

# On H. P. Lovecraft

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## H. P. Lovecraft

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born August 20, 1890, in Providence, Rhode Island, to Winfield Scott Lovecraft and Sarah Susan (Phillips) Lovecraft, both of predominantly English, descent. He was unfortunate in his parents; his father a pompous traveling salesman, who was committed to a guardian when Howard was three, and died of paresis later; his mother was an over-protected, genteel, if attractive girl, ill equipped to deal with the world, a woman who out of her deep shock at the occasion of her husband's illness and death, visited all unwittingly upon her son the resentment she must have felt against her husband, by convincing that he was an „ugly-looking” boy, though he was not at all unhandsome.

As a boy, Lovecraft lived a relatively lonely and reclusidve life. He was conditioned to it by frequent periods of illness on the one hand and, on the other, by his mother's possessiveness. He was precocious as a child. He spent many hours in grandfather Winfield V. Phillips' extensive library, which included his maternal grandmother's books on astronomy, which he developed an early interest which culminated in his early teen years by his publication of a hectographed magazine titled *The Rhode Island Journal of Astronomy*, and climaxed by his contribution of a monthly article on current astronomical phenomena to the *Providence Tribune*.

He spoke of himself in later years, referring to his childhood, as „very peculiar and sensitive, always preferring the society of grown persons to that of other children.” As an only child, by the circumstances of his existence much among adults—his psychoneurotic mother, his maternal grandparents, his aunts, sisters of his mother—

and he remained with them for most of his life. His grandmother died when Lovecraft was his grandfather when he was fourteen. His mother declined into an inevitable mental breakdown and died in 1921, after two years in Butler Hospital, leaving Lovecraft with her sisters, Mrs. Franklin C. Clark, and Mrs. Edward F. Gamwell, of whom Mrs. Gamwell alone survived Lovecraft, by four years. This constant association with adults forced Lovecraft to fall back upon the world of his imagination.

Such boyhood companions of his own age as Lovecraft had were unsatisfactory to him, and he was unsatisfactory to them. He preferred books and, when he took part in games, liked to act out historical and fictive events, whereas the other boys liked livelier competitive games, though a number of them did join him when, at thirteen, he founded the „Providence Detective Agency,” under the influence of a departure in read in reading into fiction about Sherlock Holmes, Nick Carter, and Old Young King Brady. Solitude, however, came naturally acceptably to him, and he readily found all the contacts he needed with the world outside in correspondence—at first as a member in the United Amateur Press Association, which he joined when he was fourteen, later in voluminous letters to other writers his work attracted to him.

The world of Lovecraft's imagination was stimulated by various clearly defined interests—the sciences, particularly astronomy; Greek and Roman history; the Arabian Nights, eighteenth century England; and the Gothic tradition—very much in that order. On the banks of the Seekonk as a child he acted out Greek and Roman legends; by early adolescence he was writing poetry, and by fifteen he had produced his first story „The Beast in the Cave”, which indicated that in prose, at least the Gothic tradition directed his creative effort. He re-ferred to this first story in later years as „ineffably pompous and Johnsonese.”

His membership in the United Amateur Press Association brought him into print when his story , *The Alchemist*, written in 1980 was published in *The United Amateur*. It was not until his twenties that Lovecraft began to write the stories which were eventually to bring him to a respected place among writers in the domain of the macabre in America. In 1917 he wrote *Dagon*, the first of the stories to be published in *Weird Tales* (in 1923). He followed it with other tales, two which appeared professionally in a short-lived magazine named *Home Brew*. Impressed at about this time,

and particularly by the death of his mother in 1921, by the declining family fortunes, Lovecraft offered his services at a far too nominal fee as a „ghost-writer,” a critic, a reviser of prose and poetry, and by this means began to eke out an income which just barely reached the basic economic subsistence level.

