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LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LOVECRAFT'S MYTHOLOGICAL NAMES

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Abstract

This article explores the etymology and pronunciation of two of H.P. Lovecraft's most iconic mythological deities: Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep. Through an extensive review of existing literature and comparative analysis, we uncover the linguistic roots and cultural influences that shaped these names. Lovecraft's meticulous approach to naming his deities reflects his fascination with ancient mythologies, linguistic creativity, and contemporary figures. The findings suggest that the names Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep are deeply embedded with historical and mythological significance, enhancing the otherworldly and timeless nature of Lovecraft's mythos. This study contributes to the broader understanding of Lovecraft's literary genius and sets the stage for continued scholarly exploration of his cosmic horror universe.

Keywords: Lovecraft, pronunciation, etymology, literary analyses, pseudo-mythology.

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Аңдатпа

Бұл мақала Лавкрафттың ең әйгілі мифологиялық кейіпкерлерінің этимологиясы мен айтылуын зерттейді: Ктулху және Нярлатхотеп. Қолданыстағы әдебиеттерді жан-жақты шолу және салыстырмалы талдау арқылы біз бұл атауларды қалыптастырған тілдік тамырлар мен мәдени әсерлерді ашамыз. Лавкрафттың кейіпкерлерінің есімдерін таңдауға мұқият көзқарасы оның ежелгі мифологияларға, лингвистикалық шығармашылыққа және өз дәуірінің әйгілі тұлғаларына деген қызығуын көрсетті. Нәтижелер Cthulhu және Nyarlathotep атауларының тарихи және мифологиялық контексттерде терең тамыр жайғанын көрсетеді, бұл олардың Лавкрафт мифологиясындағы жерден тыс және мәңгілік табиғатын нығайтады. Бұл зерттеу Лавкрафттың әдеби данышпандығын тереңірек түсінуге ықпал етеді және оның ғаламын одан әрі ғылыми зерттеудің негізін қалады.

Кілт сөздер: Лавкрафт, айтылым, этимология, әдеби талдау, псевдо-мифология.

ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ МИФОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ИМЕН В ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯХ Г.Ф. ЛАВКРАФТА

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Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется этимология и произношение двух самых известных мифологических персонажей пантеона Говарда Ф. Лавкрафта: Ктулху и Ньярлатхотепа. Путем всестороннего обзора существующей литературы и сравнительного анализа мы раскрываем лингвистические корни и культурные влияния, которые сформировали эти имена. Тщательный подход Лавкрафта к выбору имен для своих персонажей отражает его увлечение древними мифологиями, лингвистической креативностью и известными личностями своего времени. Полученные результаты показывают, что имена Ктулху и Ньярлатхотепа глубоко укоренены в историческом и мифологическом контексте, что усиливает их внеземной и вневременной характер в мифологии Лавкрафта. Данное исследование способствует более глубокому пониманию литературного гения Лавкрафта и закладывает основу для дальнейшего научного изучения его вселенной.

Ключевые слова: Лавкрафт, произношение, этимология, литературный анализ, псевдомифология.

Introduction

H.P. Lovecraft, an influential American writer, is best known for his contributions to weird and horror fiction, particularly through his creation of the Cthulhu Mythos. This fictional universe, filled with ancient and powerful deities known as the Elder Gods, has fascinated readers and scholars since the early XXth century. Lovecraft's mythological creations have significantly impacted modern horror and science fiction, influencing various forms of contemporary media.

The main aim of the given article is to explore and compare the etymology of H.P. Lovecraft's most famous elder gods. By understanding the origins of these names, we can better appreciate H.P. Lovecraft's literary skill and the broader cultural and historical influences on his work. And by comparing different points of view we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how various interpretations enrich and diversify our knowledge of H.P. Lovecraft's mythos.

Examining the etymology of Lovecraft's mythological deities is particularly interesting today for several reasons. Firstly, the continued popularity of the Cthulhu Mythos demonstrates the lasting relevance of these names. H.P. Lovecraft's creations remain popular, appearing in video games, movies, board games, and novels. Secondly, studying the origins of these names allows us to discover the diverse influences, such as ancient mythologies, linguistic structures, and Lovecraft's own creativity, that contributed to the creation of these iconic figures.

