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The Psychology of Fear in H. P. Lovecraft's Gothic Fiction: A Reading of "The Rats In The Walls"

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Abstract

Lovecraft's discernible taste for the Gothic yields peculiarities which are presented and discussed, in terms of the differences between the traditional European Gothic and its distinctive American version. Lovecraft selects specific traits from the Gothic repertoire to stir primal and often irrational emotions in his readers. Traits such as fear of rats and fear of the dark are discussed from both psychological and literary standpoints. The short story "The Rats in the Walls" (1924) is used as object with which to confront both Gothic characteristics and the scientific exploration of phobias.

Keywords: H. P. Lovecraft; Rats; Gothic; Musophobia.

Resumo

O gosto perceptível de Lovecraft pelo gótico produz peculiaridades que são apresentadas e discutidas, em termos das diferenças entre o gótico europeu tradicional e sua distinta versão americana. Lovecraft seleciona traços específicos do repertório gótico para despertar emoções primitivas e muitas vezes irracionais em seus leitores. Traços como o medo de ratos e o medo do escuro são discutidos dos pontos de vista psicológico e literário. O conto "The Rats in the Walls" (1924) é utilizado como objeto para confrontar tanto as características góticas quanto a exploração científica de fobias.

Palavras-chave: H. P. Lovecraft; Ratos; Gótico; Musofobia.

The oak-panelled walls were alive with rats, scampering and milling…
H. P. Lovecraft, The Rats in the Walls

Introduction

It is not unheard of, nor it is insignificant, that H. P. Lovecraft possesses a discernible taste for the Gothic. The *Historical Dictionary of Gothic Literature* describes the Rhode Island-born novelist, poet, editor, and short story writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft

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(1890-1937) as a “crucial figure in 20th-century American Gothic” and maintains that “his Gothic work is timely and saturated with the cultural and political questions of its day.” (Hughes, 2013, p. 172) Furthermore, he is the author of one of the great early works of Gothic criticism in America, a 28,000-word theoretical essay called “Supernatural Horror in Fiction”. Originally published in 1927, the manuscript is Lovecraft’s look on the developments and achievements of horror fiction in the 1920s.

For the last hundred years scholars have scrutinised Lovecraft’s perceived Gothic vein. They have found masterful use of traditional tropes of the genre such as: “haunted spaces and places, haunted people, found things, and insanity” (Jamneck & Joshi, 2017, p. 4) in many of his literary works. Jamneck and Joshi (2017) shed different light on Lovecraft’s “gothicness”. They do not initially conceive his literature as Gothic in the traditional European sense of the word. They argue that stories such as “The Call of Cthulhu”, “The Color Out of Space”, “The Dunwich Horror”, and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” do not stumble upon imposing castles and all the genre-related lore associated with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, for example. They claim the reader is exposed, instead, to decaying fishing villages, rural farmlands, or with sea voyages to mysterious islands.

Tuzkov (2014) agrees that variations on the traditional European gothic themes are in fact present in Lovecraft’s literature; and he claims that they are indeed made peculiar. Tuzkov is referring to the atmosphere of fear, supernatural horror, mystery, the appealing to infernal forces (in half-mystical or half-mythical ways); all qualities present in Lovecraft’s stories, which have received the author’s distinctive treatment, and that have predetermined, in many ways, the development of the modern Neo-Gothic prose in American fiction.

The literary text that shares Gothic elements from European and American traditions, and where both allegories meet in an unmistakably overt way, is “The Rats in the Walls”, a 15-page short-story first published in *Weird Tales* magazine in March of 1924 (and in many anthologies and collections ever since). The text tells of the descent into madness of the protagonist called Delapore, an American who inherits an ancestral Estate in England called Exham Priory. It turns out that his long-lost family hide a dark secret there; they keep a hidden city-like site underneath the house, where they raise people as “human cattle” to cater to their lust for human flesh. In addition, the walls of the house above are crawling with rats.

