

EURAMERICA Vol. 46, No. 2 (June 2016), 165-210
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<http://euramerica.org>

In Praise of the Innsmouth Look —Nautical Terror and the Specter of Atlantic History in H. P. Lovecraft’s Fiction

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Abstract

The “Innsmouth Look” combines several important themes explored by H. P. Lovecraft in his fiction: racial degeneration, fear of unknown creatures from the sea, and backwater oddity. It also reveals Lovecraft’s relationship to several aspects of Atlantic history. This article will define the “Innsmouth Look” in terms of both the specific physiological changes described in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and Lovecraft’s broader exploration of the terror of the sea. Maritime workers appear in his stories as villains largely due to their participation in the heterodox cults associated with the ancient gods of the so-called “Cthulhu Mythos.” These workers, however, are also invoking a long tradition of cultural resistance in Atlantic history. The “Innsmouth Look” is also seen in Lovecraft’s description of working

Received February 12, 2015; accepted August 24, 2015; last revised September 8, 2015

Proofreaders: Hsueh-mei Chen, Pei-Yun Lee, Fang-Yi Chen

people and communities excluded from economic progress. The violence of exclusion, as well as the more direct violence of slavery and the anatomical sciences, are in many ways the root causes of working class resentment against the Atlantic elite, with which Lovecraft affiliated himself. Most obviously, Lovecraft was feeding into early twentieth century discourses on race and cultural mixing. Although racist, Lovecraft faced directly the truth that Atlantic history made racial purity in the Americas a myth. A final reading of the “Innsmouth Look” is the general fear of evils from the sea. Taken together, this article argues that the “Innsmouth Look” is best examined in terms of the tension between freedom and violence, and therefore read through the lens of Atlantic history as an expression of working class resistance.

Key Words: H. P. Lovecraft, Atlantic history, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” sailors