Additionally, in today's world, where the relationship between language, culture, and literature is increasingly examined, the etymology of H.P. Lovecraft's elder gods offers a unique and valuable perspective. It shows how one author's creative use of language can create a mythos that resonates globally. This study not only enhances our understanding of H.P. Lovecraft's work but also provides insights into the broader field of myth-making in literature.

Methods

The research for this article employs a conceptual framework rather than an in-depth empirical study. Our approach focuses on gathering existing analyses of the etymology of

H.P. Lovecraft's elder gods and comparing them to provide new insights. We conducted an extensive review of existing literature on H.P. Lovecraft's elder gods, focusing on scholarly articles, books, and online resources. Key sources include works by H.P. Lovecraft, analyses by such scholars as S.T. Joshi and D.E. Schultz, G. Callaghan, D. Haden as well as online resources which provide discussions on the etymology of H.P. Lovecraft's elder gods and gather interpretations from various resources, offering diverse perspectives. We compared the different interpretations and etymological analyses from various sources to identify common themes and discrepancies. This comparative approach allows us to highlight areas where interpretations converge or diverge, providing a broader perspective on the etymology of Lovecraft's elder gods.

Results

H.P. Lovecraft, born on August 20, 1890, in Providence, Rhode Island, is a seminal figure in horror fiction. His early years were marked by frequent relocations and his father's hospitalization in 1893. H.P. Lovecraft discovered Edgar Allan Poe in 1898, which greatly influenced his writing. H.P. Lovecraft began writing astronomy columns and fiction in the early 1900s. He withdrew from high school due to a nervous breakdown in 1908 but continued his literary pursuits. His involvement in amateur journalism in 1913 led to significant developments in his writing career. The 1920s were pivotal for Lovecraft as he created the Cthulhu Mythos, with works like "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) and "The Dunwich Horror" (1928) [1]. These works introduced a pantheon of ancient, cosmic deities, central to his mythos.

Despite his personal struggles and limited commercial success during his lifetime, H.P. Lovecraft's works gained immense popularity. His mythos, characterized by complex names, cosmic horror, and a deep sense of the unknown, stands as one of the most influential creations in modern horror literature. H.P. Lovecraft's ability to weave together intricate mythological elements, ancient languages, and contemporary influences resulted in a universe that is both terrifying and endlessly fascinating. The world he created, populated by ancient gods and cosmic entities beyond human comprehension, has captivated readers for generations and continues to inspire writers, filmmakers, and artists.

H.P. Lovecraft's universe, often referred to as the Cthulhu Mythos [1], is a vast and interconnected web of stories that explore themes of existential dread, the insignificance of humanity in the face of indifferent deities or creatures from outer worlds, as well as the horrors lurking just beyond the veil of reality. Through his work, H.P. Lovecraft not only crafted individual tales of terror but also established an entire mythological framework that invites exploration and expansion. His creations are not confined to the pages of his stories but have grown into a cultural phenomenon, influencing countless other works and becoming a cornerstone of the horror genre.

As noted by S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, Lovecraft provided a detailed explanation of the pronunciation of Cthulhu in a letter dated July 23, 1934. H.P. Lovecraft describes the name as a human attempt to approximate the phonetics of a non-human word. He wrote that "the word is supposed to represent a fumbling human attempt to catch the phonetics of an absolutely non-human word... The actual sound-as nearly as human organs could imitate it or human letters record it-may be taken as something like Khlul'-hloo, with the first syllable pronounced gutturally and very thickly... In any case, it is not pronounced "Ka- thoo-loo," as commonly assumed" [1]. As it is motioned by the web-source "Behind the name" the pronunciation is /kə.'θu:lu:/ [2] which is, according the authors mentioned above, totally wrong. Thus, the correct pronunciation of the name is supposed to be /khlul'-hlu:/, where:

- /khl/: the initial sound is a guttural, thick “kh” followed by a “l” sound. It should be pronounced with a deep, throaty emphasis.
- /ɔl/: the vowel sound is similar to the “u” in “full,” followed by a soft “l.”
- /hlu/: the second syllable starts with a guttural “h” followed by “luu,” where the “u” is again like the “u” in “full” and is elongated.

