

Edgar Allan Poe and H.P Lovecraft: The Language of Madmen

By: Alexander Henry

Abstract

This analysis seeks to research and understand the language used within Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven," and Howard Phillip Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu." It attempts to explain at length the amount of linguistic depth both works have, demonstrating the understanding both authors possessed in the field. To do this, the essay uses notes and the text from the Linguistics course to showcase the relations, origins, and science behind particular words used by each author in their respective work.

This is done by utilizing and showcasing some of the language universals discussed within the Linguistics course, those discussed being semantics, lexicon, phonetics, and morphology. Additionally, various other terms are used to describe and coincide certain words with the language universals, such as "connotation" and "denotation." Poe's demonstration of this is through the particular words used to describe specific characters, such as the deceased lover of the narrator's affections, Lenore. This is also extended to the phrase repeated by the titular raven, "nevermore," as well as a term lifted from Homer's *The Odyssey*, "nepenthe," a fictional drug of forgetfulness, with all aspects tying well into the theme of death encompassing the poem, bolstered by the linguistic evidence presented.

Lovecraft demonstrates this by, through his understanding of language, bending and breaking the conventional rules we follow to create R'yehian, a language with the potential to be older and broken into even further base levels than any known form of English or language in total. However, while the language of R'yehian is not of direct discussion of Lovecraft's work, the monster associated with it is. There is a great amount of analysis into the description of Cthulhu, how the creature is described visually by the characters in the short story. Additionally, this gives further credence to the topic of linguistic depth, as well as the knowledge showcased by Lovecraft to create words while remaining true to linguistic function.

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear, is fear of the unknown. (H.P Lovecraft)

Edgar Allan Poe and H.P Lovecraft may not be names that one would think of when studying linguistics. While they are considered masters in the realm of dark literature, their works have contributed to the study of linguistics, even if unknowingly. Poe's intrinsic knowledge of language, the meaning of words, along with the rules and history of language, all come together to show his skills and contributions as a linguist. This is showcased through his usage of prosodic features within his most prominent work, *The Raven*, and the usage of the language universals when it comes to the words he selects within. Some of the most notable choices are semantics, lexicon, phonetics, and morphology.

Lovecraft's knowledge and usage of language, however, is more unique. Throughout many of his works, Lovecraft understands and manipulates the rules of language to create words that, while *appearing* to be unreadable, are still capable of being pronounced. Some words can even be transcribed into phonetic transcriptions, creating an even deeper connection between the normally alien words Lovecraft created, and our own language. In a way, R'yehian, were it real, could be a language even older than the various forms of English.



Furthermore, Lovecraft's extensive use of semantics, lexicon, phonetics, and morphology gives further emphasis to the core of Lovecraft's extensive alien mythology, that being the words of these great beings beyond our comprehension have been translated, given verbal and written form to allow us to pronounce them. A primary part of this essay and analysis will be focused on the lexical aspects of the words selected by these two authors, analyzing any historical context present, and presenting them in alternate formats to display their contributions to the field of linguistics.

Both men had an extremely particular choice of wording when it came to their literature, some of it being able to connect to their personal lives and the tragedies that they experienced, among other potential implications. For this analysis, I intend to focus on one work from each author. With Poe, the focus is on his famous poem, "The Raven." From Lovecraft, the focus is on *The Call of Cthulhu*, the signature of his titularly named Cthulhu Mythos. To start, we look at Poe's *The Raven*, which takes a unique turn from Poe's conventional style. Rather than highlighting the potential for malice within the human heart, *The Raven* is an elegy, a work made in requiem to the dead. It addresses a party of unknown relation to the narrator, only referred to as "the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore" (Poe, l. 15). Though, while the poem itself does not give any obvious clarification, the author makes a note of this in his own essay, *The Philosophy of Composition*, written in 1846,

From what I have already explained at some length the answer here also is obvious-
"When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover." (Poe, 5)