This work brought him new friends, among them Mrs. Sonia Greene of Brooklyn—a remarkable and dynamic woman, the epitome of the feminine, who, though she was approximately ten years Lovecraft’s senior, attracted and challenged him as he did her. They were married in 1924, but the marriage was of brief duration. After less than two years, they parted, a formal divorce followed three years later. „Financial difficulties”, plus increasing divergences in aspirations and environmental needs, brought about a divorce,” wrote Lovecraft later. In point of fact they were not complementary, and Lovecraft could not adjust to life either as a married man with the added responsibility of caring for a wife (whose earnings in large part supported them both, which was difficult for a gentleman of Lovecraft’s training and traditions to accept), or to life in Brooklyn, where the couple lived at 169 Clinton Street, though he wrote later in life to one of his old friends somewhat nostalgically of „that era of 1925... with its long informal sessions at various rendezvous—the complete disregard of the clock—the quaint familiar landmarks—the spirited weekly meetings (of the Kalem Klub, a group of fellow bookmen which included James F. Morton, Samuel Loveman, Frank Belknap Long, Everett McNeil, Vrest Orton, Wilfred B. Talman, Arthur Leeds, Herman C. Koenig, Rheinhart Kleiner, and George Kirk)—the then burning issues and the no less burning arguments—the bookshops and the tours of exploration—the last years in which we could feel that curious sense of the importance of things, and that vague, heartening spur of adventurous expectancy, which distinguish the morning and noon from the afternoon of life.”

After the separation, Lovecraft returned to Providence and except for short trips to visit Henry S. Whitehead and R.H. Barlow in Florida, to examine the historical past in St. Augustine, New Orleans, Charleston, Natchez, Quebec, Boston, and Philadelphia, among others—there he remained for the rest of his comparatively short life.

From 1923 onward his fiction found a ready market, though he was a slow writer—partly because of the necessity for revision work, and for the correspondence which kept him in touch with established and coming writers. His work in the macabre quickly won him an audience, not only among the readers of *Weird Tales*, but among the critical fraternity as well. Edward J. O’Brien triple-starred *The Colour out of Space* and *The Dunwich Horror* in O’Brien’s distinguished annual collections of the best short stories; the anthologist, Christine Campbell Thomson, began to reprint his work in England; Dashiell Hammett anthologized Lovecraft in the United States; at last, William Crawford, an amateur in publishing, brought out *The Shadow over Innsmouth* in book form in 1936, though Lovecraft’s old friend and fellow amateur, W. Paul Cook had eight years before set up and printed for book publication—but never bound—his story, *The Shunned House*. Lovecraft’s fiction had expanded from *Weird Tales* to *Amazing Stories*, *Tales of Magic and Mystery*, and *Astounding Stories*. In 1932 his aunt, Mrs. Franklin Clark died, and with his re-maining aunt, Annie E. Phillips Gamwell, he moved to the house at 66 College Street (now at 67 Prospect Place) which was his last home in Providence. There he was fond of writing by night, drawing the shades by day to work by electric light and from this final address he often emerged to walk the streets of Providence by night—as he had done in his youth from the family home at 454 Angell Street. It cannot be said that Lovecraft had much faith in his work at any period; he referred to it as touched with commercialism, and he did not turned away from revision of the work of others and go it alone.

In his last years, the illnesses which had plagued him in his youth reflected in his declining health. His abnormal sensitivity to any temperature less than 20° above zero deep-ened to the point where he was made acutely uncomfortable, by any temperature of less than 30°. His letters during his last year of life are filled with references to annoying infirmities and little disabilities. In the autumn and early of 1937, his illness grew much worse, and he did not improved. Late in February, 1937, he was taken to the Jane Brown Memorial Hospital in Providence. There he died early in the morning of March 5, 1937, of a combination of cancer of the intestine and Bright’s disease. He was buried three days later, in his grandfather Phillips’ lot in Swan Point Cemetery; though his name is inscribed on the central shaft, no stone marks his grave.

(From *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, Arkham House, 1983.)