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The hybrid traits that tinge Lovecraft's Gothic fiction have been analysed by many critics (Waller, 2002; Geeraert, 2010; Tuzkov, 2014; Reilly, 2014). The following section discusses some of these peculiar characteristics in practical textual analysis.

A Frantic Search for the American Gothic

Tuzkov summarises Lovecraft's transitional Gothic elements as holders of the following traits: "doom of human civilisation, overcoming the limits between modern and ancient worlds, between reality and dreams, perception of human life as mysticism and horror, aspiration to make the reader feel the reality of the fantastic plot." (2014, p. 62) The short story "The Rats in the Walls" epitomises the use of these traits and goes much further, exploiting readers' fears. Let us briefly analyse each on of these traits.

In "The Rats in the Walls", the 'doom of human civilisation' is causally related to the fate of the remaining human livestock, which survives in the Estate's underground only to be eventually devoured by the rats which inhabit the city's cesspits. Although initially discussing the tales of Cthulhu, Tuzkov (2014) refers to the fact that some stories lead the reader to believe that humanity is not the only civilisation which has inhabited the Earth (he means specifically in Lovecrafts's fictional universe). Quite the contrary, at different points in Lovecraftian historical time, humanity is seen as one among many in a great variety of highly advanced civilisations. According to Geeraert "for every level of civilisational (scientific, artistic, intellectual) achievement Lovecraft creates, he adds an existential level above it which goes unexplained." (2010, p. 86) In the case of "The Rats in the Walls" the author might as well be exposing his "obsessive fears of human degeneration or reverse-evolution" (Geeraert, 2010, p. 4)

Logic dictates that if there are more advanced civilisations, there are also less advanced ones. This logic is applied to the contextual events and characters that inhabit the underground of Exham Priory; there is an entire race of people which have been so starved to the point of devolution. The reader learns this through narrative evidence found underground: "the skulls denoted nothing short of utter idiocy, cretinism, or primitive semi-apedom." (Lovecraft, 1924, p. 30) The transformation of that entire society may not be entirely due to starvation, for: "Upon examination of the settlement the group discovers that the inhabitants of the grotto, presumably ancestors of the de la Poers, extend back earlier than the first Roman occupation of Britain, and that they have inter-bred with at

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least one non-human species" (Reilly, 2014, p. 58) Only their remains tell their story. With this description Lovecraft outlines what he sees as the literal possibility of devolution through the process of degeneration, in an "almost eugenic fear of the possibility of reverse evolution." (Geeraert, 2010, p. 29)

As for 'overcoming the limits between modern and ancient worlds', the inheritance and ensuing restoration of the ruining Exham Priory bridges this historical gap:

> Exham [was] much studied because of its peculiarly composite architecture; an architecture involving Gothic towers resting on a Saxon or Romanesque substructure, whose foundation in turn was of a still earlier order or blend of orders -- Roman, and even Druidic or native Cymric, if legends speak truly (Lovecraft, 1924, p. 25).

Through the narrator, Lovecraft pieces together an outline of Exham Priory's past, from prehistoric time through various conquests of England (Roman, Saxon, Danish, Norman). In addition, he traces the stories surrounding the protagonist's family's possession of the estate up to 1261; there "Lovecraft recounts the apparent progress of civilisation throughout English history, symbolised by the increasingly elaborate architecture erected on the site." (Geeraert, 2010, p. 27)

The 'path between reality and dreams', craftly inserted in the story, is inescapably paved with disturbing imagery; as can be noted in Delapore's description of something as trivial as his retirement to bed:

> I retired early, being very sleepy, but was harassed by dreams of the most horrible sort. I seemed to be looking down from an immense height upon a twilit grotto, knee-deep with filth, where a white-bearded daemon swineherd drove about with his staff a flock of fungous, flabby beasts whose appearance filled me with unutterable loathing. Then, as the swineherd paused and nodded over his task, a mighty swarm of rats rained down on the stinking abyss and fell to devouring beasts and man alike (Lovecraft, 1924, p. 28).