Within the first mention of the name, this character is noted to have significant importance to the narrator with the use of the adjectives "rare" and "radiant" to describe her. But the next adjective, "maiden," is a particularly interesting description used for this Lenore. "Maiden," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to a woman, typically unmarried. But, in a similar vein, it also can be used to refer to a virgin, as it derives from the Old English term *mægden*, a term for an unmarried woman that also refers to a virgin. Both terms imply that Lenore, to the narrator, is pure, or untainted. In addition, both terms, as well as the passage from Poe, give the implication that the woman died before she was able to be married, earning more credence to the idea of purity. This is further emphasized with the noted lofty comparison to angels, stating that her name was given by these pillars and pinnacles of purity. The line after this, however, emphasizes the word "here" by putting it in italics. It is a creative way of highlighting her death, as the parallel to angels makes it seem as if her name is reserved for those higher, pure beings, tying into the usage of "maiden."

The name "Lenore" is repeated multiple times throughout the poem, particularly in instances where the typical aspects of Poe's madness in his writing can be found. In the fifth stanza, upon peering into the darkness, in the fourteenth stanza when speaking to the titular raven, and a final time during the sixteenth stanza. Every time Lenore is mentioned, it is in a lofty, biblical sense. Her name is always near or directly tied to angels and given the nature of the poem as an elegy, that comparison and reinforcement is incredibly fitting. But the most notable aspect of the name being repeated, and its biblical comparisons, is the history of the name and its meaning. Being a shortened form of "Eleanor," the name has a surprisingly long history. The name connection goes back to the name "Aliénor," a form of saying Eleanor and partially attributed to the Queen of France. The name also goes back to the Greek word "eleos," a term for compassion or mercy. It even has some potential Arabic connections or origins with

the word “ellinor,” having a meaning of “god is my light,” giving even further credence to the biblical comparisons, as well as the lofty importance that the woman has to the narrator.

The name “Lenore” can also be broken down and written in phonetic transcription under the IPA, translating to [lɛn'ɔ:ɪ]. The word pertains to iambic prosody, being unstressed in the first syllable, and stressed in the second. The sentiment and significance of Lenore’s name can be seen equally in the titular raven. Introduced in the seventh stanza, the raven only has one line throughout the entire poem, *nevermore*. It is a peculiar word, one that can go as far back as the 1800s meaning, “at no future time,” or, “never again,” giving a distinct sense of finality whenever the word is used.

It conjoins the two words “never” and “more,” both originally coming from Old English words for “not” and “ever”, to not only create this word, but also to stay in line with the meter of the poem, trochaic tetrameter, and each line ending with an “-ore” sound. This word, as with Lenore, can be written in phonetic transcription, translating to [n,ɛvə-m'ɔ:ɪ], as well as following the anapestic meter. This is shown with the lack of stress in the first two syllables and stress on the third and final syllable. As said before, the ending, terminating sound for both nevermore and Lenore fall in line with the trochaic tetrameter, as well as having the same terminating “-ore” sound as the other words within the poem, such as “bore,” “yore,” “door,” and “before.”

Another lexical and semantic analysis that can be made occurs in the fourteenth stanza in the dialogue made towards the raven that ties into the previously mentioned theme of death, mourning, and moving on. At first, he calls the raven a wretch, yet also remarks that “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee” (Poe, l. 84). While the terms used in this line are purely connotational, the next two lines are particularly unique. Poe’s in-depth knowledge of the history of language comes into play with the following lines, “Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore / Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!” (Poe, l. 85-6)

“Respite,” within this context, is a term that comes from the Latin word “respectus,” meaning “refuge,” or “consideration,” used to define a short period of rest from something difficult or unpleasant. Furthermore, the next word used, “nepenthe,” rather than being a real word, Poe chooses to use a word first termed in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. The word nepenthe (νηπενθές), being from Ancient Greek, translates literally to “not-sorrow” or “anti-sorrow.” The word was used to name a fictional drug of forgetfulness within the fourth book of Homer’s epic, “Then Helen, daughter of Zeus, took other counsel. / Straightway she cast into the wine of which they were drinking a drug / to quiet all pain and strife, and bring forgetfulness of every ill” (Homer, Book 4, v. 219-221).

