



Supernatural Horror in Literature (Top 100 Classic Gothic Horror)

H P Lovecraft

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Supernatural Horror in Literature H. P. Lovecraft The Most Important Essay on Horror Literature

"Supernatural Horror in Literature" is a long essay by the celebrated horror writer H. P. Lovecraft surveying the field of horror fiction. It was written between November 1925 and May 1927 and revised in 1933–1934. It was first published in 1927 in the one-shot magazine *The Recluse*. More recently, it was included in the collection *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*. Lovecraft examines the roots of weird fiction in the gothic novel (relying heavily on Edith Birkhead's 1921 survey *The Tale of Terror*), and traces its development through such writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe (who merits his own chapter), and Ambrose Bierce. Lovecraft names as the four "modern masters" of horror Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood and M. R. James. An *H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* calls the work "HPL's most significant literary essay and one of the finest historical analyses of horror literature." Upon reading the essay, M. R. James proclaimed Lovecraft's style "most offensive." However, Edmund Wilson, who was not an admirer of Lovecraft's fiction, praised the essay as a "really able piece of work...he had read comprehensively in this field — he was strong on the Gothic novelists — and writes about it with much intelligence".[4] David G. Hartwell has called "Supernatural Horror in Literature" "the most important essay on horror literature".

THE OLDEST and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form. Against it are discharged all the shafts of a materialistic sophistication which clings to frequently felt emotions and external events, and of a naively insipid idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to "uplift" the reader toward a suitable degree of smirking optimism. But in spite of all this opposition the weird tale has survived, developed, and attained remarkable heights of perfection; founded as it is on a profound and elementary principle whose appeal, if not always universal, must necessarily be poignant and permanent to minds of the requisite sensitiveness. The appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from everyday life. Relatively few are free enough from the spell of the daily routine to respond to tappings from outside, and tales of ordinary feelings and events, or of common sentimental distortions of such feelings and events, will always take first place in the taste of the majority; rightly, perhaps, since of course these ordinary matters make up the greater part of human experience. But the sensitive are always with us, and sometimes a curious streak of fancy invades an obscure corner of the very hardest head; so that no amount of rationalisation, reform, or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper or the lonely wood. There is here involved a psychological pattern or tradition as real and as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind; coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it, and too much a part of our innermost biological heritage to lose keen potency over a very important, though not numerically great, minority of our species.

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