

# In the Cobweb of Horror: Poe's and Lovecraft's Characters Bound with the Fibers of Dread

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on the analysis of the concept of fear in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Certain crucial, interconnected issues are dealt with which show the similarities and differences between the two authors' works: sources of fright, lunacy and the role of setting. This essay engages only with the horror stories written by Poe and Lovecraft, not with their short stories associated with other genres (satire, fantasy, etc.).*

## KEYWORDS

Poe, Lovecraft, horror, sci-fi, gothic, fear, lunacy, setting

Edgar Allan Poe and Howard Phillips Lovecraft are two well-known figures of American literature. While the scope of both writers' works is quite diverse, they are especially noted for their works in the genre of supernatural horror fiction.<sup>1</sup> Like Poe, Lovecraft wrote tales of the macabre as well as science fiction, detective fiction and pure fantasy.<sup>2</sup> Some of the topics they engaged in are similar due to the fact that they were both interested in psychological turmoil, life and death, the rational and irrational, the fantastic and weird.<sup>3</sup> These areas of their interest are reflected in their works.

## Sources of Fear

The sources of dread in Lovecraft's and Poe's stories can be perceived from various perspectives. One concerns location: they can be of an external or internal nature. External sources of fear include sources not connected so directly with the character (for instance another person or creature), whereas internal sources are, for example, connected with madness – in such a case the source of fear arises directly from the character's mind.

Lovecraft's "The Outsider" is quite interesting in terms of the question of external/internal sources of fear. The main character lives completely isolated in an old castle; the protagonist hates his ghostly home and therefore, he decides to explore the nearby surroundings. He finds another castle, enters it and in one of the rooms finds a group of people. As he opens the door, the company seems shocked by something and runs away in horror. The protagonist is also scared, his fright based on the assumption that there is something lurking in the room, something unseen yet terrible. He wants to escape but as he moves, he detects another movement behind one of the doorways. Eventually, he discovers that the source of his (as well as the others') horror is a creature that is "a ompound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable."<sup>4</sup>

1 Schweitzer, *Discovering H. P. Lovecraft* (Holicong: Widside Press, 2001), 1.

2 Allan T. Bilstad, *The Lovecraft Necronomicon Primer: A Guide to the Cthulhu Mythos* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2009), 19.

3 Edgar Allan Poe and Gary Richard Thompson, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2004), xv.; Bilstad, *The Lovecraft Necronomicon Primer*, 19.

4 Howard Phillips Lovecraft and August Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others: The Best Supernatural Stories of H. P. Lovecraft* (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1963), 57.

Half frightened, half mad, he tries to touch the monster and his fingers touch “a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass.”<sup>5</sup> In this tale, the unexpected denouement turns the external cause of fear into the internal one.

It is similar in Poe’s “William Wilson.” From the beginning, the narrator believes there is another person who looks and behaves just like him. The final fight reveals the truth when the narrator’s enemy speaks and the narrator suddenly claims “I could have fancied that I myself was speaking.”<sup>6</sup> William Wilson’s final words are “*In me didst thou exist – and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.*”<sup>7</sup> Lovecraft’s “Cool Air” and Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” engage in the same topic and in both cases, the source of dread is external. The tales examine the possibilities of science and depict how science can cross the border between life and death. In Poe’s story, the narrator mesmerizes a dying man, M. Valdemar, in order to find out what will happen, as “no person had as yet been mesmerized *in articulo mortis.*”<sup>8</sup> After seven months, the narrator proceeds in the experiment and inquires M. Valdemar about his feelings and wishes; the patient asks to be freed from the hypnotic state quickly. The narrator tries to satisfy Valdemar’s wish, but at the moment he succeeds, something unexpected happens: “his whole frame at one [...] absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putrescence.”<sup>9</sup>