While the word “nepenthe” only properly exists in the original Greek verse of the epic, as most translations alter the wording to fit the context of the English version of the narrative, the word is always referred to have come from Homer’s story. Overall, Poe’s linguistic knowledge, understanding of the rules of language and language universals show his contributions and skill as a linguist. This is proven by those lines and words, and demonstrated through his highlight of the prosodic features and language universals in the latter portions of the poem.

Conversely, rather than following the rules of language as tightly as Poe does, Lovecraft, on the other hand, often makes up words while remaining scientific about how his characters and their alien words are presented, showcasing his knowledge of language with phonetics, phonology, semantics, and lexicon. This is especially prevalent in the choice of work for the current analysis, his most famous short story, *The Call of Cthulhu*. In the title alone, it is obvious that the word “Cthulhu” is not a word present in any conventional dictionary. Despite this, the

word can be transcribed into a phonetic form through the IPA, translating to [kəθ'ʊ:lʊ:], following the amphibrach prosodic feature. This is shown through a lack of stress in the first syllable, stress in the second, and an additional lack of stress in the third. Furthermore, the author himself, in a letter to the amateur writer Duane W. Rimel on July 23, 1934, addressed the issue of how the name “Cthulhu” is meant to be pronounced.

The name of the hellish entity was invented by beings whose vocal organs were not like man’s, hence it has no relation to the human speech equipment. The syllables were determined by a physiological equipment wholly unlike ours, *hence could never be uttered perfectly by human throats*. The actual sound – as nearly as any human organs could imitate it or human letters record it – may be taken as something like *Khlûl'-hloo*, with the first syllable pronounced gutturally and very thickly. The *u* is about like that in *full*; and the first syllable is not unlike *klul* in sound, hence the *h* represents the guttural thickness. (Lovecraft)

While this pronunciation is not a familiar one, these are some of the only origins currently present about Lovecraft’s alien characters. However, this way of pronunciation is not entirely standard, as Lovecraft himself has been noted to say it differently on varying occasions. Interestingly, this scientific analysis of alien words is present within the character’s own story. The word is brought up multiple times before the creature and its history within Lovecraft’s story is revealed, though the first proper mention is from a man named Henry Anthony Wilcox, where he recounts his dreams and the strange happenings within them. However, what is particularly interesting about the passage is as follows, “The two sounds most frequently repeated are those rendered by the letters ‘Cthulhu’ and ‘R’lyeh” (Lovecraft, para. 11).

While the words are not separated with hyphens to enunciate the spelling of words, the surrounding words suggest a denotation and entailment that the narrator is spelling the words out, referring to them as *sounds* and *letters*, rather than names or words. This continues the scientific minuteness that Lovecraft and his characters have when looking at these words. Rather than trying to pronounce them, he takes an orthographical approach, analyzing the spelling of these alien words. This scientific depth can be seen even further with a quote from David R. Cole’s article *Cthulhuic Literacy: Teaching Secondary English with a Dose of Lovecraft*: “Lovecraft creates the illusion of verisimilitude through the detail of his writing style and due to the fact that many of his main characters are scientists – even though the scientists in his stories are often on the verge of going mad!” (Cole, 3).

Another example of Lovecraft’s linguistic knowledge is a specific term used to describe the sculpture of Cthulhu that begins the main character’s journey. The word “fetish,” a term that most in the modern day, would associate as a term used to describe a sexual attraction toward something, such as an object or a body part. But, in this context, Lovecraft uses the term derived from Latin origins, the word *facticius*, meaning “artificial,” and the word *facere*, meaning “to make.” In general, it is a term given to objects that are believed to have supernatural powers, or some kind of a man-made object that holds a degree of power over others. The word “fetish” contains a labiodental and alveolars as their places of articulation, with the [f] sound being made by touching the bottom lip with the teeth, and the [t] sound being made by raising the tongue.

