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**The Intertextual Use of H. P.
Lovecraft's Fiction in
*Rick and Morty***

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the influence of H.P. Lovecraft's ideas on *Rick and Morty*, the TV programme from the 2010s that brings forth the devices characteristic for postmodernist works. The main focus is on explaining the postmodernist notions and Lovecraftian elements on which *Rick and Morty* was based. More precisely, two episodes in total – s02e06: *The Ricks Must Be Crazy* and s04e06: *Never Ricking Morty* – are analysed and compared with elements of Lovecraft's works they draw from. Furthermore, the effect of the time of the show's creation on the choice of used postmodernist devices and Lovecraftian elements, as well as their purpose, try to be explained. Based on the comparative analysis of two episodes of *Rick and Morty* and Lovecraft's works, one concludes that the show successfully incorporated Lovecraftian ideas and worldview into its episodes and transferred them into the 21st century. Because of the current situation in the world marked by a global pandemic, the show relies mainly upon Lovecraft's cosmic indifference. The show refers to the coronavirus, which could be regarded as a monster of the 21st century that awakened the cosmic fear present in Lovecraft's works.

KEYWORDS

Rick and Morty, Lovecraft, Cosmicism, Lovecraftian Horror, Postmodernism, Intertextuality

1. Introduction

H. P. Lovecraft was a prominent 20th-century American writer of what would today be classified as science fiction (or sci-fi) and weird fiction, a genre that includes elements of horror, fantasy, and supernatural (Clute, "Weird Fiction"). He was a prolific author, and in today's day and age, his works have gained importance because the topics they deal with, the mood they create, and the motifs they are built upon, which will be described later, fit the entire atmosphere caused primarily by the global pandemic, which changed everyone's lives overnight. He was not a postmodernist writer, but the backbone of his works – cosmicism – was taken over and used by postmodernist works of fiction. Not even a popular American TV show *Rick and Morty* could have escaped the ever-growing influence of H.P. Lovecraft, and it may even be regarded as Lovecraftian in the true sense of the word. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the influence of H.P. Lovecraft's ideas on this humorous and animated modern TV programme that brings forth the devices characteristic for postmodernist works. The main focus will be on explaining the postmodernist notions and Lovecraftian elements on which *Rick and Morty* is based. More precisely, two episodes in total – S02E06: *The Ricks Must Be Crazy* and S04E06: *Never Ricking Morty* – will be analysed with regard to postmodernist devices used in them and compared with elements of Lovecraft's works they draw from. Furthermore, the effect of the time of the show's creation on the choice of used postmodernist devices and Lovecraftian elements, as well as their purpose, try to be explained.

2. *Rick and Morty* and Lovecraft in Short

Rick and Morty is a popular animated sci-fi TV show with elements of, oftentimes dark, humour that was created by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland and first aired in 2013 in the U.S. It follows the adventures of Rick, a crazy scientist whose intelligence is exceptional and who is moved by the desire to play god, and his grandson Morty, whom Rick drags along to his exciting, but oftentimes bizarre, adventures. They make a perfect dynamic duo – one is smart, while the other is curious. Morty looks up to his grandfather and trusts that he knows what he is doing, just as the viewers do. The best description of the show is found in Rhys Williams' review: "For its comedy *Rick and Morty* mines the by-now-familiar tropes and strategies of sf, fantasy, horror and the Weird." (148). This mixing of different genres is a postmodernist trait, as well as something that at first glance connects the show to H. P. Lovecraft. One has already seen that the basis of weird fiction is precisely this – mixing elements from different genres in one work of fiction. This is best seen in Lovecraft's novella *At the Mountains of Madness*, when he describes the rising of a notorious and dreadful mountain range:

there was one part of the ancient land—the first part that ever rose from the waters after the earth had flung off the moon and the Old Ones had seeped

down from the stars—which had come to be shunned as vaguely and namelessly evil...a frightful line of peaks had shot suddenly up amidst the most appalling din and chaos—and earth had received her loftiest and most terrible mountains. (*Complete Works* 550)

