

Pre-Intermediate



B1+

R A I N B O W S

# Weird Stories

Howard Phillips Lovecraft



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Howard Phillips Lovecraft

# Weird Stories

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# Weird Stories

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# The Author

## Howard Phillips Lovecraft

(1890-1937)



Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born on August 20, 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island.

Lovecraft was over-protected by his mother and grew up an introverted child with few friends and afraid of strangers. His father showed early signs of madness and when he was admitted to a mental hospital, the only male figure in his family was his grandfather Phillips. He encouraged Lovecraft to read from the family library and helped him set up a laboratory where the boy did weekly experiments, reporting them in a journal. The boy showed an early interest in fairy tales<sup>1</sup> and classic mythology. Later he became fond of fantasy fiction (E.A. Poe, Jules Verne and H.G.Wells<sup>2</sup>), chemistry and astronomy. Lovecraft was frequently ill, had nervous crises and suffered from night terrors or *night gaunts*<sup>3</sup> as he called them. As a result, he never attended school regularly and never got a diploma, but was educated privately.

From 1906 to 1912 he contributed to various local newspapers with poems, letters and articles on astrology.

It was only in 1913, that his letters in verse, published in the pulp magazine<sup>4</sup> "The Argosy", attracted the attention of Edward F. Daas, President of the United Amateur Press Association (UAPA), who invited him to contribute with poems and short stories.

In 1914, Lovecraft became a member of UAPA and began a lively correspondence with other amateur<sup>5</sup> journalists. In the meantime he

1. *fairy tale*: story about imaginary creatures with supernatural power.

2. E.A. Poe (1809-1849): American Romantic writer famous for his gothic stories of mystery and the macabre; Jules Verne (1828-1905): French author of science fiction, the creator of Captain Nemo and his submarine Nautilus; H.G. Wells (1866-1946): English writer known for his contribution to science fiction

and his description of the invasion of the Earth by the Martians.

3. *night gaunt*: demon-like being.

4. *pulp magazine*: inexpensive periodic publication printed on poor quality paper (from wood pulp) with pictures, stories and articles of interest to the readers.

5. *amateur*: taking part in an activity for pleasure, not as a job.



wrote short stories, often inspired by his dreams, e.g. ***The Alchemist*** (1916), *The Tomb* and *Dagon* (1917), *Polaris* (1918), *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* (1919), *The Terrible Old Man* (1920), ***The Outsider*** and *The Music of Erich Zann* (1921); most of them were later published in “Weird Tales”<sup>6</sup>.

In May 1921, Lovecraft’s mother died and in July, at a convention of amateur journalists in Boston, Lovecraft met Sonia Greene, a Russian-Jewish widow. The writer married her in 1924 and went to live in her Brooklyn flat. The next year, Sonia Greene accepted a new job in Cleveland, but Lovecraft remained in New York until 1926. The two were divorced in 1929.

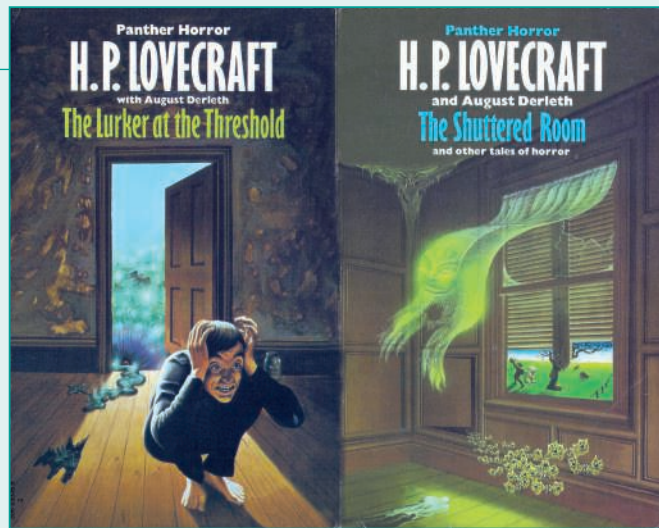
In 1924, the magician and showman Harry Houdini<sup>6</sup> commissioned a story based on his experience, and Lovecraft wrote one of his best pieces, ***Imprisoned with the Pharaohs***.

Back in Providence, Lovecraft wrote the famous essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1926) and new short stories e.g. *The Call of Cthulhu* and *The Silver Key* (1926), ***The Color Out of Space*** (1927).