In Lovecraft’s “Cool Air,” the hero narrating the story reveals that one of his neighbors, Dr. Muñez, is a specialist in a method allowing a person to exist consciously without a heart; this requires a constantly cold environment. In fact, the doctor himself is still alive only thanks to this method; at the very end of the story, he confesses: “*I died that time eighteen years ago.*”<sup>10</sup> The narrator experiences real horror when the refrigerating machine breaks down and it can no longer supply Muñez with cool air and the narrator breaks with some other men into the doctor’s flat. Fear and repugnance here escalate more gradually than in Poe’s story. In “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” the decomposition of the body is so sudden that it leads to a dreadful shock; in Lovecraft’s tale, it is an overwhelming shock preceded by increasing thrill (caused by the hero’s expectation of something horrific). In both cases, the narrators are horrified by the decomposition of a human body. In Lovecraft’s tale, the only remnant of the doctor’s existence is, similarly to Valdemar, some slimy substance. “A kind of dark, slimy trail led from the open bathroom door to the hall door, and thence to the desk, where a terrible little pool had accumulated.”<sup>11</sup>

In Lovecraft’s “The Rats in the Walls,” the title of the story indicates the source of fear. At first, the protagonist believes that rats or mice may be responsible for the strange behavior of his cat, as his servant suggested. The protagonist is – either unconsciously or consciously – affected by the servant’s belief and (again, deliberately or unwittingly) ascribes the strange phenomena to rodents rather than to something else. Rats may be repulsive; still, their presence is a natural explanation (definitely more so than a spectral, perplexing, terrible *something*). Nevertheless, the only visible evidence of their presence is found to the end of the narration, and this evidence consists merely of a pile of small

5 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 59.

6 Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 641.

7 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 641.

8 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 96.

9 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 103.

10 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 211.

11 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 210.

bones – these rodents evidently had nothing to do with the sounds of nausea the protagonist hears. Living rats never featured in the story at all.

In Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" a little impulse – merely an eye of an old man (the owner of the apartment the protagonist lives in) is enough to stimulate the unnamed narrator's fright. In this short story, the increasing nervous tension is not a result of dreadful fear; the psychology of the character, the state of his mind is the source of all the horrific feelings. The source of fear is perceived as external by the protagonist (the old man's eye) but it is evident that this dread is, above all, internal: the primary cause is a sick mind ascribing imaginary wicked value to an ordinary thing (the old man's eye and later also the protagonist's own heartbeat that he believes is produced by the murdered man's treacherous heart).

In "The Black Cat," Poe again used an insane narrator. In this case, however, although it is quite obvious that the horror is caused by his lunacy, the narrator does not ascribe the causes of his fear to an ordinary thing (such as the eye in "The Tell-Tale Heart"), but possibly to some supernatural power.<sup>12</sup> The narrator of "Berenice" is another whose fright is caused by his own lunacy.

Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls," "The Beast in the Cave" and "In the Vault" have something in common: the source of horror is unknown to the protagonist, who tries to somehow rationally explain the situation.

In "The Beast in the Cave," the hero is in a dark cave and is surprised by hearing steps coming closer. He suggests that the sound is caused by an animal such as a puma, rather than by a human being, although there is something strange about the movement – a certain "lack of unison betwixt hind and fore feet."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, he hits the beast with a stone; however, how great is his astonishment when he unexpectedly finds out that "The creature I had killed, the strange beast of the unfathomed cave was, or had at one time been, a MAN!!!"<sup>14</sup>

In the story "In the Vault", the main character, again, does not see the real cause of his fear, but this does not prevent him from forming an opinion about it. Birch, a gravedigger, happens to get locked in a vault. He spends a couple of hours trying to escape; to do so, he uses the coffins to climb to a small window through which he wishes to squeeze. When he pulls himself up, he suddenly feels that something is holding his ankles and dragging him down. a horrible pain strikes his legs, but he frees himself from the grasp, squeezes through the window and, unable to walk, crawls away.

It is revealed that the real source of his agony was in fact the corpse of a man who wanted to revenge himself on Birch for having been treated badly by the gravedigger (Birch cut his legs off so that the man would fit in the coffin). But this elucidation differs diametrically from the one Birch fathomed in the vault: "in his mind was a vortex of fright mixed with an unquenchable materialism that suggested splinters, loose nails, or some other attribute of a breaking wooden box."<sup>15</sup> Again, a very similar defense mechanism as in "The Beast in the Cave" takes place: the protagonist deduces a natural explanation of an unknown external source of horror.

In several ways, Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" might remind the reader of "In the Vault" and "The Beast in the Cave." Although the characters of "The Masque

12 See the chapter "Lunacy."

13 Lovecraft, "The Beast in the Cave," The H. P. Lovecraft Archive, ©1998 – 2013 by Donovan K. Loucks, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/bc.aspx>.

