

Lovely lovecraft: the complexity of "the shunned house"



While we often cast aside shock value as a cheap method of producing a volatile reaction from readers and filmgoers, the fact remains that decay, disfigurement, and other elements of the grotesque are capable of establishing a theme and perhaps even aiding in the progression of a narrative when used appropriately. One could even argue the necessity of transgressive imagery to create potent allegorical figures within a given work. In film this is commonly portrayed within a subgenre called body horror. Despite the exploitative style of some movies such as *Cannibal Holocaust* or *Hostel*, others like *The Fly* articulate dense morality through bodily malformation. Often heralded as one of the horror genre's most revered novelists, H. P. Lovecraft is a master orchestrator of these and other elements with his influence haunting much of today's contemporary horror films and literature. Lovecraft's novelette "The Shunned House" provides several effective means of asserting bleak themes of decay, neglect, and the ugliness of our own demons through the use of genuinely perturbing symbolism.

Early on Lovecraft makes it known that the titular house saw considerable death and trauma, with the narrator suggesting that "it was plainly unhealthy, perhaps because of the dampness and fungous growth in the cellar, the general sickish smell..." (113). A focus on smell and the smattering of adjectives related to health appear as an intentional attempt on Lovecraft's part to thrust his readers into a dark and uncomfortable place, readily introducing decay and declining health as a primary theme. The narrator goes on to introduce some of the traumas permeating the house, mentioning the "frightful proportion of persons [who] died there" as well as

the fact that “ those who did not die displayed in varying degree...a decline of the mental faculties, which spoke ill for the salubriousness of the building” (113). Note the use of the antiquated term ‘ salubriousness’ as it subtly personifies the house as a sickened being. Though the most logical assumption would be that people are dying in the house simply due to it being unkempt, some might take a shot in the dark and argue that Lovecraft is urging his audience to willfully suspend their disbelief in order to float the idea that rather the house is dilapidated on account of being able to “ feel” the residual negative energies that perforate its walls and infect its inhabitants accordingly.

Notions of decay are discussed in greater detail whereupon the narrator is exploring the house and discovers in its cellar a “ mouldy [sic] floor with its uncanny shapes and distorted, half-phosphorescent fungi” (126). To provide a little context, the narrator had been examining the house for some time and there is nary a mention of any previous attempt to rid the place of the fungi. We often associate fungi with all things pestilent and parasitic. Perhaps the fungi could be read, in a very abstract light, as representing the negative energy humans often stow and have eating away at their emotions hence why some inhabitants of the house suffer from “ a decline of the mental faculties” (126). Another way of looking at it would be to imagine the house as a metaphor for society and the fungi as the innate ugliness that society is left to deal with on a daily basis. Further credence is lent to this point when shortly after noticing the fungi, the narrator experiences an apparition that comes in the form of “ a subtle, sickish, luminous vapour [sic] which as it hung trembling in the dampness seemed to develop vague and

shocking suggestions of form..." (126). Notable here is the use of 'sickish' as an almost personifying adjective given that this particular passage might insinuate that the 'vapour' is taking the form of a human specter. This is ultimately left to the reader's imagination. Some might read it as simply a cloud of mold spores in a stereotypically dusty cellar, though the fact that Lovecraft opts to linger on this particular scene might imply a different meaning. If the 'vapour' was indeed taking the shape of a human, it could serve as an allegory for degradation resulting from negative energy. Combine a decrepit, notoriously violent house with years upon years of neglect and you're bound to see its residual negativity take some pretty nasty forms.

Speaking of nasty forms, no analysis of "The Shunned House" would be complete without taking a peek at the penultimate scene near the end. Our narrator has started digging a hole in the cellar in hopes of finding the source of some wretched smell emanating from it. "As [he] turned up the stinking black earth...[his] spade caus[ed] a viscous yellow ichor to ooze from the white fungi which it severed" (137). Contrasting the story's aforementioned apparition, Lovecraft is leaving nothing to the reader's imagination here. All manner of grossness is on full, gratuitous display; if the ground wasn't already putrid enough it's now oozing something that sounds an awful lot like the pus that seeps from a popped pimple. This scenery is captivating as it is effectively nauseating, further elucidating themes of decay within the narrative while also perhaps serving as a precursor to the contemporary body horror subgenre. Corpses leak all sorts of sebaceous, gooey goodies shortly after expiry and I can't help but feel that Lovecraft is

trying to manufacture his shunned house to do the same and then some. Things only get nastier as the narrator continues to dig until he stumbles upon something “ fishy and glassy—a kind of semi-putrid congealed jelly...” which turned out to be the elbow of an “ unthinkable abomination” (137-138). Again Lovecraft presents readers with perpetually squelchy visions designed explicitly to induce cringing and squirming. I feel thoroughly “ grossed out” reading this in 2018 and I can only imagine what was going through the heads of these readers when the story was published some 81 years ago. It may seem like a little bit of a stretch but this scene could serve as a potent example of grotesque allegory tying back into the story’s primary theme of decay. The narrator represents the troubled everyman constantly digging for something but absent to the fact that he’s only digging further and further into the uglier side of himself which consequently appears in the form of the gnarly beast at the bottom of the hole. Dig yourself deep enough and all you’ll have left are your demons.

In sharp contrast to the pulpy nature of many other works of fiction, H. P. Lovecraft articulately weaves elements of the unknown and unearthly into a simultaneously stomach-churning and thought-provoking narrative. As its title might suggest in abstract, “ The Shunned House” personifies complicated themes of decay and confronting demons by way of a dilapidated house and the otherworldly being in its cellar. Noted filmmaker David Cronenberg once said: “ I think of horror films as art, as films of confrontations. Films that make you confront aspects of your own life that are difficult to face. Just because you’re making a horror film doesn’t mean you can’t make an artful film” (Cronenberg). Perhaps the same could be said

equally in regards to horror literature as there is often far more to be found than a series of sinister shocks and creepy crawlies.