In 1927, he finished his first two novels, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*.

Between 1930 and 1936, Lovecraft wrote the short novels *A Whisperer in Darkness* (1930), *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), *The Shadow Out of Time* (1935); the long stories *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1931), *The Dreams in the Witch-House* (1932); and the short stories *Through the Gates of the Silverkey House* (1932) and ***The Thing on the Doorstep*** (1933). *The Hunter in the Dark* (1935) was the last short novel Lovecraft wrote under his name. After this, he published either with other authors or revisions of other authors.

In the fall of 1936, the first symptoms of Lovecraft’s illness (cancer) appeared; he was hospitalized and died on 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1937.



6. *Weird Tales*: fantasy and horror fiction “pulp” magazine (1923-1954).

7. Henry Houdini: (1874-1926) Hungarian stunt performer famous for his sensational escape acts.

# Lovecraft's Themes

Lovecraft's stories are based on a set of **supernatural, pre-human and extraterrestrial elements**. He wrote about gothic architecture, dark foggy forests and old houses with rats scurrying<sup>1</sup> in the walls and cities of alien creatures from the past, living on vast, subterranean plains.

In *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1925-26), he himself explains the main theme of weird<sup>2</sup> tales: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind<sup>3</sup> – fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear – **fear of the unknown**."

The fear he deals with<sup>4</sup> is **cosmic**: he transmits the sensation that human life is only a "thin shell"<sup>5</sup> in an immense and unknown reality. He was from rural New England and his stories are usually set in the environment he knew because he said that the unknown is closer to ordinary life than we imagine. People believed completely in the positive power and possibilities of Science at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Lovecraft showed its dangers and its limits. In a letter to James F. Morton in 1923, Lovecraft talks about how Einstein's theory of relativity puts the world into chaos and makes the cosmos a joke<sup>6</sup>. In a 1929 letter to Woodburn Harris, he writes that technological comforts risk the collapse of Science. Consequently, the origin of fear in Lovecraft's stories is the unknown, a forbidden<sup>7</sup> remote knowledge which man cannot explain. The unknown sometimes involves a **non-human presence**, or inhuman entities, semi-gelatinous substances, totally different from the classic blood, bones, or corpses of contemporary horror stories and more similar to the creatures described in science-fiction novels. These non-human creatures need human followers to make contact with men. Only in this way can the protagonists win temporary victories and go on with the story. Another important theme in Lovecraft's literature is the **threat**<sup>8</sup> **to our civilization**. In his stories, human beings must sometimes fight against more barbaric, primitive elements; civilized cultures are ruined by malevolent inhuman forces; lonely, highly educated protagonists gradually become corrupted by an evil influence. In this last case, the curse<sup>9</sup>, which usually falls on the main

1. scurrying: running.

2. weird: very strange and unusual, unexpected.

3. mankind: humanity.

4. deals with: speaks about.

5. shell: the hard external covering of something, especially nuts, eggs

and some animals.

6. joke: funny story.

7. forbidden: prohibited.

8. threat: menace.

9. curse: a cause of trouble and unhappiness, condemnation.



character, is **hereditary** and comes from interbreeding<sup>10</sup>, with non-humans or a magical influence. However, the descendants cannot escape the dishonor of crimes committed by their ancestors<sup>11</sup>. Mankind is **haunted by their destiny**, they are not in control of their own actions. Lovecraft's characters cannot even run away, as they are attracted by an outside force or simply doomed<sup>12</sup> to their end. These helpless and hopeless situations lead his protagonists to **madness**: they rarely understand what is happening to them and are unable to mentally face<sup>13</sup> the extraordinary realities they witness<sup>14</sup> or hear.



H.P. Lovecraft by Abigail Larson (2010)

Another controversial theme is Lovecraft's **racism**. Lovecraft associated virtue, intellect and civilization with white Anglo-Saxon ethnicity, in contrast with the other corrupt, intellectually inferior, uncivilized and irrational non-European ethnical groups. Lovecraft considered English culture to be the most civilized, and his admiration for British authors is repeatedly mentioned and supported. He lived at a time when racial segregation laws were enforced<sup>15</sup> in many States of the Union and when the Immigration Act of 1924 restricted immigration in order to have less "inferior stock"<sup>16</sup> from eastern and southern Europe. Lovecraft's racism makes us think of his view on genders<sup>17</sup>. In his stories, women are non-existent and when they appear, they are just servants of menacing forces, so there is **no love and romance**: in his world, sexuality assumes a sinister connotation, as in his own private life.