14 Lovecraft, "The Beast in the Cave," The H. P. Lovecraft Archive, ©1998 – 2013 by Donovan K. Loucks, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/bc.aspx>.

15 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 15 – 16.

of the Red Death" can see the source of their dread, according to some scholars a certain element connecting the first story to the latter two is human imagination. The crucial question in the Poe's story is who is hidden behind the mask (and, consequently, who actually causes the horror). The easiest explanation is that it is a man; however, the ending of the story negates this theory. When Prospero's guests attack the figure and unmask it, they gasp "in unutterable horror at finding the grave cerements and corpse-like mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form."<sup>16</sup> This theory about a human in disguise is not satisfying for some commentators, who contend that it is human imagination that brings the figure alive, gives the masque its sinister power and makes it a source of fear. "The Masque of the Red Death' [...] can be (and has been) read as a parable of the inevitability and the universality of death."<sup>17</sup> Hence the fright of death is omniscient, and this terror creates the illusion of the Red Death and this vision whips up the horror even more. Consequently, the narration can be seen as a study in hallucinatory terror<sup>18</sup> and the source of fear would be internal.

It is quite obvious that the masked figure is not a figure of a man; the question remains whether it is a personification of the Prince and his guests' fear, or Death itself. Some critics state explicitly that the phantom figure is the embodiment of the disease ravaging the country;<sup>19</sup> in that case, the source of dread in "The Masque of the Red Death" would be external.

In Lovecraft's tale "Hypnos," which is not associated with the Cthulhu mythos, the conclusion as to whether the source of horror is external or internal also depends to a certain degree on the point of view. In this story, the source of fear is, at least on a first reading, exclusively internal, something not so common in Lovecraft's work. The main character and his friend try to immerse themselves in sleep and reveal its deepest secrets. While doing so, the narrator's companion suffers a shock – as does the narrator himself shortly after. The two friends live in horror, avoiding falling asleep, but despite this precaution, the narrator's companion eventually does doze off and his nemesis, whatever it is, kills him. No matter what kills the character, it is of an internal nature in that sense that it can be only seen in dreams. On the other hand, if the point of view is changed, the cause of fear in this story can also be perceived as external; for if the two friends want to reveal the ultimate secret of night visions, there is a premise of a universal essence of dreams which is common to all human beings. Therefore, the fright would be caused by something beyond one's mind, something coming from a spectral illusionary world, an astral world humans can enter only when sleeping. The soul, separated from the body would then be threatened by this unknown force; consequently, concerning the soul, the cause of dread would be external.

At the end of the narration, the main character is told that there was in fact no companion at all; that all that has happened has happened exclusively to him. Nevertheless, even if the companion was imaginary, the horror is not. Therefore, if the source of fear is the narrator's madness, the cause of fright is purely internal, connected only with the narrator's mind, not with consciousness of all mankind.

16 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 273.

17 Joseph Patrick Roppoloin Eric W. Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 409.

18 Yvor Winters in Louis B. Budd and Edwin H. Cady, *On Poe: The Best from American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 73.

19 Dawn B. Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 113.

To return to Poe and the internal sources of horror in his tales, “The Premature Burial” is concerned with the inner source of fear as well. The narrator is afraid of being buried alive; his personal phobia hunts his tormented soul so much that his life is not real life anymore, but rather a preparation for death.

Regarding Lovecraft’s use of the Cthulhu Mythos, the source of dread is represented by creatures from distant secluded spaces in the universe that lived on Earth in distant past, such as the Great Old Ones. The fright of these creatures is different from a fear of mere strange animals from a foreign planet; the horror the Great Old Ones arouse in Lovecraft’s characters is almost holy. It is the same in the case of Cthulhu dwelling under the sea. It is a kind of fright that might have felt people in the distant past (for example when facing a natural disaster that they ascribed to some gods).

Reportedly, Lovecraft drew his inspiration from his dreams and frequent nightmares.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, for the characters in the Cthulhu Mythos, these entities represent external sources of fear.