The narrator talks about how the mountains rose from nothing overnight and drove away even the Old Ones – the mythological creatures from the depths of outer space who took over the Earth and were in conflict with every other race of the time. Because of the mention of these extra-terrestrials and the creation of an eerie atmosphere, it is quite evident that Lovecraft here employed elements of science-fiction and horror, which creators of *Rick and Morty* also consistently use. However, to carry out an in-depth analysis of postmodernist and Lovecraftian elements *Rick and Morty* is teeming with, one must first answer the question: what is implied by Lovecraftian ideas? The peculiarity of Lovecraft's works brought about the emergence of a new subgenre of horror fiction – the Lovecraftian horror, in which:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint...of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror")

It can be seen from the quote that the fundamental element of the Lovecraftian horror is creating an atmosphere that fills the reader with fear of everything bigger than him. Lovecraft finds that oftentimes in the literature of this genre, a violation of natural laws and their deterioration is present. In it, it is also revealed how vulnerable man is and how incapable he is of protecting himself against the unknown. Out of the fear from the unknown comes a realization that man is small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, which is a backbone of Lovecraft's misanthropic literature. In other words, man is in his works seen as powerless against the forces of nature and the unknown entities from space, which is an idea found in cosmicism. In Berruti's words, cosmicism is "aimed at revealing the meaninglessness and nothingness of our existence, always threatened by the fulfilment of a superior...design on a cosmic scale." (363). This cosmic indifference or indifference towards the existence of man and awareness that there is something much more grand and powerful than him is what brings out cosmic fear, which is, according to Miller, "both the feeling of terror located in a human body and the physical manifestation of that horror as an immense entity" (124). Miller refers here to the two-faceted fear with the internal, universal side, and the external side, which corresponds to some kind of a monster, or something unfathomable to man, like "immensely powerful forces from the depths of space labeled as 'gods' by the human beings who either combat them or seek to gain a sliver of reflected power by worshipping them" (Joshi, "Icons" 98-99). This personified fear is one of the main characteristics of the Cthulhu Mythos

stories. Lowell explains that Cthulhu Mythos refers to "a series of horror tales written by Howard Phillips Lovecraft...and expanded on by others after his death" (Lowell 47). In other words, Cthulhu Mythos encompasses Lovecraft's own stories as well as those stories using Lovecraftian elements (such as his characters or places) and evoking a feeling of horror inside the reader. Lovecraft's works were based on the idea of cosmic fear because, in his words: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." ("Supernatural Horror"). To put this differently, he was fascinated with the universal fear of everything that is unexplored, primarily space. This is what, consequently, brings Lovecraft's characters to lose their sanity, which is already fragile. Their sanity is further threatened by the events around them that they are unable to understand or handle. Because fear is a true emotion that must not be disregarded, one might as well delve deeper into it: "it is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law or cosmic alienage or 'outsideness' without laying stress on the emotion of fear." (Lovecraft, "Notes"). Lovecraft here maintains that highlighting the notion of fear is what gives works of fiction authenticity. However, it must be described realistically and not be included in a story in its idealized form, which is why, in his works, he puts the focus on the extra-terrestrial.