10. *interbreeding*: mixing with a different race.

11. *ancestor*: a person in your family who lived a long time ago.

12. *doomed*: condemned.

13. *face*: deal with.

14. *witness*: are spectators of.

15. *enforced*: imposed, applied.

16. *stock*: the family or group that a person or animal comes from.

17. *gender*: sexual category.



## BEFORE READING

### 1 Tick the correct answer.

a. What is a spectroscope?

An instrument for

☐ detecting ghosts.

☐ measuring speed.

☐ detecting colors.

☐ measuring warmth.

b. What is a spectrum?

☐ The colors light can be separated into.

☐ A ghost from space.

☐ A quality of metal.

☐ A kind of reflecting glass.

c. How many colors are there in a spectrum?

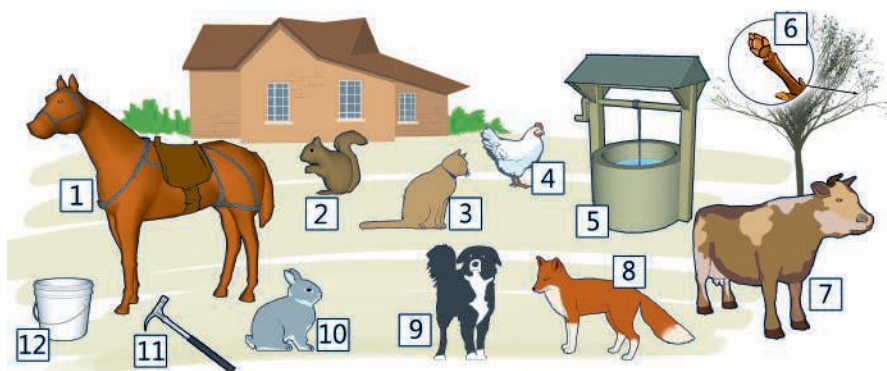
☐ Ten

☐ Three

☐ Eleven

☐ Seven

### 2 Match the following words to the appropriate pictures.



☐ bucket

☐ bud

☐ cat

☐ cow

☐ dog

☐ fox

☐ hammer

☐ hen

☐ horse

☐ rabbit

☐ squirrel

☐ well

### 3 Match each adjective (column A) with its synonym (column B).

A

a. dark ☐

b. old ☐

c. bizarre ☐

d. blasted ☐

e. artificial ☐

B

1. unnatural

2. strange

3. obscure

4. ancient

5. dried up

# Weird Stories

## The Colour Out of Space

### BEFORE READING

### Story 1

*This tale was written in 1927. Here Lovecraft describes what a meteor from space can do to vegetation, animals and humans.*

West of Arkham the hills are wild and the valleys are covered with dark, old woods. On the hills there are ancient farms, with low, moss-coated<sup>1</sup> cottages which seem to keep New England's secrets.

Many of the old people have gone away and foreigners do not like to live there. Only Ammi Pierce speaks of the 'strange days'. Before a new road was built, there was a road over the hills and through the valleys crossing the blasted heath<sup>2</sup>. The heath and the road will be flooded<sup>3</sup> to make the new artificial lake, and the secrets of the 'strange days' will be part of the secrets of the lake.

When I went into the hills and valleys to explore the place for a new artificial lake, they told me the place was evil<sup>4</sup>. I thought it was just a legend which was part of the Puritan folklore, but when I saw the place, I felt that the trees grew too thickly and there was too much silence. The atmosphere of oppression made it unreal and grotesque.

The blasted heath seemed to be the result of a fire, an area eaten by acid where no vegetation had ever grown. I saw the ruins of a house and an abandoned well full of stagnant vapors, which strangely mixed with the colors of the sunlight.

That evening I asked local people about the blasted heath and the 'strange days'. They told me it had all happened in the eighties, when a family had disappeared or had been killed. It was better not to listen to Ammi Pierce's strange tales because he was a little bizarre.

1. moss-coated: covered with furry green vegetation.

2. blasted heath: dried up open land.

3. flooded: covered with water.

4. evil: bad, with malevolent effects.

But the next morning I went to Ammi's old cottage in the forest. I had to wait a long time before he opened the door and it was clear he was not happy to see me.