## Lunacy

It is not surprising that Poe and Lovecraft engaged with madness in their work – after all, Poe balanced all his life on the verge of madness<sup>21</sup> and Lovecraft worried about his own sanity because his parents displayed emotional and mental instability.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most obvious examples of a mad narrator in Poe’s work is the protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” From the very beginning, the mental state of the character plays a crucial role,<sup>23</sup> which is obvious from the initial paragraph of the protagonist’s narration:

True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! And observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that the main character so vehemently asserts he is not leads exactly to the opposite conclusion. James M. Hutchisson even uses the term “egomaniacal declarations of the narrator”<sup>25</sup> who is evidently mad but wants his audience to believe he is sane.<sup>26</sup> Dawn B. Sova claims that the main character “appears obsessed with conveying to his audience that he is sane. This effort, however, only increases the reader’s conviction about his lack of sanity.”<sup>27</sup> Even if the reader believed this dubious proclamation of mental health, it would not show the narrator in a better light; on the contrary, the extreme calmness of the murderer suggested his insanity.<sup>28</sup>

20 George Hay, *The Necronomicon* (London: Skoob Book Publishing Ltd, 1992), 24.

21 Robert Chambers, *The Book of Days* (Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1864), 422.

22 Donald Tyson, *The Dream World of H. P. Lovecraft: His Life, His Demons, His Universe* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2010), 53.

23 Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, 174.

24 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 303.

25 James M. Hutchisson, *Poe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 143.

26 Hutchisson, *Poe*, 144.

27 Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, 174.

28 Poe and Thompson, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 317.

Regarding style, Poe used hyphens to tear the sentences to pieces together with many exclamations marks which could figure the ejaculations of the protagonist's tortured mind. Consequently, the text calls forth the utterance of a person whose mind is somehow fragmented, damaged and distorted. Twisted or inverted syntax also contributes to the image of the narrator's mental disorder.<sup>29</sup> The narrator addresses the reader frequently, which also indicates an uncontrollable hysteria.<sup>30</sup>

The narrator ascribes vicious powers to the old man's eye, which drives him to "take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever."<sup>31</sup> In the protagonist's mind, the old man's eye becomes the Eye of God. The main character believes it is watching him all the time and, thus this omniscient Eye becomes a constant observer to be feared.<sup>32</sup>

To return to the purported coldness of the narrator, the murder of the old man gives more evidence. The narrator plans the murder "methodically."<sup>33</sup> The content - the act of murder - is driven by his mad mind. However, there is certain coldness and calmness about the form - about the procedure, the way the murder is committed. The lunatic narrators in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and in "The Black Cat" are so frightening because they are so controlled.<sup>34</sup>

The behavior of the protagonist of "The Black Cat" is, to some extent, similar to the behavior of the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart." The two stories are closely related,<sup>35</sup> despite some key differences.

Whereas in "The Tell-Tale Heart" the narrator's initial utterance can be interpreted as the evidence of his mental disease which has tormented him ever since he can remember, the protagonist of "The Black Cat" is not ill and he knows the cause of his mental state quite well: alcohol. Due to this problem he commits acts of terrible violence: for instance, he gets furious and cuts out the eye of his cat. However, alcohol cannot be the only reason; this is, for example, too cold-blooded a deed to be done out of drunkenness and besides, it requires a certain dexterity and precision reminiscent of surgery. He claims he "grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!"<sup>36</sup> If he is not thinking at all, he would probably simply strangle the poor animal. Instead, he is driven by his madness to extreme cruelty and he "deliberately" cuts Pluto's eye out.

Later, when he actually kills the cat, he seems to do so with a bad conscience:

One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; - hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; - hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence; - hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin - a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place It - if such a thing were possible - even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.<sup>37</sup>

29 Hutchisson, *Poe*, 144.

30 Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies*, 249.

31 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 303.

32 Daniel Hoffman, *Poe PoePoePoePoePoePoe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 223.

33 Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, 226.

34 Hutchisson, *Poe*, 144.

35 Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 394.

36 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 224.

37 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 225.