Another element of his stories that is quite important is the notion of time, which he finds "the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. Conflict with time seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression." (ibid.). He finds time horrid and relentless but enjoys playing with the concept of time in his stories because it holds endless possibilities and fits perfectly into the theme of cosmic fear, as can most clearly be seen in his novella *The Shadow Out of Time*. The following scene describes travel of consciousness which allows the subjects to explore what one thought impossible through an alien body: "to such minds the unveiling of hidden mysteries of earth—closed chapters of inconceivable pasts and dizzying vortices of future time which include the years ahead of their own natural ages—forms always, despite the abysmal horrors often unveiled, the supreme experience of life. (*Complete Works* 666). This passage clearly illustrates the violation of the natural flow of time by Lovecraft allowing his characters to travel from the past into the future and vice versa, thus giving them the possibility to experience life in unimaginable ways. When describing fundamental elements of Lovecraft's stories, Joshi states that "science provides the intellectual backbone of nearly all his short stories; but at the same time Lovecraft seems to suggest that science itself will ultimately be a source of horror and destruction." ("Time, Space, and Natural Law" 176). Based on this, it can be said that Lovecraft incorporates science into his works by emphasizing its significance but simultaneously finds scientific advancements the root of all evil. The evidence of this lies in the story *Herbert West—Reanimator*, which can be seen as Lovecraft's take on Mary Shelley's famous *Frankenstein*. Lovecraft here writes about how the main character, Dr. West, experimented on carcasses, and afterwards even corpses, and so created "the elixir which he

thought would to some extent restore life's chemical and physical processes." (*Complete Works* 124). In other words, he wanted to be able to reanimate dead creatures by means of a special mixture he made. However, his research and experiments, no matter how advanced, "ended horribly—in a delirium of fear which we gradually came to attribute to our own overwrought nerves—and West had never afterward been able to shake off a maddening sensation of being haunted and hunted." (ibid.). Not only did everything have a negative impact on the main character's mental state, but he also disappeared. What is worse, later in the story it is discovered that his venture resulted in the creation of an army of the undead who went on killing sprees, and in the end, even murdered their creator. This, therefore, proves Lovecraft's somewhat dark view.

3. Analysis

Now, two episodes of *Rick and Morty* – more precisely, s02E06: *The Ricks Must Be Crazy* and s04E06: *Never Ricking Morty* – will be analysed regarding Lovecraft's ideas and works they draw from, as well as the postmodernist notions that will be introduced and explained. The first and most important reference to Lovecraft and his most famous story *The Call of Cthulhu* is the appearance of Lovecraft's monster, Cthulhu, at the end of the *Rick and Morty* title sequence in all four seasons. The opening credits change from season to season, with different "Easter eggs" for that season. In other words, the opening credits reveal the scenes the viewers might expect to find in that season, with a few random scenes thrown in, which never make an appearance in the show, just like the scene with Cthulhu. This Lovecraft-esque and one of the invariable scenes in the intro shows the monster chasing after Rick, Morty, and Morty's sister because they kidnapped its baby. Alternatively, as Norris states: "the creators have chosen, in a typically Lovecraftian manner, to create a greater narrative depth by hints rather than later full exposition." (206). In other words, this scene from the opening credits is only a preview of the greater and more fantastic world the viewer is about to be immersed in, once the actual episode begins. The monster in *Rick and Morty* title sequence¹ was drawn in such a way one may even refer to it as the replica of Lovecraft's vision of Cthulhu: "a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind." (*Complete Works* 243). The monster from the title sequence is the monster described by Lovecraft but translated to screen and to a new context, which is why it can be described with a phrase of McHale's coinage – "an intertextual character" (78). A common postmodernist strategy seen here is a pastiche, which, in Malpas' words, "borrows ideas or stylistic devices from another work or works" (135). Put differently, a pastiche is a work of fiction that takes elements from other works and fits them into its context.

Another important aspect of the show present in its title sequence, which draws a parallel to Lovecraft, is playing with the multiplicity of worlds