As for the origin of the name, H.P. Lovecraft mentioned that the name Cthulhu was chosen to resonate with the word “chthonic,” derived from the Ancient Greek word “χθόνιος” (khthonios), meaning “of the earth” [2]. This connection is suggested by Lovecraft himself at the conclusion of his story “The Rats in the Walls” (1923). There is an option suggested by G. Callaghan, that the creature was basically “an inverted version of the paternal sea gods Poseidon, Neptun” [3; 41], etc. The concept of chthonic entities, or earth-dwelling spirits, has deep roots in various ancient and medieval mythologies. These spirits were often seen as guardians of mines and hidden treasures beneath the earth.

Furthermore, H.P. Lovecraft’s description of Cthulhu as dead but dreaming: “In his house at R’lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming” [4; 14], introduces the notion of an ongoing, latent threat that is not entirely dead nor fully alive. This paradoxical state reflects the broader themes in H.P. Lovecraft’s work, where the boundaries between life and death, reality and nightmare, are blurred. The very presence of Cthulhu, even in its dormant state, has a profound effect on those who encounter it, driving them to madness. This reinforces the idea that Cthulhu represents more than just a physical threat; it embodies the overwhelming and destructive power of the unknown and the unknowable.

The next character is described as “appears to be the harbinger of the collapse of the universe” [5; 2]. H.P. Lovecraft stated that the unique name Nyarlathotep came to him in a dream. However, it is possible to speculate that the name may have been partially influenced by Lord Dunsany’s minor god Mynarthitep, mentioned briefly in “The Sorrow of Search” from “Time and the Gods” [5; 2], or by the prophet Alhireth-Hotep from “The Gods of Pegana” [5; 2]. The suffix “-hotep” is distinctly Egyptian, aligning well with Nyarlathotep’s Egyptian origins. Additionally, Lovecraft’s reference to Nyarlathotep as having “risen up out of the blackness of twenty-seven centuries” suggests a historical context, placing the character in the 22nd Dynasty of Egypt, which spanned from 940 to 730 B.C.E. [5; 2]. According to D. Haden, the name Nyarlathotep can be interpreted as “letter/message that is trusted of the gods,” [5; 2] reflecting the character’s role as a messenger or intermediary. This interpretation aligns with the essence of Nyarlathotep as depicted in the story, particularly in the phrase “Nyarlathotep... the crawling chaos... I am the last... I will tell the audient void...” [5; 2]. The term “audient void” is crucial here, as “audient” refers to attentive listening, a concept historically associated with preparation for spiritual initiation, “such as a young boy being prepared for baptism” [5; 2]. Its use in this context contrasts the ideas of noise and silence, suggesting that Nyarlathotep is not merely a chaotic force but also one that brings a message from the cosmos – a message that demands careful attention, because in Lovecraft’s universe even the void itself can speak and transfer messages.

W. Murray speculated that the dream image of Nyarlathotep might have been inspired by the inventor Nikola Tesla. Tesla’s well-attended lectures, which featured extraordinary experiments with electrical apparatus, cast him as a somewhat sinister figure in the public imagination. This comparison adds another layer to the character, suggesting that H.P. Lovecraft may have drawn from contemporary figures as well as ancient mythology to shape Nyarlathotep’s persona [6].

Based on common usage, the name is typically broken down into syllables for ease of pronunciation like this “Ny-ar-lath-o-tep”, the transcription is /,nai.ər'ləθə,tɛp/ and it follows:

- **ny**: pronounced as “nai,” rhyming with “tie.”
- **ar**: pronounced as “ar,” similar to the “ar” in “car.”
- **lath**: pronounced as “lath,” where the “th” is soft, as in “thick.”
- **o**: pronounced as a short “o,” as in “pot.”
- **tep**: pronounced as “tep,” rhyming with “step.”

The exploration of the etymology and pronunciation of Lovecraft’s elder gods, particularly Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep, reveals the intricate and deliberate nature of H.P. Lovecraft’s literary craftsmanship. Our findings suggest that Lovecraft’s creation of these names was not arbitrary but deeply rooted in his fascination with ancient mythologies, languages, and contemporary influences.

