

H.P. LOVECRAFT



H.P. Lovecraft is another New England writer whose writings received little notice during his life and who died in near poverty. However, he is now recognized as possibly the most influential horror writer of the 20th century. Stephen King claims H.P. Lovecraft as a major influence, and you'll find Lovecraftian storylines through King's work. Most notable are the short stories "Jerusalem's Lot" (yes, the 17th century location of the later 'Salem's Lot), published in *NightShift*, and "Crouch End," eventually dramatized in one of the best film versions of a Lovecraftian story (please see our module for the link), originally published in *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*. Lovecraft himself claimed Poe as his greatest influence, so an interesting link exists between these three great New England horror writers.

Lovecraft was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1890. In Lovecraft's early life, his father struggled with psychotic breakdowns, which we now know were brought about by syphilis. He was eventually hospitalized and died when Lovecraft was 7. A major theme in Lovecraft's stories is the inheritance of tainted or corrupted genes, and the ensuing madness of the protagonist as he comes to realize this inheritance. The early loss of Lovecraft's father no doubt contributed to this theme. His mother also suffered from depression, and so mental instability played in major role in his early life. He also had a nervous breakdown in his late teens, and then entered into an isolated, hermit-like existence that was rarely broken. A later marriage ended in divorce, and Lovecraft's life hovered around his native Providence.

He primarily wrote poetry until his early twenties, when he began to submit short stories to pulp fiction magazines. One magazine was the precursor to the many horror comics of the 1950's and 60's that heavily influenced an American horror subculture: *Weird Tales*. Lovecraft's first published short story, *The Tomb*, appeared in this magazine in 1923. It has many of the features of his later stories: a fantasizing, isolated male protagonist obsessed with a place (here a mausoleum, but at other times a decrepit mansion or decayed town) that he intuitively possesses some secret about his past. His obsession carries him to the point of madness and he is hospitalized (i.e., placed in an asylum), but later investigation shows that his intuitions are correct, and he is either the direct descendent or perhaps reincarnation of a family line long since dead. The "secret" of the protagonists of Lovecraft's stories later take on much more horrific proportions, but this early work lays out some of his common themes.



Many other of Lovecraft's later stories take on a more cosmic perspective, of Great Old Ones who once ruled the universe, are antagonistic "break through" the layers of chaos ensuing (and much beings exist in a universe they can not a friendly one. Most often the into a horrible fate that they only



to humans, and who are always threatening to reality human beings have created, with much gruesome death). For Lovecraft, human only minutely perceive, and that universe is protagonists of Lovecraft's stories are locked gradually gain awareness of. These ancient

gods, Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, and many others exist in other dimensions unseen by humans, but will often appear as tentacled, grotesquely squirming and bubbling beings. Lovecraft's gift was to suggest their appearance rather than describe it in detail, so that much was left up to the reader. This ambiguity of shape and form has also created headaches for the many film directors who attempt to visual Lovecraft's monsters, so often the final product is laughable rather than terrifying.

Lovecraft was a voluminous letter-writer, and despite his self-imposed isolation, corresponded with many other writers of the day. One writer, August Derleth, enlarged Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, and wrote many stories deeply influenced by Lovecraft's subjects and worldview. Robert Bloch, who eventually wrote the novel *Psycho* upon which the famous film is based, was another correspondent



who went on to contribute many stories and screenplays for television and movies, including penning several episodes of *Thriller* (a pre-*Night Gallery* kind of TV series starring Boris Karloff), Alfred Hitchcock Presents, and for Hammer Films. While Bloch began his long writing career influenced and supported by Lovecraft, his later mature work focuses primarily on psychological horror, with *Psycho* being a vivid example. Note that in the fun *Night Gallery* episode in our module entitled "Professor Peabody's Last Lecture," Derleth, Bloch and even Lovecraft himself

appear as students in the classroom as a hilarious "in" joke.

No discussion of Lovecraft can bypass the fact that he was a strident racist. His stories ooze with his paranoid fears about matings between the races, and people of color are nearly always presented as decadent, primitive worshippers of chaos. Lovecraft closely followed the eugenics theories of the day, which eventually fueled Hitler's theory of a superior Aryan race.

Lovecraft continues to fascinate and inspire to this day. A fun online e-zine on Lovecraft exists at <http://lovecraftzine.com> with links to Stephen King-inspired e-comics in Lovecraftian style, and other inventions.