The surreal being which emerges in Delapore's dreams is what motivates him to explore the underground terrain. The grotto he sees in his dreams eerily matches a similar place he encounters in the subterranean site below the house. The nightmarish landscape suggests: "that he has tapped into ancestral memory." (Reilly, 2014, p. 58) The Romantics tended to idealize the middle ages, noble savagery, and societies seen as less civilised: "Lovecraft shares a romantic nostalgia for the beauty of past ages, a focus on dreams, a strong sense of loss, and a bitter antipathy to modernity" however, in "The Rats in the Walls", Lovecraft refers to the Middle Ages as "a time of savagery and superstition, a

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contemptible historical period but a ripe vein to mine for the morbid and debauched imagery of nightmares" (Geeraert, 2010, p. 30).

The revelation of Delapore's family's past as well as the transgenerational bouts of insanity which plague the protagonist lead him not only to wound but also to attempt to eat his friend Norrys in the dark of the cavernous underground city. Geeraert sees Delapore descent into madness as a "rapid reverse-evolution of an American aristocrat" (2010, p. 26) that takes place before the reader's very eyes.

Although the concept of hereditary mental disease was much studied in the eighteenth century, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Alexander Tweedie's *Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine* notes that "the hereditary predisposition to scrofula, consumption, gout and insanity," has become "entirely a part of the medical creed." (In: Waller, [1847] 2002, p. 410) Beliefs concerning hereditary disease were so widespread that the fear of marrying into families with a history of mental illnesses was a real ordeal; thus: "parents often sedulously examined the relatives of their children's suitors for evidence of chronic disease; after titles, cash, and connections, the family's record of health was often the next most serious criterion used when deciding whom their progeny should marry" (Waller, 2002, p. 411).

Interestingly enough, the madness which ails Delapore's family is not restricted to his bloodline, as at least one other person not genetically related, namely the psychic investigator Thornton, descends into madness there as well, suggesting that the source of insanity rested in the house, and not in the bloodline. Nowadays, social sciences view this etiological category as a popular resource for "introducing social distance between the immoral and the respectable elements of society" (Waller, 2002, p. 413).

'Losing grasp of what is real and what is not' manifests in a variety of ways in the story. The white-bearded daemon swineherd he finds in the underground of the house can be metaphorically linked to the protagonist's guilt; possibly guilt over his family's enslavement of an entire population (symbolically not so far removed from the enslavement of African-Americans in the American South), or possibly guilt over World War I soldiers sent to their deaths by high-ranking army officers sitting in cozy offices (probably indicating Delapore's feeling of helplessness and despair over the death of his own son). Geeraert sees the fact that Delapore's son had been fatally wounded in the Great War as "an appropriate metaphor for the historical fate of the European aristocracy" (2010, p. 26).

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Some critics have accounted for some of Lovecraft's problematic elements related to racial bigotry. The controversy over his cat's name, Niggerman, has been tackled oftentimes. Rusty Burke writes that:

> […] guilt over the oppression of blacks, over deliberately depriving other human beings of the very freedom the white Southerner claims so fiercely as his birthright, over systematically depriving an entire race of their very human dignity, plays an important role in the psychic makeup of the white Southerner (Reilly, 2014, p. 187).

Lovecraft himself thought "a world in which physical force (…) determine[s] the dominance and content of the population of sentient beings is a reprehensible world" (Geeraert, 2010, p. 27) Furthermore he was disturbed by Darwinian evolution, especially with the notion of the survival of the fittest. Social Darwinism just did not sit right with him.