Discussion

Comparing the etymological roots and interpretations of Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep reveals H.P. Lovecraft’s meticulous approach to naming his deities. The use of ancient languages and mythological references serves to enhance the otherworldly and timeless nature of these entities. By integrating contemporary influences, H.P. Lovecraft ensured that his creations remained relevant and evocative and H.P. Lovecraft’s tendency to subvert traditional mythological themes, presenting Cthulhu as a dark and chaotic counterpart to familiar deities.

The following table 1 summarizes the information provided above.

Table 1. Etymology, pronunciation, and origins of Lovecraft’s deities

Name of Deity	Correct Pronunciation	The Origin of the Deity and its Name	First Mentioned
Cthulhu	/khlʊl-hlu:/	1. Derived from the Greek word “chthonic” (χθόνιος) meaning “of the earth.” 2. An inverted version of classical sea gods like Poseidon and Neptune.	“The Call of Cthulhu” (1926)
Nyarlathotep	/,nai.ər'ləθə,tɛp/	1. Inspired by Lord Dunsany’s minor god Mynarthitep and the prophet Alhireth-Hotep. 2. The suffix “-hotep” is of Egyptian origin. 3. Possibly inspired by the inventor Nikola Tesla.	“Nyarlathotep” (1920)

By focusing on the etymology and pronunciation of H.P. Lovecraft’s elder gods, we uncover the layers of meaning embedded in his creations, offering a comprehensive understanding of his contribution to the genre of cosmic horror. This discussion sets the stage for continued scholarly exploration of H.P. Lovecraft’s mythos and its lasting influence.

Conclusion

The exploration of the etymology and pronunciation of H.P. Lovecraft's elder gods, particularly Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep, provides a deep insight into the meticulous nature of H.P. Lovecraft's literary creation process. Our analysis reveals that Lovecraft's choice of names was not arbitrary but was instead rooted in a combination of ancient mythologies, linguistic creativity, and contemporary influences.

For Cthulhu, H.P. Lovecraft's detailed explanation of its pronunciation emphasizes a guttural and alien sound that aligns with the entity's non-human nature. The name's possible derivation from the Greek word "chthonic" (meaning "of the earth") links it to ancient mythological spirits associated with the underworld, highlighting H.P. Lovecraft's deep engagement with ancient cultures. Additionally, interpretations suggesting Cthulhu as an inverted version of classical sea gods like Poseidon and Neptune provide a fascinating subversion of traditional mythological themes. Nyarlathotep, on the other hand, described by Lovecraft himself as a name that came to him in a dream, further demonstrates his creative process. The Egyptian suffix "-hotep" and the potential influence from Lord Dunsany's works and figures like Nikola Tesla add layers of historical and contemporary significance to the character. Nyarlathotep's multifaceted nature and historical placement in the 22nd Dynasty of Egypt showcase Lovecraft's ability to blend ancient history with modern elements to create enduring and complex mythological figures.

Lovecraft's choice of words often carries implicit meanings, contributing to the overall realism and depth of his mythos. Each term and name is carefully selected, not just for its surface meaning, but for the layers of symbolism and etymological significance it brings. This careful word choice lends an air of authenticity to his fictional universe, making it feel like a deeply rooted mythology with ancient origins. The name "Nyarlathotep" itself suggests meanings that go beyond a simple invented name. Words like "audient," used in the context of Nyarlathotep, also carry connotations that deepen the reader's understanding of the character, implying not just a passive receiver of messages, but an entity that is both listening and ready to act.

When it comes to Cthulhu, H.P. Lovecraft's choice of name and description again carries deep hidden meanings that contribute to the character's sense of realism and the overarching cosmic horror of his mythos. The name "Cthulhu" itself is crafted with the aim to evoke a sense of the ancient and the incomprehensible that is why it is intentionally made difficult to pronounce, emphasizing the idea that this is a non-human word. Cthulhu is not just a name; it is a symbol of the creature's cosmic significance and its connection to ancient, primordial forces.

By comparing the etymological roots and interpretations of these deities, we see how H.P. Lovecraft's linguistic and cultural influences converge to enhance the otherworldly and timeless nature of his mythos. This study not only deepens our understanding of H.P. Lovecraft's literary contributions but also sets the stage for further scholarly exploration of his work and its lasting impact on the genre of cosmic horror. The intricate details of H.P. Lovecraft's naming conventions offer a comprehensive view of his creative genius and the enduring appeal of his mythological universe.

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