

## A comparison of short stories by Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft

"The Imp of the Perverse" is a classic gothic short story written by Edgar Allen Poe, which details the thoughts and actions of the nameless main character and narrator, who begins the story with a rambling psychological analysis of human action which serves as a futile attempt to justify the narrator's murder. This short story's main character is an archetypal anti-hero, who we at first perceive as rational, but who experiences a descent into madness as he attempts to battle his inner demons which have taken over his thoughts and actions. Near the end of the short story, the narrator describes his recent urges to confess as a "nightmare of the soul," which serves as a foreshadowing of his eventual confession. Nightmares are a popular narrative element in gothic literature and often serve to link the main character's darkest fears with events yet to take place. Throughout the story, Poe's signature macabre writing style can be seen in phrases like "We stand on the brink of a precipice" and "I felt an icy chill creep to my heart," which serve to unnerve the reader and intensify the insanity of this tale.

H.P. Lovecraft's "Call of Cthulhu" is a chilling horror story which explores the vulnerability and weakness inherent to all humans. Lovecraft recounts the story of Francis Wayland Thurston who stumbles upon evidence of the existence of primordial inhabiting the unknown corners of earth: "There had been eons when other Things ruled on the earth, and They had had great cities... the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshy minds of mammals." Countless people across the planet are visited by visions of Cthulhu or He himself, and as Francis retells their encounters, the weakness of the human mind and spirit becomes a major theme as time and time again, people fall dead with shock and fear.

Clearly inspired by gothic writers, Lovecraft's antiquated language can be seen in his spellings (show as shew, dispatch as despatch, or eskimo as esquimo) as well his ominous diction, which is similar to that of Poe's, employing the use of dark and morbid imagery: "I now felt gnawing at my vitals that dark terror which will never leave me." However, while Poe's writing focussed more on the demented side of the human psychology in order to scare his readers, Lovecraft's writing and its horror is more based in the fear of the unknown: "The aspect... was abnormally lifelike, and the more subtly fearful because its source was totally unknown." This fear of the unknown is a major element of what's known as cosmic horror: Lovecraft's unique genre of writing that bridges the gap between the gothic genre that inspired his works and the horror genre (ei Stephan King) that Lovecraft's works, in turn, inspired. Lovecraft is also able to heighten the horror aspect of this story by including

the reader themselves into a cyclical pattern, whereby the reader is reading an account of a man who is now dead who is in turn relaying the accounts of several others who experienced inexplicable deaths, as if the story and its contents itself are cursed.

### More notes on H.P. Lovecraft's "Call of Cthulhu"

- Fear of the unknown
  - "We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity"
  - "Terrifying vistas of reality"
  - "Covered with undecipherable characters"
  - "The aspect... was abnormally lifelike, and the more subtly fearful because its source was totally unknown"
  - "All that the universe had to hold of horror"
- Mythos
  - "There had been eons when other Things ruled on the earth, and They had had great cities... the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshy minds of mammals."
  - Idealized chaos and primitive behavior. These ideas would later influence modern-day nihilism.
- Emphasis on the importance of dreams
  - "In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming"
- Diction
  - Anachronistic diction
    - "Shew" (show)
    - "Despatch" (dispatch)
    - "Connexion" (connection)
    - "Civilisation" (civilization)
    - "Esquimaux" (eskimo)
  - "Freeze the blood"
  - "Violently insane"
  - "Nocturnal suicide"
  - "I now felt gnawing at my vitals that dark terror which will never leave me"
- Reliability of the narrator
  - "The dream-narratives and cutting collected by the professor were, of course, strong corroboration [for the existence of primordial beings], but the rationalism of my mind and the extravagance of the whole subject led me to adopt what I thought the most sensible conclusions."
  - "Was I tottering on the brink of cosmic horrors beyond man's power to bear? If so, they must be horrors of the mind alone."
  - Forces the reader to question the implications of the story, just as the narrator does.