His last words about “the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God” are remarkable here; it is quite possible that they reflect his own feelings – by being able to kill the animal he loves, as if he actually became “the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.” Similarly, the main character of “The Tell-Tale Heart” compares himself to Death – his victim comforts himself that what he has heard was an ordinary sound; “*All in vain*; because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim.”<sup>38</sup>

Another similarity concerns the fear of supernatural. In “The Tell-Tale-Heart” it is the Evil Eye; in “The Black Cat,” it is the fear of witches. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist mentions that his wife remarked several times that black cats were witches in disguise. He also notes that he points this out “for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.”<sup>39</sup> However, some scholars, such as Daniel Hoffman, have a different opinion about this: despite the protagonist’s light tone, this remark about disguised witches is quite important and affects the main character intensely. According to Hoffman, the narrator’s wife only suggests it, but her husband may actually believe that the cat is in fact a witch.<sup>40</sup>

It is more difficult to find such a sadistic or cold-blooded narrator in Lovecraft’s stories. One character worth mentioning in this context is an old man from the story called “The Picture in the House,” which is not a tale of the Cthulhu Mythos. But even this old man differs from the protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” in one significant detail: the sadistic murderer is not the narrator of the story; he is a man the narrator meets and it is revealed that the old man is actually a cannibal who believes (and, according to his ancient memories, it is true) that by eating human flesh, he can prolong his own life. In contrast to “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” which are dramatic monologues by the protagonists,<sup>41</sup> the narrator of “The Picture in the House” is not the murderer himself, but an observer who experiences the horror and who is likely to become another victim.

The old man’s brutal insanity becomes obvious when he sees a picture depicting a sadistic scene and is enthusiastic about the idea of how human limbs are cut off the body:

Thet feller bein’ chopped up gives me a tickle every time I look at ‘im—I hev ta keep lookin’ at ‘im—see whar the butcher cut off his feet? Thar’s his head on thet bench, with one arm side of it, an’ t’other arm’s on the graound side o’ the meat block.<sup>42</sup>

Especially in the tales of Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos madness plays an important and interesting part. There is a certain pattern appearing in the stories: at first, the narrator discloses that he made a discovery so terrible that he almost lost his mind; he had been a reasonable person and had not believed in the supernatural. However, then he saw with his own eyes<sup>43</sup> something that changed his life, something due to which he almost lost his mind, something that forced him to change his opinion about the supernatural. This “something” is, of course, connected with the knowledge of the Great Old Ones.

38 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 304.

39 Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 224.

40 Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, 231.

41 Carlson, *a Companion to Poe Studies*, 489.

42 Lovecraft, “The Picture in the House,” The H. P. Lovecraft Archive, ©1998 – 2013 by Donovan K. Loucks, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/ph.aspx>.

43 Hay, *The Necronomicon*, 20.

Many characters from the Cthulhu Mythos also often feel an obsessive compulsion to keep searching despite the fact that they know it could lead to the disruption of their mental health (for example in "The Call of Cthulhu").

In "The Shadow Out of Time," the narrator collapses when giving a lecture in political philosophy at a university. When he finally regains consciousness, he is haunted by obscure fantasies which he explains from a psychological point of view; his disordered conception of time, for example, is, according to him, the result of a psychological barrier. This explanation is obviously more natural for him to accept than the notion that he has undergone "mind exchange with a member of an alien race."<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, his mental could be damaged; in the last chapter, he states:

From that point forward my impressions are scarcely to be relied on – indeed, I still possess a final, desperate hope that they all form parts of some demoniac dream or illusion born of delirium. a fever raged in my brain, and everything came to me through a kind of haze – sometimes only intermittently.<sup>45</sup>

One of Lovecraft's longest stories is *At the Mountains of Madness*. The narrator prefaces his story with "Doubt of the real facts, as I must reveal them, is inevitable; yet if I suppressed what will seem extravagant and incredible there would be nothing left,"<sup>46</sup> using the afore mentioned pattern, thus making the credibility of his testimony rather doubtful. At the end of tale, the narrator and his companion experience a mixture of fear and madness. However, this does not paralyze them. It has the opposite effect: as if their brains have been switched to a state of mind in which they are being driven by a primal impulse forcing them to run and leading them to safety:

Instinct alone must have carried us through—perhaps better than reason could have done; though if that was what saved us, we paid a high price. Of reason we certainly had little enough left.<sup>47</sup>

In "The Hunter of the Dark," the protagonist, writer Robert Blake, is also overwhelmed by horror, but in his case, it leads to his death. He is found dead in his study, sitting in a chair, a terrible expression on his face: "glassy, bulging eyes, and the marks of stark, convulsive fright on the twisted features."<sup>48</sup> Evidently, he had been writing "his frenzied jottings to the last,"<sup>49</sup> because a broken pencil is found in his hand. For those who have found Blake's body it is obvious that his twisted notes were written as a result of Blake's "excessive imagination and neurotic unbalance."<sup>50</sup>

Madness in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," also seems to be very powerful. According to some scholars, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a tale of "psychic conflict" or a "psychodrama."<sup>51</sup> Some critics believe that there is a deeper connection between Roderick and his home, but there might be another explanation for the similarities of the house and its owner. However, this does not concern Usher's physical but mental

44 S. T. Joshia and David E. Schultz, *An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 245.

45 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 417.