I told him of my work and asked some vague questions about the area. Though he looked very old, he was intelligent and immediately understood what I wanted. He did not protest about the water which was going to cover the land, but said that it was better to flood it after the 'strange days'. His voice became very low and he pointed outside with his right forefinger.

I listened to Ammi and I trembled<sup>5</sup> all the time even though it was summer. When he had finished, I hurried back to my hotel before sunset, and the next day I returned to Boston to give up my job.

Old Ammi's story started with the meteorite.

"Before that time," he said, "the only legends were about the witches' trials. Nobody thought that the devil lived in those woods. Then, a white cloud came at noon with explosions in the air, and a column of smoke from the valley. By that night, everybody in Arkham knew that a great rock from the sky had fallen into Nahum Gardner's farm."

Here Ammi paused and closed his eyes for a moment. Then he continued,

"Nahum went to town to tell people about the stone and on his way he stopped here. The next morning, my wife and I went with three professors from Miskatonic University to see the rock from unknown stellar space. We expected to see a very big stone, but Nahum said it had become smaller, though it was still hot."

'Stones cannot get smaller!' said the professors.

"They analyzed the stone and found it was strangely soft, it looked like plastic. They put it in an old bucket because they wanted to test it in the college laboratory. The stone was highly malleable, very luminous in the dark, didn't become cold and burned metals and glass. No solvent could attack it and it revealed shining bands different from the usual colors of the spectrum. The professors were completely puzzled!"

---

5. *trembled: made short movements because afraid.*



"Old Anmi's story started with the meteorite."



“So they returned to Nahum’s place and found that the stone had become smaller. They again took a piece for testing and were able to see the central part of the thing, a large colored globule, not quite homogeneous, with a shiny surface. One of the professors hit it with a hammer, and it exploded with a nervous little pop<sup>6</sup>, leaving behind a spherical space. At the end of the test, the college scientists declared that it was nothing from this earth, but a piece of the great Outside, with outside properties and obedient to outside laws.”

“That night there was a thunderstorm. The stone, which was magnetic, attracted the lightning and, when the storm was over, nothing remained of it. There was only a hole in the earth. The stone from the sky had vanished and the professors thought they had never seen it. The Arkham newspapers wrote about the incident in detail and sent reporters to talk with Nahum Gardner and his family. Even a Boston daily paper interviewed him and Nahum quickly became a kind of local celebrity.”

Ammi sighed, then he went on.

“In July and August Nahum worked hard cutting the grass and he felt more tired than in other years. Then autumn came. There was an abundance of pears and apples of phenomenal size. But not one single fruit was good to eat; the taste was bitter and disgusting. It was the same with the melons and tomatoes. Quick to connect events, Nahum declared that the meteorite had poisoned<sup>7</sup> the soil<sup>8</sup>”.

“Winter came early and I noticed that Nahum looked worried. The rest of the family also became less communicative and attended church services and social activities less regularly. Nahum said that his dogs no longer barked<sup>9</sup> and that he was worried about certain footprints<sup>10</sup> in the snow which were not those of squirrels, rabbits, or foxes. Little by little people became convinced that there was poison in Nahum’s land: the snow disappeared faster around his place; the size and color of the weeds<sup>11</sup> was unbelievable and they smelled horrible.

6. *pop*: a short, sharp sound, like something exploding.

7. *poisoned*: contaminated.

8. *soil*: ground.

9. *barked*: made loud sounds.

10. *footprint*: mark made on the ground by the foot.

11. *weed*: bad plant.



“There was only a hole in the earth.”

Of course it was the meteorite.

‘Perhaps some mineral element from the stone has entered the soil,’ said the professors, ‘but the water will soon wash it away.’

The trees produced buds prematurely around Nahum’s place, and at night their branches danced menacingly in the wind. Fifteen-year-old Thaddeus, Nahum’s second son, insisted that they danced even when there was no wind. The entire Gardner family became nervous, and soon people started saying that something was wrong with them.

In April, farmers stopped using the road near Nahum’s place because of the strange colors of the vegetation; Nahum’s boys were scared by what was said in town, especially Thaddeus, the most sensitive of them. In May the insects came, and Nahum’s place became a nightmare, full of buzzing and crawling<sup>12</sup>. Before long, Nahum’s people became so familiar with strange things that they did not notice. But one night Nahum realized that there was a distinct luminosity in the grass, leaves and flowers near the farm.”