The other possibility, the one which links guilt with war, may have been Lovecraft's attempt at connoting the traumatic neurosis of those WWI soldiers' who succumb to the intense stress of war. It was believed that he huge firepower from the (then) newly mechanised artillery could lead to undetectable brain damage, since some men were seen eerily 'freezing' in the battlefields. This idea of brain injury gave rise to the term 'shellshock', since "it was no coincidence that a splintering 'shell' was now connected to an obliterating 'shock'" (Leese, 2002, p. 1) therefore "Walter [Delapore]'s protestations might be read as an inversion of the conception of shellshock." (Reilly, 2014, p. 60) Celia Kingsbury argues for just this inversion when she writes that shellshock is an "emotional response to conditions so horrendous that they remain outside the pale of human comprehension, even though they are conditions wrought by human action (2002, p. 82) Reilly (2014) acknowledges that Lovecraft knew little of shellshock or its victims, and that his general attitude towards psychoanalysis was dismissive, however, it is interesting that Delapore is portrayed as a recovering victim of psychological trauma.

Regarding the image of the white-bearded daemon swineherd which crops up in Delapore's dreams, it can be said that the presence of a demon figure has been historically linked with a material (yet mythical) manifestation of guilt. And this, in turn, links to the earlier professed 'perception of human life as mysticism and horror'. Lovecraft apparently believed that the emotionally unsatisfying nature of scientific reductionism would lead to a retreat from the very idea of truth. Such a crisis of confidence in the project of determining truth is a testament to Lovecraft's insight into human psychology (Geeraert, 2010). Restrictions on truth yield restrictions on belief, which in turn are implicit in restriction of emotions, since emotions rely heavily on beliefs. Lovecraft displayed keen

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insight into such matters, with a comprehension that emotionally appealing propositions are significantly more striking when they are also believed to be true.

As for the 'aspiration to make the reader feel the reality of the fantastic plot', it is perhaps important to point out that, from a social sciences perspective, rats are no mere background vermin in literature, but rather compelling manifestations of what society wishes to hide or to purposefully ignore. Rats have been considered glaring symbols of poverty, uncleanliness, contamination, and disease, in other words, a shameful display of society's failings and a commentary on the horrors of deprivation. Furthermore, Lovecraft's unique vision of existential horror, especially when it refers to the rich connection between fantasy and reality, "speaks directly to the current western intellectual situation, particularly the popular conflict between certain versions of monotheistic religion and the scientific concept of evolution playing out in America and elsewhere." (Geeraert, 2010, p. 4) In that vein, religion is in the business of signifying fantasy as intensely as science is in the business of describing reality.

Lovecraft helps establish crucial groundwork for the American strand of Gothic by engaging retrospective terror and arcane unease. Among the shared traits between European Gothic and its Atlantic Western version is the literary use of common phobias. Lovecraft uses actual superstition (i. e., fear of things that are wholly imaginary) in his fiction, as well as "'useful' or 'adaptive' superstition, which contains a core of truth." (Geeraert, 2010, p. 27) The phobias used with the literary objective of stirring emotions in readers include fears related to animals (spiders, dogs, insects, bats); fears related to the natural environment (caves, loud noises, storms, darkness); fears related to man-made environments (decaying settings, haunted houses, castles); fears related to blood, injury, or medical issues (broken bones, falls, personality disorders); and fears related to the supernatural (ghosts, vampires, zombies, curses, prophecies). In "The Rats in the Walls" Lovecraft goes on to tackle a bundle of these primal fears. The next sections cover two of these: the fear of rats and the fear of darkness, respectively.

'Of Mice and Men': Why We Fear Rats

Phobia is a kind of psychological condition which is triggered when a person feels grave danger from a specific situation or an object (Jeremitsky et al., 2005). When triggered, the individual feels a sudden wave of anxiety which, in turn, triggers stress or

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fear response. Some scholars claim that phobia is a conditioned response developed over time as a result of specific childhood incident or stories (Alvi, Qadir & Ali, 2019).