and species. However, the show goes one step further and explores the idea of parallel universes and multiple timelines. These multiple genres combined in one work and the idea of the existence of different worlds or parallel universes could be found in postmodernism as well. In addition to that, from science fiction, postmodernism drew "interplanetary motifs" (McHale 66), which include themes like intergalactic travel or encounters with extra-terrestrial species. *The Rick and Morty* opening credits always show alien species, planets, and Ricks and Mortys of alternate worlds that the presumably real Rick and Morty fight against or team up with on their adventures. This presumable realness of the characters of Rick and Morty refers to the fact that the creators of the show created so many alternate worlds with different versions of the main characters that the viewer is not sure anymore if they are following the adventures of the real Rick and Morty or of their selves from an alternate reality. This corresponds to the notion of the sublime which "generates a mixture of exhilaration and terror through the sense that it might overwhelm or obliterate the subject" (Malpas 136) and is described as "a disturbance of everyday sense-making activity" (ibid. 28). In other words, it is a tactic for creating overpowering feelings in either a reader or a viewer by presenting them with something that simultaneously brings them both revulsion and enjoyment. The sublime is, therefore, used to disrupt and to challenge the reader (or the viewer).

In *Never Ricking Morty*, Rick and Morty find themselves stuck on a train that is, in reality, a story device, or, as it is evident from Rick's statement: "A literal literary device quite literally metaphorically containing us." ("Never Ricking Morty"). The dynamic duo is aware that they are only metaphorically a part of a fictional story with different alien species, which is one of the main sources of Lovecraftian cosmic fear. The extra-terrestrial element is perfectly depicted in Lovecraft's story *The Colour Out of Space*:

It all began...with a meteorite...That fragment lasted a week...When it had gone, no residue was left behind, and in time the professors felt scarcely sure they had indeed seen with waking eyes that cryptic vestige of the fathomless gulfs outside; that lone, weird message from other universes and other realms of matter, force, and entity. (*Complete Works* 416-417)

In this story, a meteorite from outer space fell on Earth, and whenever a fragment of it was saved, it started shrinking, which led to it completely disappearing over time. The scientists thought that they could solve the mystery surrounding the meteorite, but they had no luck. Something unexplainable and unknown brought immense fear to the inhabitants of the town.

In *The Ricks Must Be Crazy*, Rick and Morty travel in-between different worlds that are found inside one another. The duo goes on an adventure into the microverse Rick created inside a battery of his ship. He plays god by making his society whose inhabitants he treats like his slaves since they produce electricity

that powers his ship. When Rick visits them, they call him an alien, which proves that they are aware of the existence of multiple worlds. However, they are entirely unaware that they live inside a battery. In the microverse, he encounters a scientist, Zeep, that is the spitting image of Rick, only of a different race. He too created his universe – miniverse – and is referred to as a “traveller from another world” (“The Ricks Must Be Crazy”) by the inhabitants of that miniverse. When the trio travels to the teenyverse created by a scientist from the miniverse (Kyle), they get stranded there because they told Kyle what the real purpose of these small universes was. He was not sure what was true anymore, so he suffered an existential crisis and went on a suicide mission, which resulted in a blown-up ship that was the crew’s only way out of that world. All of this resembles the postmodernist notion of Chinese-box worlds. It is a strategy which “involves frequency: interrupting the primary diegesis not once or twice but often with secondary, hypodiegetic worlds, representations within the representation.” (McHale 113). Put differently, when this strategy is employed, one can find a world within a world, which resembles the way in which a Matryoshka doll or, as the name suggests, a Chinese box is constructed. To be more precise, in this episode, a simulation within a simulation is found. Rick’s character, and his intentions, are also translated into different characters in smaller universes. The implication here is that science is what ultimately may bring destruction, which corresponds to Lovecraft’s view on science: “The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality” (*Complete Works* 238).

Moreover, Lovecraft’s playing with time is present in *Never Ricking Morty*. Lovecraft writes in his story *The Shadow Out of Time*: “In every age since the discovery of mind-projection, a minute but well-recognised element of the population consisted of Great Race minds from past ages, sojourning for a longer or shorter while.” (ibid. 667). He talks about the extra-terrestrial Great Race who worked out how to send consciousness into the past and back into the future, thus defying the linear concept of time. What could be connected with this is a humanized concept of time inside the train in *Rick and Morty*, as well as the one character who gets cut in half and is floating simultaneously outside the train and inside the arcade – the Floaty Bloody Man: “His followers believe the entire universe is Floaty Bloody Man’s nightmare as he dies in a time dilated reality” (“Never Ricking Morty”). Because of his existence in both realities, he became a myth and even a new god. This calls to mind Lovecraft’s Elder Things and his newfound religion based on these deities, best described in *The Call of Cthulhu*: “They worshipped...the Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky. Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died.” (*Complete Works* 246). In this passage, Lovecraft suggests the existence of monster-like alien creatures from outer space who lived long before any humans have existed. They talked to the first men through their dreams, and