“I was now the only person to visit the place,” said Ammi, “and when school closed and the boys no longer went to town, I sometimes went shopping for the Gardners.”

12. *buzzing, crawling: sounds and movements typical of insects.*



“All the members of the family began declining both physically and mentally, and people were not surprised at the news that Mrs. Gardner had gone mad. It happened in June, on the anniversary of the meteor’s fall. Nahum did not send her to the county mental hospital, but when the boys grew afraid of her, he locked her in the attic. By July she had stopped speaking and a little later she became luminous in the dark, like the vegetation.”

“One day the horses became agitated and soon after galloped out of the stable. They were found only after a week, useless and uncontrollable, so they had to be killed.

The grass, the leaves and the flowers became grey and crisp<sup>13</sup>; the fruit was small and tasteless and all the insects died. By September, all the vegetation disintegrated into a grey powder.

Nahum’s wife cried madly from time to time, and he and the boys were in a constant state of nervous tension. They avoided people now, and when school opened, the boys remained at home.”

“On one of my rare visits,” Ammi went on, “I warned Nahum not to drink the well water because it was no longer good. But Nahum seemed indifferent: he had become resigned to strange and unpleasant things.”

“Thaddeus went mad in September after a visit to the well. He had come back without the bucket, shouting about ‘the moving colors down there’. After a week, Nahum was forced to shut him in an attic room near his mother’s.

Almost at the same time, all the farm animals, hens, pigs and cows, began to die; even the dogs and the cats abandoned the farm.”

“On October 19<sup>th</sup>, Nahum entered my house crying because poor Thad had died in a strange manner,” continued Ammi. Nahum had buried what remained of him in the family cemetery behind the farm.

My wife and I comforted the poor man as best as we could. I accompanied Nahum home reluctantly and did my best to calm the hysterical sobs<sup>14</sup> of little Merwin. The other child, Zenas, continued to look fixedly into space all the time. When night came, I left that

---

13. *crisp: dry and easy to break.*

14. *sob: little sound made when crying.*



“... all the farm animals (...) began to die...”

damned house because I was afraid to remain there. Three days later Nahum ran into my kitchen in the early morning, and told my wife a desperate tale once more: little Merwin had died. The boy had gone out late at night with a lantern and a bucket for water and had never come back. Nahum had searched for him all night in the woods and the fields. At sunrise, near the well, he had found a pressed mass of iron, which had certainly been the lantern, and a half-fused piece of metal with a handle, the remnants of the bucket. That was all. There was no explanation, the place was cursed<sup>15</sup>.”

“For over two weeks I saw nothing of Nahum; I was worried, so I went to the Gardners’ place. There was no smoke from the great chimney, and all was grey and lifeless around the farm.

Fortunately Nahum was alive. He was weak, and lying on a sofa in the cold kitchen. I soon realized that Nahum had lost his mind, so I took the keys and went to the attic to see if his wife was still alive. It was quite dark inside her room, and the smell was revolting. I saw something black in the corner and screamed. For a moment a cloud obscured the window, then a sort of vapor touched me and strange colors danced before my eyes.

While I was running downstairs I heard a scream followed by a noise as if of suction<sup>16</sup>. Then I heard my horse Hero neighing<sup>17</sup>

15. *cursed: under a malignant spell.*

16. *suction: when air or liquid is removed.*

17. *neighing: making a long cry (typical of horses).*

in a panic outside, and the sound of its gallop disappearing into the distance.

But there was another noise out there. A sort of liquid splash, water: probably it was the well.

I slowly moved towards the kitchen looking for Nahum. He was still alive in a way, but in the last half-hour, death had attacked him. What remained was the distorted parody of his face.

‘What was it, Nahum what was it?’ I asked, and his cracked lips were just able to say broken words.

‘Nothin’, nothin’ ... the color ... it burns ... cold an’ wet ... but it burns ... it lived in the well ... I’ve seen it ... a kind of smoke ... suckin’ the life out of everything ... in that stone ... it probably came from that stone ... when the professors broke it ... it was that same color ... burns you up ... in the well water ... sucks the life out ...’

And that was all. I put a red tablecloth over what was left of Nahum; then I opened the back door and trembling walked home by the north road and the woods. I did not want to pass near the well.”

“After reassuring my wife, I went to Arkham and informed the authorities that the Gardner family was no more and two of the children had disappeared.