Popular culture also influences phobias in many ways, including “acquisition of fear, prevalence rates, the types of common phobias, and treatment-seeking behaviour.” (Milosevic & McCabe, 2015, p. 318) In fact, phobias can be acquired via multiple means, for example, through “a direct traumatic experience (e.g. being bitten by a mouse), observation of another person’s fear in response to a mouse (a parent jumping on a chair when startled by a mouse), and/or being exposed to negative information about mice or other rodents (e.g. they spread disease).” (Milosevic & McCabe, 2015, p. 229-230)

Throughout history, the fear of mice and rats, *musophobia* (also called *murophobia* and *suriphobia*) has been associated with the spread of certain deadly diseases by rodents. Unsurprisingly, the bubonic plague that wiped out half of Europe’s population in the middle-ages was carried through by fleas on rats. For this reason, some researchers have proposed that *musophobia* may be predominantly rooted in disease-avoidance rather than predator-defense concerns (Matchett & Davey, 1991).

Phobias not only affect the mental behaviour of an individual, but also their social manners of conduct. It is usually classified in three kinds: social phobia, agoraphobia, and specific phobia. The fear of mice falls under the latter. Although the traditional description of musophobia involves an excessive and irrational fear of mice, once understood, one can notice that perhaps this fear bears rational explanation. Individuals with this phobia generally fear other rodents such as rats and hamsters. It is one of the most common phobias along with fear of serpents and arachnids (Milosevic & McCabe, 2015). Statistically, it is more prevalent in females and children, rather than males (Kraft, 2010).

From a neurological point of view, when an individual with *musophobia* encounters a rat, the insular cortex of the brain processes the event as an intense situation, and the amygdala initiates a hormonal signal that prepares them for a defensive response (Straube et al., 2005).

Understanding that humans are larger and stronger than rats, studies which seek to explain the mechanism behind the causal relationships have shown that fear-relevant physiological response arises after quick, unconscious, or pre-attentive stimulus analysis, that is, as a rapid approach-avoidance response (Mennella, Vilarem & Grèzes, 2020)

From a purely evolutionary standpoint, musophobia seems to have risen from “phylogenetic mechanisms which favor old over new evolutionary dangers and affect the

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rules of aversive learning which govern the acquisition of fear." (Marks & Tobena, 1990, p. 365). Similarly, from a functional-evolutionary perspective, the fear of rats stem from the context of encounters between animals (of various sizes) and humans in which the former threatens the latter. In other words, the fear of rats originates as a "predatory defense system whose function is to allow animals to avoid and escape predators" (Ohman, 1986, p. 123).

Nowadays it is known that many common specific phobias have evolutionary basis, akin to other anxiety disorders. Incidentally, being afraid of poisonous snakes and of carnivorous predators have surely saved many lives throughout history.

Sometimes phobias are portrayed in popular culture as involving a humorous response. Comical depictions often involve an exaggerated fear response to a seemingly innocuous object, for example, "a large, muscular man appearing to be extremely afraid of a small creature, such as a mouse" (Milosevic & McCabe, 2015, p. 319). Such response would seem to fall outside the stereotypical definition of masculinity, and that may be humorous to some. Modern medicine and psychology – and common sense – view this type of depiction as harmful, as it may discourage the distressed individual from seeking treatment. From a clinical perspective, any type of phobia, if left unchecked, can become dangerous for the individual, however "treatment [...] involves progressive relaxation, systematic desensitisation, medication, virtual reality and hypnotherapy." (Alvi, Qadir & Ali, 2019, p. 2)

In conclusion, rats in popular imagination are deeply potent animals. They are not only harbingers of the Black Death, but they also represent disease and dying. In the Gothic lore, this link to such fundamentally medieval disease makes them repositories of the past (much the same way they scurried across people's feet and spread illness in the so-called dark ages, they still can). Rats feature heavily in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, as can be seen in the popular quote: `Rats, rats, rats! Hundreds, thousands, millions of them, and every one a life.' Rats also feature in some of Stoker's short stories such as "The Judge's House" (1891) and "The Burial of Rats" (1914). In these two stories Stoker used rats as surrogate for haunting, in tandem with decaying nature, and these examples go to show how these constantly present, unlikeable, often unseen urban pests, remain powerful vehicles for delivering horror (Crofts & Hatter, 2019).

Rats, however, are not the sole source of fear Lovecraft cunningly evokes with his literature. There is also this strange pervasive qualm called nyctophobia.