Another analysis of the places and manners of articulation within Lovecraft’s words is in the creature itself. Outside of an IPA format, the word “Cthulhu” as it is pronounced in modern-day, can be looked at under this lens. Most, if not all, manners of articulation within Lovecraft’s names are velars, particularly the words “Cthulhu,” “R’lyeh,” and the full chant present in the short story, “Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn” (Lovecraft, para. 23). All of

these words are pronounced with an extraordinary amount of guttural thickness, as noted from Lovecraft's message, and the letters comprising them are pronounced in their base sound components, as it is the only way to make sense of such an erroneous arrangement of letters.

While there is not much interpretation with the words that Lovecraft showcases, the semantic aspect of his works can be seen in the terms that he uses to pronounce them. The word "guttural" is referred to as a term for sounds produced by the throat. This comes from the Latin root, *guttur*, meaning "throat," but this has another interesting synonym. It can also be a word to use for *growling*, like an animal. An interpretation of the word "Cthulhu," of the sunken city "R'lyeh," and of the phrase that describes the state of dreaming God, being described as guttural is not a coincidence.

Much like Poe, Lovecraft does not misuse words. The frequent usage of velars in his writings ties back to the visual depiction of Cthulhu during the first and second sections of *The Call of Cthulhu*, but the second description, as told by the main character, an anthropologist named Francis Wayland Thurston, "It represented 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" (para. 21).

"Anthropoid," coming from the Greek word *anthrōpos*, meaning "human being," is a term that refers to something resembling human being in form. With Lovecraft using the word vaguely to describe its connection to human form, this gives even more emphasis on the creatures used to try and describe the appearance of the monster. Even with the descriptors used to try and give a proper appearance to Cthulhu, some of the most defining characteristics are kennings, words put together by a hyphen. He describes the head as *octopus-like*, and its body as being *rubbery-looking*, casting doubt on the certainty of what this thing is. This can be seen further later within the short story as Inspector Legrasse goes to investigate a forested area said to be the center of some dark cult. As the collection of officers draw near, Lovecraft makes a particular note of the chanting coming from the woods as having strange sounds. The author describes it as follows, "There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; and it is terrible to hear the one when the source should yield the other" (para. 29).

Aside from the single mention of the rough and vague humanoid shape that the creature possesses, Lovecraft is extremely particular about his mention of beasts and various creatures used to describe the words created and uttered by Cthulhu and the other gods of the Lovecraftian pantheon. This all once again goes back to the simple term, "guttural," a term connected to beasts by the sounds that they make. In everything that Lovecraft presents in *The Call of Cthulhu*, the notion of guttural pronunciation is intrinsically linked to everything that the language of the story stands on. Cthulhu is only *vaguely* human, with the traits exuberated by the sculpture and his eventual reveal far more akin to animals and beasts than to man, and this is showcased no finer than in the language presented in the story, with phrases and words that must be broken down to the most basic of forms, letters, and pronounced with the original, basic sound components. It is eerily fitting of beings beyond human comprehension, where attempting to understand such endless depths breaks our minds into madness.

Lovecraft is a name often paired with Poe, as the former was greatly inspired by the latter, going as far as to call him the God of Fiction and even put direct references to Poe's works within some of his later stories. Ergo, it is not surprising that the two made tremendous contributions to the field of linguistics, even if unknowingly. They hardly ever misused words, and even when some passages from either author could be seen as their own personal madness, each word can be researched, understood, and brought to a new meaning beyond that.

Lovecraft's own language of R'lyehian is eerily reminiscent of Old English with such emphasis on guttural pronunciation and thickness. Derived from the sounds we use to create the phonetical and lexical vastness we use every day; his expressed knowledge of the old language allowed him to create a new language, one that is even more basic and fundamental than the oldest forms of English. With the words being comprised of these base sounds and literal pronunciation, Lovecraft managed to create a language that seems even older than our own.

Both men understood science very well and used that to their advantage when crafting their stories, and, again, unknowingly, contributed to the science of words and language. Poe and Lovecraft understood the rules of language and literature, and sometimes even bent and broke the rules to showcase why these rules matter, why they are important, and how they can be applied, even if the answer is not obvious. Sometimes, to see the truth, we must delve a little deeper.

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