

***Horror as Racism in H. P. Lovecraft.* By John L. Steadman. (New York/London/Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. 243 pages, £17.99 pbk). ISBN 9798765107690.**

There is a well-rehearsed tension at the heart of any critical engagement with the works of H. P. Lovecraft. On the one hand, his influence on supernatural fiction is profound. In the words of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, due to his fiction and critical writing, Lovecraft ‘became the most influential figure in horror fiction after Edgar Allan Poe’ (2009, 607). Simultaneously, Lovecraft’s virulent racist and xenophobic beliefs, realised in his fiction via overt metaphoric and literal racism, have presented and continue to present any critic with a problem: to what extent can the art be separated from the artist? Are we to dismiss the work, or are we to ignore the author’s racism? John L. Steadman’s latest book, *Horror as Racism in H. P. Lovecraft: White Fragility in the Weird Tales*, seeks a middle ground by examining Lovecraft’s work through Robin DiAngelo’s concept of ‘white fragility’, acknowledging Lovecraft’s racism but also recognising the significance of the author’s work.

Steadman’s central argument is that Lovecraft’s weird fiction reflects his deep-rooted feelings of resentment and anger towards people of colour and that it proselytizes his racist and xenophobic beliefs via two core racist narratives, firstly that western society is in decline as a direct result of miscegenation and, secondly, that the enslavement of ‘inferior’ races by ‘superior’ civilizations is endemic and justifiable. Through a close reading of Lovecraft’s personal history, fiction and non-fiction, Steadman seeks to enhance our understanding of the author’s work and thereby enable the reader to navigate the aforementioned tension. Central to Steadman’s thesis is the argument that Lovecraft’s ‘racism and white fragility *do* affect the validity of his thought on all levels’ (209). Such a position places Steadman in diametric opposition to critics such as S. T. Joshi, who argue that we ‘should separate Lovecraft’s racial hatred from the rest of his philosophical, intellectual, and political thought’ (209).

Steadman begins by examining Lovecraft’s early, privileged life and, crucially, the ‘traumatic loss’ (18) of that privilege on the death of his father and his family’s subsequent impoverishment when Lovecraft was fourteen years old. For Steadman, this marks the beginning of a ‘pattern of loss

and failure' that 'defines Lovecraft's personal and professional life', a pattern that is reflected in Lovecraft's fiction as his 'privileged protagonists' experience such a pattern, although one that is 'much more catastrophic than merely a diminishment in class status or economic want' (5). For Steadman, this trauma of loss intensified Lovecraft's 'virulent, aggressive' racism, transcending even the systemic racism of the time (34). Specifically, Steadman characterises Lovecraft's dislike of and revulsion for 'hybrids' (those of mixed-race) as 'psychotic', arguing it fuels his first racist narrative, the miscegenation narrative (43). Steadman's close reading of Lovecraft's non-fiction writing identifies numerous examples of this racist narrative in order to 'show exactly how intense Lovecraft's racism was' so that the reader 'can fully appreciate how this hatred is transformed and sublimated, in Lovecraft's later fiction, into the creation of compelling fantasy and horror' (46).

Indeed, a strength of this work is the breadth and depth of Steadman's engagement with Lovecraft's own writing, the author's biography, and current critical discourse. Steadman subjects Lovecraft's early weird fiction - including 'Arthur Jermyn' (1920), 'Herbert West – Reanimator' (1922) and 'The Horror at Red Hook' (1925) – to close reading in order to demonstrate how the author 'uses racist images (...), [and] the miscegenation narrative, to enhance the horror in these tales and to increase the reader's interest' (64). Steadman justifies such a biographical reading of Lovecraft's fiction on the grounds that 'Lovecraft always puts a bit of himself (...) into [these] stories, and invariably, he brings along something that is new and fresh – but of course, often deeply disturbing as well, not only on personal levels but on moral, philosophical, and metaphysical grounds' (65). Crucially, Steadman praises the literary quality of this work, despite the egregious nature of the racist narrative, arguing '[t]here is (...) always a distinction to be made between subject matter and quality in any literary work and we must respect that distinction' (112).

Steadman uses his engagement with other critics and commentators such as Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock to address the so-called 'Lovecraft paradox', that 'Lovecraft ... could on the one hand hold such noxious views concerning race and on the other assert the relative insignificance of the entire [human] species' (130), in the face of the naturally superior cosmic slave masters like the Mi-Go or the Elder Things. In response, Steadman reminds us that for

Lovecraft 'hybrid degenerative monsters, Blacks, and anthropoids are not human and are, moreover, a threat to the safety and longevity of the [Anglo-Saxon] white race' (131). For Steadman, 'Lovecraft's racism is an attempt (...) to protect [Western] civilization' (132). However, the author's 'admiration for (and implicit fear of) the cosmic slave masters (...) reflects Lovecraft's frank admission (...) that humankind as a whole will eventually face an apocalypse that will ultimately destroy all human beings' (132). Steadman tests this overarching hypothesis with a close reading of Lovecraft's later weird fiction, those tales – including 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (1927)', 'At the Mountains of Madness' (1931) and 'The Shadow Out of Time (1934) - that pit humankind against the cosmic slave masters. Steadman's reading of these narratives leads him to identify repeatedly Lovecraft's second racist narrative, that superior races are 'naturally predisposed to the practice of slavery' and are 'even justified in the practice' (160).