so these first men formed a cult (or religion) around these Elder Things (or "Great Old Ones") whom they worshipped.

Furthermore, many postmodernist notions can be found in the *Never Ricking Morty* episode, especially since the focus is on blurring the lines between reality and fiction. The strategy used to achieve this is separating the reality inside the train from the reality outside it, which resembles postmodernist works, where sometimes "multiple narrative frames and styles that continually force the reader to reassess the truth of what is happening in the story" (Malpas 101) are used. Essentially, these multiple frames are employed to confuse the reader (or viewer, in the case of TV programmes) and make them question the reliability of the narrator or even their senses. This is evident in the fight scenes from the aforementioned episode, where every time a character is thrown out of the train window, they enter a different reality. For example, inside the train, Morty is the "real" Morty, but when his head smashes the window, he gets transported into a reality in which he breaks out of an egg inside a laboratory, the second time he is a soldier on a battlefield, etc. All these Mortys from parallel realities think their reality is the original one. To make things even more complicated, the train is first presented as a world in the game inside an arcade, the second time as a part of a training video for train cops (which they somehow leave through TV and enter the room where the training is held), and finally, as a toy train inside Rick and Morty's living room. All of this could in a way relate to Lovecraft's interdimensional travel, as in his short story *The Challenge from Beyond*, which revolves around a worm-like alien species that could transfer their consciousness across different galaxies while their bodies remained in place. In this scene, Lovecraft describes how this species occupies the bodies of its victims to explore their world:

The investigator's mind would now occupy the strange machine while the captive mind occupied the interrogator's worm-like body. Then, in another interchange, the interrogator's mind would leap across boundless space to the captive's vacant and unconscious body on the trans-galactic world—animating the alien tenement as best it might, and exploring the alien world in the guise of one of its denizens. (Lovecraft et al.)

Even though he describes the possession and interchange of bodies between alien species, there is a motif of travel in-between worlds and even galaxies. The consciousness is the one that does the travelling and not the person as a whole. The focus is also put on the exploration of an alien planet in disguise as one of its inhabitants, which is in opposition to the situation in *Never Ricking Morty*, where the focus is on travel between different realities or parallel universes, and even between the different diegetic levels. The viewers, as well as the characters, are confused by what is happening: "It's enough to really make you question all of existence, isn't it?" ("Never Ricking Morty"). Here, a connection can even be made with Lovecraft's cosmicism, which is also present in *The Ricks Must Be Crazy*. On his way back to reality, Rick said to inhabitants of the microverse: "Nothing you

do matters. Your existence is a lie." ("The Ricks Must Be Crazy"). Lovecraftian anti-anthropocentric approach is best highlighted here, with which the insignificance of a man in the grand scheme of things is stated. Such an idea is described best in a passage from Lovecraft's *Beyond the Walls of Sleep*: "we are all roamers of vast spaces and travellers in many ages...You and I have drifted to the worlds that reel about the red Arcturus, and dwelt in the bodies of the insect-philosophers that crawl proudly over the fourth moon of Jupiter. How little does the earth-self know of life and its extent!" (*Complete Works* 19). Lovecraft associates humans with insects, therefore alluding to their insignificance. Moreover, he finds humans ignorant and oblivious to the complexity and grandeur of the universe and life in general. What else is postmodern about *Never Ricking Morty* is that the only way the duo can save the universe is by storytelling, which is when viewers witness a story-within-a-story type of situation. After the train derailed and the duo got out, they mentioned the coronavirus because of which they had to stay home and all they could do was shop.