46 Lovecraft, *Tales*, 481.

47 Lovecraft, *Tales*, 580.

48 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 119.

49 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 119.

50 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 120.

51 Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies*, 196.



state. The description of the house and of Usher's appearance and his state of mind show certain similarities. Moreover, the narrator is moved, but he feels gloom and despondency more intensively when he arrives and glances at the house; he feels pity and awe when he looks at his old friend. He is struck by Roderick's strange behavior at first, but then he comforts himself that there have always been some peculiarities in his companion's behavior. Shortly, in all three cases, the narrator feels a certain mixture of familiarity and anxiety; in this sense, the house, Usher's physical appearance and the state of his mind correlate. Some scholars equate the structure of the house to Usher's body and its interior to his mind.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, they all seem so interconnected that no further distinction is necessary.

In fact, there is a certain detail concerning the exterior of the mansion that might be a direct connection with Roderick's mind. It is the "fissure" – the sole sign of damage which not only makes a connection with the disarranged appearance of the owner, but perhaps also with a fissure in his soul caused by the one significant event that tortures his mind: his sister's disease. At the moment of his final shock, Usher experiences the climax of his nervous tension and then dies; soon afterwards, the whole house collapses, burying Roderick and his sister beneath. This destruction of the house and of the last members of the family (their physical death), can also be simultaneously perceived as the end of Usher's sanity and its transformation into insanity at the very moment of his physical death. Consequently, the fissure – which might be a symbol of the body as well as weakened Roderick's mind – widens and completes the whole destruction. According to some scholars the widened fissure figures the collapse of family and physical houses.<sup>53</sup> It might also be linked to the collapse of one of its last living member's mental state.

Regarding lunacy in Poe's stories, one tale should not be omitted: "Berenice." Similar to "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator (Egaeus) is obsessed with a fixed idea caused by a very ordinary and simple stimulus. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" it is the old man's eye, in "Berenice" the stimulus is her teeth. However, Egaeus is not a lunatic murderer but rather a mad scientist. He perceives his cousin not as an object of love, but as an object of analysis.<sup>54</sup> The act of pulling out her teeth – the object of his obsession and his main interest – is then the absolute extraction of Berenice's identity.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, "The Imp of the Perverse" should be mentioned. The major theme of this tale is the narrator's "self-destructive tendencies,"<sup>56</sup> which force him to confess to the crime he has committed. According to some scholars, the narrator unconsciously desires to be caught, desire which can also be found in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart."<sup>57</sup> Some critics tend to limit the idea of perverseness to the phenomenon of insanity, but it can also be described in terms of theological morality.<sup>58</sup> In "The Imp of the Perverse," as well as many other tales by Poe, lunacy is a central theme and causes the destruction of the protagonist.

52 Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies*, 196.

53 Thomas Kent, *Interpretation and Genre: The Role of Generic Perception in the Study of Narrative Texts* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1986), 52.

54 Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies*, 172.

55 Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies*, 172.

56 Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, 84.

57 Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, 84.

58 Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies*, 250.

## Role of the Gothic and Sci-fi Setting

Edgar Allan Poe's short horror stories often contain features of gothic literature. In "The Masque of the Red Death," the setting, Prince Prospero's refuge (a castellated abbey where a masquerade is taking place), plays a significant role. In "The Masque of the Red Death," a great deal of attention is devoted to a description of seven rooms of the abbey. This is not a mere tool to help the reader to visualize the setting – each room has a different color. a common critical concern is to identify the symbolic meaning of these colors; the symbolic meaning of the seven rooms then helps to emphasize the gothic atmosphere of the story.<sup>59</sup> Among the most popular interpretations of the seven rooms are the seven ages of man, the seven days of the week or the seven deadly sins.<sup>60</sup>

In Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls," the setting is similar. The house where the narrator lives is a priory, its architecture "involving Gothic towers" resting "on a Saxon or Romanesque substructure of a still earlier order or blend of orders—Roman, and even Druidic or native Cymric, if legends speak truly." The old building is also full of "moss, bats, and cobwebs."<sup>61</sup> a gloomy cellar opens into a cave that hides a terrible secret. The fear intensifies in the direction towards the cellar which is connected to the cave that is the center of the horror. The setting evokes a materialized period of time leading the reader from the Gothic to the ancient ages of mysterious rituals. The priory is not only an atmospheric setting, but also a guardian of the ancient secrets, concentrating the thrill, dread and readers' interest in its center.