In the afternoon I returned to the Gardners’ farmhouse with three police officers, the coroner, the medical examiner and the vet. They were shocked when they saw what remained of poor Mrs. Gardner and her husband. The doctors took some of the Gardners’ dust to be examined in the college laboratory. Under the spectroscope the dust showed an unknown spectrum, similar to the spectrum of the meteor.

A policeman noticed that I was very nervous and continued looking at the well. He asked me why and I told him that Nahum was so afraid of something down the well that he had never thought of searching there for Merwin and Zenas.

At this, the men decided to explore the well immediately; the water was taken up bucket after bucket and soon there was a disgusting smell in the air. Merwin and Zenas were both there,



"At this, the men decided to explore the well immediately."

parts of them, in the porous and bubbling<sup>18</sup> bottom. There were also the remains of a dog and the bones of other little animals.

It was sunset and we all went indoors to discuss the case. What was the connection between the color of the vegetation and the death of the animals and humans? Why was everything so grey and crisp? What had made the two boys jump into the well?

Then the coroner noticed a soft light coming up from the well. We all went to the window and I was shocked: that was the color I had seen before! And I remembered Nahum's words, 'It isn't right, it is against nature'.

The horses outside began to neigh in panic and I advised the men not to go out. Then the light from the well grew stronger and the horses became more and more panicked. Suddenly, though there was no wind, the leafless branches of all the trees began to move spasmodically under the half-clouded moonlit sky. And, when a passing cloud obscured the moon, thousands of tiny<sup>19</sup>

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18. *bubbling: with balls of air.*

19. *tiny: very small.*



points of light appeared on top of each branch. In the meantime, the phosphorescent ray from the well was getting brighter and brighter, till it seemed to flow directly into the sky. The luminosity on the trees increased, the moving branches seemed to extend vertically and the horses galloped away.

Also inside the room something terrible was happening: gradually pale phosphorescence filled it, getting stronger each minute. We immediately left the room and went out through the back door.

Only when we were far away, on the high ground, we stopped to look back. Just then, the horrible thing shot vertically up like a rocket and disappeared through a round and curiously regular hole in the clouds among fragments and vapors. Then all was darkness and a furious wind coming from interstellar space hit the fields and the woods. What remained was a dusty, grey desert where nothing has grown ever since."

This was Ammi's tale and I think there was a lot of truth in it. I will be glad when the 'blasted heath' disappears under the water.



**WORKING ON THE TEXT**

- 1** Three characters are differently involved in the story. Write their names beside the appropriate headings.

First narrator: .....

Second narrator and spectator: .....

Protagonist: .....

- 2** Answer the following questions.

- What is the artificial lake going to cover?
- Why was it called the 'blasted heath'?
- Why does the first narrator visit Ammi? Where does Ammi live?
- Why does Ammi speak of "strange days"?
- Where did the rock from space fall?
- What did the professors declare after examining the stone?

- 3** Complete the following table giving details about the events Ammi narrates.

July and August	
Winter	
Spring	
April	
May	
June	
Summer	
September	
October	
After two weeks	

## WORKING ON VOCABULARY

- 4 Complete the sentences about the meteor using the appropriate words (nouns, adjectives, verbs) from the text.
- The meteor was ..... when it fell but in the course of the night it became .....
  - The stone was strangely ....., looked like ..... and was highly .....
  - The rock was ..... in the dark and refused to ..... cold.
  - It burned ..... and .....; it was ..... and attracted .....
  - Its core was ..... and not homogeneous with a ..... surface.
  - It ..... the soil, ..... animals and people and ..... things into grey .....

## WORKING ON GRAMMAR

- 5 Make the following sentences *negative*. The verb you have to transform is in bold type.
- They told me **to listen** to his tale.
  - Ammi's story **started** with the meteorite.
  - On his way to town, Nahum **stops** here.
  - The professors said that stones **could** get smaller.
  - The papers **sent** reporters to talk with Nahum Gardner and his family.
  - People became convinced that there **was** poison in Nahum's place.
  - Nahum's people **had become** familiar with strange things.
  - He **will be** glad when the water covers the blasted heath.
  - Ammi **did** his best to calm Merwin's sobs.
  - "**Watch!**" I shouted. "And cover your eyes!"



## WORKING ON SKILLS

## Speaking

- 6 Imagine you are interviewing Ammi. Enact the dialogue with a partner using the following suggestions.