This show employs mimesis frequently, which is evident here. McHale explains mimesis nicely: "For the real world to be reflected in the mirror of literary mimesis, the imitation must be distinguishable from the imitated...A mimetic relation is one of similarity, not *identity*, and similarity implies difference." (28). In other words, mimesis points to similarities between the fictional world and the real world, but also emphasizes their differences since the distinction between the two is crucial. As Hutcheon states, "fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded" (40). The emphasis is put on the process by which that reality, and, consequently, the work of art, are constructed. There is no realistic transposition of the real world into a work of art, but the reality serves only as a model based on which the author makes their picture of reality that may not correspond to the real world around them. This is precisely what the authors did when mentioning the coronavirus in the show. This marked the moment when, in Currie's words, "an internal boundary between extratextual reference to real life...signifies the artificiality of the fictional world while simultaneously offering its realistic referential possibilities." (4). By referencing the current situation in the world, the creators of the show are highlighting its fictionality, as well as showing that works of art are still based on the real world. Because of the current pandemic that the world has been going through, Lovecraft's worldview has found its way into fiction more than ever before. As Sederholm and Weinstock state: "Although our contemporary monsters may not resemble those Lovecraft imagination, we nevertheless live today with the very Lovecraftian awareness of the looming specter of a sudden apocalypse." (34). One can say that in the 21st century monsters come in different shapes – technology (primarily AI), coronavirus, global panic caused by the news, etc. What is still present, and Lovecraft describes it best, is the universal fear of the unknown, what the show is trying to prove with the strategies it uses to incorporate Lovecraftian and postmodernist elements into its episodes.

4. Conclusion

Based on the comparative analysis of two episodes of *Rick and Morty* and Lovecraft's multiple works, one can conclude that the show is Lovecraftian in every sense of the word. It successfully incorporates Lovecraftian ideas and worldview into its episodes in a humorous way and transfers them into the 21st century. Because of the current situation in the world marked by a global pandemic, Lovecraft's cosmic indifference evident in his misanthropic approach to man has been fundamental to the show. The direct reference to Lovecraft is apparent in the intertextual character, Cthulhu, in the title sequence of all four seasons. Moreover, since the main character in the show is a scientist who makes others question their existence and suffer an existential crisis, one might say that Lovecraft's view of science as a means of bringing destruction is present. However, not every show involving scientists or science is Lovecraftian. As one can see, multiple factors need to be present in order for a show to be classified as such. In one episode, a new religion resembling Lovecraft's worship of the Elder Things is created. The show takes Lovecraftian ideas to the next level and plays with cosmic fear in such a way that it creates either parallel universes or simulations within simulations with different alien species in various galaxies. The notion of the sublime is highlighted with the presence of Chinese-box worlds since it leaves the viewers (and characters) confused, and maybe even terrified, but also amused. In the show, a story within a story is also present since in one episode, the only way the duo can save the world is by storytelling. Intergalactic travel is present in both the show and Lovecraft but the only difference is that in Lovecraft, the travelling of consciousness and manipulation of time are possible, while in *Rick and Morty*, the duo travels in their bodies to different realities, planets, and even various diegetic levels. The artificiality of the show is evident in the duo's awareness of living in a fictional universe, but also in their referring to the real-world situation with the coronavirus. With this, the lines between fiction and reality become blurred. One can even refer to the coronavirus as a monster of the 21st century which awakens the cosmic fear present in Lovecraft's works.

End Notes

- 1 From the following pictures, one can see that the monster in Rick and Morty (1) was undoubtedly based on Lovecraft's Cthulhu (2): (1) <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1216561/Rick-and-Morty-characters-Why-is-the-Cthulhu-not-in-any-episodes> (2) <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:g26697/>

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