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‘Hankering, Gross, Mystical, Nude’: Fear of the Dark

Even though God tells Jonah, in the Old Testament, to get up and go to Nineveh, Jonah traces the opposite path, heading away from where God had told him to go. His journey can be traced in a downward line in a 2D graphic representation. Jonah begins by getting down from his bed, and getting out of his house downhill towards Jafo, and then down to the docks in the port, and down into a boat, and down into its bilge (the boat’s basement) only to get eaten by a big fish and getting further down the water inside the creature’s maw in an aphotic environment (where there is nothing but darkness).

Much as Jonah from the Bible, almost every character in “The Rats in the Walls” traces a similar downward line in 2D graphic terms. The protagonist, of course, goes down the stone steps of Exham Priory, as he himself describes: “As I descended the stairs myself, I became suddenly aware of sounds in the great room below; sounds of a nature which could not be mistaken.” (p. 28). After waking up from one of his nightmares, Delapore hears the scuffling of rats, and he follows the descending noise of the rats and discovers a vault even lower than the house's lowest chamber. His cat also darts ahead and into the ancient flight of steps. And the rats, too: “These creatures, in numbers apparently inexhaustible, were engaged in one stupendous migration from inconceivable heights to some depth conceivably or inconceivably below.” (p. 28) Even the servants do not escape the same path, as Delapore notes: “two servants pushed open the massive door. They were searching the house for some unknown source of disturbance which had thrown all the cats into a snarling panic and caused them to plunge precipitately down several flights of stairs and squat, yowling, before the closed door to the sub-cellar.” (p. 28) Delapore goes further down with the two men; as he describes: “I went down to the door of the sub-cellar, but found the cats already dispersed. Later I resolved to explore the crypt below” (p. 28) Even in his dreams Delapore sees a grotto far down from an immense height, and even rats rain down on this (half-oneiric, half-real) abyss.

And what does he find there? More darkness. Underground the sunlight does not penetrate, and humans (and most other animals) fear what they cannot see. The lack of any kind of visual stimuli increases anxiety, uncertainty, and tension in people (Grillon et al., 1997). In the Jewish-Christian mythology (and in both oral storytelling and written literature that sprung directly or indirectly from it) Heaven is supposed to be somewhere

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up, and Hell is supposed to be somewhere down. Tales in popular culture are brimming with examples of whatever is 'down' (or coming from underneath, from the depths) being likened to evil. And what is evil, generally causes fear.

The impact of folk tales and stories are not to be underestimated, for they play an important role in the development of people. Although children are more susceptible to this kind of fear (darkness, superstitious evil), it is, nevertheless, a basic emotion that can be experienced in all developmental stages (Bhugra, 2006). The idea that storytelling can lead to the formation of a collective unconsciousness can help to explain how different fears are perceived all over the world (Bhugra, 2006). Studies demonstrate that ethnic and cultural differences pose different effects on specific fears and, naturally, not all people express fear the same way (Meltzer et al., 2008).

When humans die, they are buried underground (in most cultures) – six feet under, as is the case stated in "Orders conceived and published by the Lord Major and aldermen of the city of London, concerning the infection of the plague", published in 1665. This 16-page document lays outs a long list of restrictions on how people are to travel and behave during the plague. It also details how burials of the dead are to be carried out, whether before sunrise or after sunset, and most notably, it contains the key sentence "that all the Graves shall be at least six foot deep" (London, [1665] 2011, p. 10). In consequence, fear of death is strongly associated with fear of darkness and, in turn, of night (when, much as in the grave, there is no light). Fear of the dark receives the scientific name of Nyctophobia.