**You:** Introduce yourself; say you are inspecting the area for an artificial lake.



**Ammi:** Say you are pleased to meet the inspector:

Ask where exactly the lake is going to be created.

**You:** Tell him the lake will flood the blasted heath. Ask what happened in that place.

**Ammi:** Reply that it all happened in the eighties when a meteor fell from outer space.

**You:** Ask if anybody was hurt. Say you saw the ruins of a house and chimney during your inspection.

**Ammi:** Say that the Gardner family was ultimately killed and before that, strange things happened.

**You:** Ask what strange things.

**Ammi:** Explain that the vegetation became grey and crisp, that the fruit was no good to eat and the water bad to drink, that all the animals died...

**You:** Show your interest. Say you will come back for the whole story another day. You have noticed that Ammi is tired and upset.

**Ammi:** Agree and say good bye.

## Writing

- 7 Write down what happened when the police officers and the doctors visited the farm with Ammi. Use no more than 100 words.

## Listening



- 8 Listen to the following passage. Find the words that have been changed and write the correct ones.

When I went into the hills and rivers to inspect them for the new artificial lake, they told me the place was good. They told me this in Arkham and, because that is a very old town full of stories about witches, I thought the evil must be something which grandpas had told children through centuries. The name “blasted heath” seemed to me very strange and unusual, and I wondered how it had come into the folklore of a Catholic community. Then I saw the bright woods and slopes in the west. It was morning when I saw them, but there was never shade there. The trees grew too thickly, and their branches were too big for any New England wood. There was too much noise and the floor was too soft with the wet covering of infinite years of decay.

## SUPERNATURAL HORROR

Supernatural elements appeared in literature from the very beginning. The first known poem, *Beowulf* (8<sup>th</sup> century AD), is the story of a courageous and brave warrior<sup>1</sup> who fights against a monster. In Christian times, this fight symbolizes the battle between evil and good. The supernatural is a central characteristic of **William Shakespeare's** comedies and tragedies. The ghost in *Hamlet* represents the doubt the King's son feels about his father's death; the witches<sup>2</sup> in *Macbeth* symbolize the ambition of a courageous warrior; the fairies and goblins in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are comic elements that play with human passions.

The attraction of the unknown and the fear of the afterlife became a sub-genre during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the new middle class created by the Industrial Revolution demanded realistic novels which went beyond the limits of nature and life.

The Gothic Novel (late 18<sup>th</sup> century) represents man's unconscious fear of death under the surface of a fantastic tale. The first Gothic



1. warrior: (especially in the past) a person who fights in a battle or war.
2. witch: ugly, old, magic woman.

novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), was written by **Horace Walpole**. It starts with a gigantic helmet that appears in the sky and falls down on the poor illegitimate heir<sup>3</sup> of the Otranto lands. This event is followed by strange and horrific apparitions in secret passages and by shocking revelations. The first to use the term “Gothic” was most probably **Percy Bysshe Shelly**, author of the Gothic story *Zastrozzi, a Romance* (1810) and husband of the well-known **Mary Shelley**, creator of *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).

The monsters and the ghosts of old tales and ancient stories become the “undead”, immortal beings who link life and death, and represent the hope every man has of defeating<sup>4</sup> death and living forever. Lovecraft does not clearly mention creatures like ghosts, zombies or vampires, but the descriptions he makes of the characters in his tales refer to the category of the undead.

H.P. Lovecraft started his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1925-1926) with the following sentence: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear”. Fear that takes different shapes and values with the passing of time, but which is basically fear of the unknown. “The unknown, being likewise<sup>5</sup> the unpredictable<sup>6</sup>, became, for our primitive forefathers<sup>7</sup>, a terrible and omnipotent source of boons<sup>8</sup> and calamities<sup>9</sup>”, Lovecraft goes on.

Some authors, like **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) or **Joseph Conrad** in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), describe the search for the unknown as a journey. **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) explains that the unknown is in ourselves and our fear and hidden feelings can emerge by analyzing our dreams.

However, the fear of what we do not know will forever influence literature and for this reason horror stories will forever exist, and will forever be read.

3. heir: a person who has the legal right to receive the property or the title of a person who dies.
4. defeating: winning over.
5. likewise: similar to.
6. unpredictable: not to be expected before it happens.
7. forefather: predecessor.
8. boon: advantage.
9. calamity: a bad event causing damage or suffering.