In many stories, Lovecraft places his characters in old towns (such as his Arkham), old buildings or apartments. For instance, the cottage from "The Picture in the House" is described as one of the houses that are hidden in nature and shadows, and whose "small-paned windows still stare shockingly, as if blinking through a lethal stupor which wards off madness by dulling the memory of unutterable things."<sup>62</sup>

The setting of Lovecraft's tales of the Cthulhu Mythos often includes old houses in towns such as Arkham, Innsmouth or Dunwich.<sup>63</sup> These towns are usually described as old, full of mysteries and urban legends. For instance, Arkham is depicted as a "changeless, legend-haunted city" with "clustering gambrel roofs that sway and sag over attics where witches hid from the King's men in the dark, olden days of the Province."<sup>64</sup> Such a scene is much closer to a gothic setting than to a sci-fi setting.

The sci-fi elements of the setting are represented mainly by the towns built by the Great Old Ones. These cities are bizarrely unbalanced in terms of layout; their geometry is "all wrong"<sup>65</sup> and even the Sun "seemed distorted when viewed through the polarising miasma welling out from this sea-soaked perversion."<sup>66</sup>

This "sea-soaked perversion" is a representative example of Lovecraft's concept of perversion: something unknown, foreign, not belonging to our own world, or, at least, to the world as we know it. In Lovecraft's literary world, "perverse" means "twisted,"

59 Poe and Thompson, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 301.

60 Poe and Thompson, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 301.

61 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 33, 35.

62 Lovecraft, "The Picture in the House," The H. P. Lovecraft Archive, ©1998 – 2013 by Donovan K. Loucks, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/ph.aspx>.

63 Hay, *The Necronomicon*, 20.

64 Lovecraft, *Tales*, 654.

65 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 148.

66 Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 155.

such as the architecture of the cities built by the Old Ones. Nevertheless, Lovecraft knew Poe's idea of perversity and made a reference to it in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," in which the narrator claims: "It must have been some imp of the perverse [...] which made me change my plans as I did."<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

In the analyzed Poe's stories, there seems to be the tendency to emphasize the importance of the characters' psychology. The stories often provide an insight into the unstable mind of the narrator, which is to say that the source of horror is usually internal.

In Lovecraft's stories, the proportion is quite different. Here the external sources of fright seem to prevail. The most internally oriented source of dread is probably presented in "The Hypnos," but this case can also be thought of as external in nature in some analyses. In Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, the source of fear is of an external nature – the horror is caused mainly by the Great Old Ones.

In Poe's tales, the dread is often caused by the protagonists' insanity, and such stories show what a sick mind is capable of. In Lovecraft's case, it is vice versa – fright leads to insanity or to nervous tension verging on lunacy. Lovecraft did not deal primarily with the mental states of his characters. Rather, he used such depictions to show via the protagonists' emotions how dreadful the experienced horror is. Whereas some of Poe's characters are actually mad, some of Lovecraft's characters wish to be insane because it would mean they do not have to deal with the terrible facts they have come across.

In stories by Poe, the gothic settings do not only elicit mood, but it also have a symbolic function. Gothic settings in Lovecraft's tales serve more to evoke a gloomy and mysterious atmosphere. Even his tales of the Cthulhu Mythos often take place in old towns and houses, which resemble gothic settings. The most significant element of a sci-fi setting in the Cthulhu Mythos are the cities built by the Old Ones.

Regarding Poe's influence on Lovecraft's stories, there are at least some indications even in the tales of the Cthulhu Mythos. Certain elements such as the gothic setting, lunacy of the characters or the issue of perversity, are also used in these stories, but Lovecraft treats them in his own way. Lovecraft evidently loosened the bonds tying him with Poe, but he did not get rid of these ties completely.

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<sup>67</sup> Lovecraft and Derleth, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, 330.

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