trade gold for the opportunity to mate with humans.¹³ Several modern adaptations instead have utilized explicit rape scenes to emphasize the violent, unwanted contact between humans and the Others. Just as Angela Smith reads the intrusion of

¹³ A case can be made that Audrey is made to bear the unwanted snake spawn of the god Yig.

Frankenstein's monster into the room of Elizabeth as a symbol for "degeneracy encroaching on the virtuous national and racial body" ("Monsters in the Bed" 347), so too we can read the use of rape in modern adaptations as a metaphor for the Others encroaching on fit, white, human bodies.

The violence of Lovecraft's Others is therefore channelled in a new direction, becoming sexual violence and the terror expressed might be the same terror of miscegenation, deformity and depravity present in many of Lovecraft's narratives, now manifesting in a slightly altered form. Yet a constant biological fear remains at the core of these narratives: women can give birth to monsters. Not only that, but women are still monstrous and still bear the traces of eugenic thought. Moore's *Providence* No. 4 – another Lovecraft-inspired comic book – features an albino character, Leticia Wheatley, who has given birth to an invisible monster, John-Divine. Leticia mated with her father, who was possessed by a supernatural entity in order to give birth to John-Divine. Therefore many decades after Lovecraft's death the albino woman, the Other, continues to reproduce.

It is pertinent to analyze the women appearing in these newer stories, movies, comic books, and the like, and to look at the way biological and societal fears are represented when women appear. Many decades after Lovecraft's death women may be appearing more often in adaptations of his work, but that does not mean they have ceased to be Othered.

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