Steadman's close reading of Lovecraft's writing makes a compelling case for the driving force of the two recurring racist narratives across the author's weird fiction. However, there are number of areas in which Steadman's thesis is either not altogether intellectually coherent or omits key considerations. Firstly, regarding the slave master/slave racist narrative, whilst Lovecraft does indeed see slavery as endemic amongst superior races, an argument can also be made that Lovecraft sees slavery as ultimately unsustainable and injurious to those superior races. For Steadman, 'At the Mountains of Madness' is a 'nearly perfect expression of Lovecraft's slave master/slave narrative' (180). However, the story's cosmic slave masters – the Elder Things – are undone by the slave rebellion, the uprising of the shoggoths, that evokes Lovecraft's 'very real fear that there might be similar uprisings on the part of Blacks and other members of the hated races in American cities' (176). Therefore, while Steadman suggests that Lovecraft '[holds] up the Elder Things' civilization, along with the institution of slavery, as ideals that human civilizations should strive to emulate' (181), Lovecraft is also arguing that such civilizations are always destined to fail. Such an inescapable source of anxiety, and therefore fear, is worthy of greater exploration than that afforded in Steadman's thesis.

Secondly, Steadman's use of DiAngelo's concept of white fragility is problematic. Steadman states that Lovecraft 'could easily have served as the poster child for the fragile, white male in his generation', defining white fragility as 'a process that can occur when a white person's racial worldviews are challenged' (1). However, in Steadman's own reading of Lovecraft's fiction and non-fiction there is nothing to suggest that Lovecraft ever felt that his aggressive racist views were *challenged*. Rather, Steadman attributes Lovecraft's fragility to the loss of social and economic status that occurred on the death of his father, the beginning of a pattern of loss and failure that, in Steadman's view, intensified his racist views. Such an interpretation of white fragility is not consistent with DiAngelo's own thesis as articulated in *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism* (2018). For DiAngelo, white fragility occurs when those who see themselves as 'racially progressive' are confronted by their own complicity with the systemic racism that is an inevitable consequence of being part of the white hegemony (2018, 4-5). Clearly, Lovecraft would not have perceived himself as racially progressive, and therefore this definition of white fragility cannot apply. There would indeed be value in exploring in detail Lovecraft's work, through the lens of DiAngelo's thesis, and particularly what Lovecraft erroneously says about race as a *biological* rather than *social* construct. However, Steadman's engagement with white fragility is no more than cursory, confined to the problematic attribution of white fragility to a loss of privilege in social and economic terms.

Thirdly, Steadman uses a biographical reading of Lovecraft's racist views to identify two core racist narratives, with the suggestion that this approach should preclude other readings. Indeed, Steadman is critical of what he sees as a 'growing tendency in Lovecraft scholarship on the part of scholars and critics to interject themselves into their analyses in ways that may not be particularly "seemly", pursuing 'pet peeves and theories that these writers cherish rather than [engaging with] Lovecraft's views and what he was trying to accomplish in his weird tales' (195). However, Steadman is also using material extrinsic to the texts, albeit biographically derived, in order to interrupt Lovecraft's work, thereby privileging perceived authorial intent over all other readings. Whilst it is appropriate to insist that any interpretation of the texts be supported by a close reading of the primary

material, such interpretations do not need to be confined to the ‘influences that shaped Lovecraft’s world view’ (197), as this unnecessarily invalidates readings of the texts that engage with Lovecraft’s work through the lens of more recent concepts, such as ‘white fragility’. For example, it would have been entirely appropriate (and indeed interesting) for Steadman to have analysed the horror created by Lovecraft’s positioning of white Anglo-Saxons as the superior race in discourse with DiAngelo’s view of ‘white supremacy’ as the description of a ‘sociopolitical economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefit those defined and perceived as white’ (2018, 30).

These criticisms are not intended to invalidate the profoundly illuminating close reading of Lovecraft’s fiction in terms of the two central racist narratives identified by Steadman. However, Steadman risks undermining his own thesis by insisting on what is an essentially biographical reading of the weird tales at the exclusion of all other methodologies. Indeed, this reductive approach appears to have unnecessarily limited Steadman’s own engagement with the many interesting and relevant aspects of DiAngelo’s concepts of white fragility.

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