Nyctopohobia is more common in children and is considered a normal response during natural development. Most of the time, this fear is short-lived, but in some cases it can be problematic. It can persist throughout development and strengthen in magnitude (King et al., 2005). These fears are developed in specific points of child development due to environmental factors, and they may not necessarily be rational or realistic. Older children, on the other hand, tend to have more realistic fears (Meltzer et al., 2008) According to Levos and Zachilli "it may be that the unrealistic fear of the dark that is seen in children might have transformed into a more realistic fear of the dark in adults. Adults may be afraid of the dark on the basis that it could put them at a higher risk for victimisation." (2015, p. 103)

Nasar and Jones (1997) examine how aspects of concealment, hiding places, and dark spots influence how people view fear of crime at nighttime. They speculate that fear

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of victimisation generally causes people to be less likely to participate in activities that take place in the evening when it is dark, because simply the idea of what may happen at night induces higher levels of anxiety in those individuals. Furthermore, some individuals believe that, even if they are afraid when no danger is present, their reactions may save them if there is ever a situation where a threat exists (Stephen King has told many times that as an adult, he knows that no supernatural hand will come out from under the bed to pull his feet at night, nevertheless, he always sleeps with his feet covered). The researchers found that participants feel a decreased sense of safety when there are numerous places for other people to hide in the dark. For these individuals, an approaching stranger can produce different levels of fear in dim or ill-lit contexts. Interestingly, they found out that it is not even necessary for the individual to make eye-contact or to see a silhouette of the stranger, because simply the acknowledgement that there may be a stranger there is enough to induce fear (Nasar & Jones, 1997).

Devereux (2009) proposes that human's tendency to fear darkness is neuroanatomically and neurophysiologically determined. Peculiarities in humans' night-vision make them diurnal creatures. Our night-vision is distinctly inferior from that of other animals, such as tarsiers, cats, and deer. Thus, our species' activity, whether we are:

> prehistoric or primitive hunters or a member of some contemporary industrial society, calls for an amount of nocturnal activity which is probably greater than the nocturnal activity of any other essentially diurnal species, whose night-vision is equally inadequate for that purpose. Since, biologically speaking, darkness is not the normal setting for human activity, it is self-evident that the necessity to perform various activities in the dark imposes a considerable strain upon man, especially since the primacy of vision over the other senses is particularly conspicuous in the human species" (Devereux, 2009, p. 88).

Eventually, Jonah was let off easy, with only a rebuke from God. The rest must live with their biological inadequacies imposed by the laws of physics. Each individual with its own relationship with irrational fear. If fear of the dark (as many others) warns of unsavoury dangers and saves lives, what is to be said about readers of Gothic fiction who relish in rats and darkness and seek them as forms of amusement and catharsis? With no amount of irony, let us just hope readers get what they wish for.

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Final Considerations

One can say with a tremendous amount of certainty that Lovecraft finds success in his exploitation of both rational and irrational fears in his literature. The culture of consuming fear is paramount in this success. Lovecraft summarises this notion in the opening paragraph of his seminal 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' claiming that: "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form." (2013 [1927], p. 4)

If writers of Gothic literature indeed reflect in their works the concerns and fears of the times in which they are created (Oakes, 2000) then "The Rats in the Walls" indeed epitomises the fictional use of some of these fears. First, Lovecraft uses rats as literary device to startle and destabilise readers. Moreover, the use of rats to tackle readers' latent fears also seems to subsume Lovecraft's assessment of Gothic quality in his fictional rhetoric. Consistently, "rats are inherently Gothic animals; uncannily intelligent, cannibalistic, constantly present, often unseen but constantly watching. As a single entity, or as part of a pack, the rat is a powerful vehicle for delivering horror in the popular Gothic imagination." (Hatter & Crofts, 2020, p. 1)

Secondly, he draws a downward line with his characters that lead them all underground to the pith of the unknown, where darkness lies: "tracing a path of reversed evolution, Delapore's descent through his house renders by way of physical movement the horrors that Lovecraft has in store." (Avery, 2019, p. 48)

Readers plunge voluntarily in Gothic literature delighting in the stirring of feelings it brings, for much the same reasons people decide to go on rollercoaster rides. Fear with the underlying knowledge of safety can be quite pleasurable – for some. All in all, it boils down to the gratification which stems from fear, and "The Rats in the Walls" is spot on on the exploration of this emotion.

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