

# The Silver Key Short Guide

## The Silver Key by H. P. Lovecraft

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## Overview

In "The Silver Key" Lovecraft presents his views on what constitutes the beautiful, on what makes a well-told fantasy, and on the role a youthful spirit plays in successful writing. The ideas are complex, but they explain some of Lovecraft's difficulties as a professional writer. He believed that a writer's literary success should be gauged by how beautiful his fictional world was. The story's main character, Randolph Carter, tries to sort through the problems of the modern world and spends much of his life searching vainly for absolute truth. Eventually, he resolves his unhappiness with modern life by returning to his origins. The notion that people can find answers to the problems of life in their family histories is a comforting one. That history can provide solutions to some of the problems of modern life is an important idea.



## About the Author

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born August 20, 1890, in Providence, Rhode Island, a setting that he used for much of his fiction. His high-strung father was a traveling salesman who went insane in 1893 and eventually died in 1898. His mother seems to have gone dotty from the strain of her husband's illness; later, grief compounded her already neurotic behavior. She treated her son like a daughter, making him wear short pants and a girlish hairstyle until he was six. Smothered by his overly protective mother, aunts, and grandparents, he had a nervous breakdown while in high school. He lived with two of his aunts for most of his adult life and was dependent on them for emotional support.

Lovecraft was a lonely boy who occupied his time by reading books and fantasizing. As a teen-ager, he began writing stories for his own amusement, and throughout his life he regarded himself as an amateur who wrote primarily for pleasure, although in the 1930s the need for an income made him try to behave like a professional writer. In his last years, he was helped by literary agents.

His first stories, written when he was in his twenties, were awful, and his early poetry was little better. But from this unpromising beginning, Lovecraft emerged with a passion and skill for spinning fantastic tales and horror stories. He became an able critic and scholar whose *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927; new edition 1945) is widely admired by modern-day writers and scholars. His research led him to a better understanding of his craft, and he entered a mature phase with the publication of the short story "Dagon" in 1917. From then until his death, Lovecraft created an imaginary universe that fellow writer August Derleth dubbed the "Cthulhu Mythos"—after "The Call of Cthulhu," a 1926 short story.

Lovecraft worked in amateur writers clubs and supported himself by editing and ghostwriting at low fees. He published many stories in "pulp" magazines, such as *Weird Tales*, as well as poetry and essays, but never thought of himself as a fully professional writer. The strain of poverty, emotional ills, and physical infirmities shortened his life. In 1937 he died of chronic nephritis and cancer in Providence, Rhode Island.

Lovecraft owes much of his current reputation as one of America's masters of fantastic tales to August Derleth.

During the late 1930s and 1940s, Derleth gathered and edited Lovecraft's stories. He not only culled tales out of pulp magazines but uncovered unpublished manuscripts such as *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, thus establishing Lovecraft's literary canon. In addition, Derleth completed some of Lovecraft's unfinished stories. During his life, Lovecraft encouraged friends like Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, and Derleth to contribute stories to the "Cthulhu Mythos." So compelling has been Lovecraft's visionary blend of the scientific and the supernatural that even present-day writers are drawn to the Mythos.

## Setting

Most of the story's action takes place in the mind of Randolph Carter, an experienced dream wanderer who has gloried in the beauties of the imagination. But at age thirty he becomes infected with the cynicism of modern life and loses his ability to travel in the dream world. Nothing in the physical world can compare with the ability of Carter's dreams to inspire wonder and awe. The physical settings for the story's action are primarily Boston and Kingsport, Carter's ancestral village in New England. There are references to Carter's participation in World War I as a member of the French Foreign Legion and to his being wounded in France, as well as to his occult studies in the American South which end abruptly in a graveyard. But the story's emphasis is on the contrast between Boston, his home as an adult, and the now uninhabited old Carter place near Kingsport, the home of his youth. Carter views Boston as embodying the ugliness of the modern world and associates it with his loneliness and unhappiness. Kingsport, however, he associates with the wonders and mysteries of the dream world.



# Social Sensitivity

Just about everything in "The Silver Key" is socially sensitive. For instance, Lovecraft condemns religion. When Carter seeks solace in the "gentle churchly faith endeared to him by the naive trust of his fathers" he discovers "the starved fancy and beauty, the stale and prosy triteness, and the owlish gravity of grotesque claims of solid truth" of religious faith. He finds that religion emphasizes "outgrown fears and guesses of a primal race confronting the unknown." This point of view could spark discontent among some young adults and among their parents. In "The Silver Key" Lovecraft portrays religious belief as part of modern alienation, even though it offers some lines of thought that would allow people to transcend everyday existence. The problems, as he sees them, are twofold: religion depends on fears that have been antiquated by modern knowledge, and it tries to fence in the imagination, setting restrictions on the avenues along which it may wander. Lovecraft advocates an unfettered imagination.

However, atheists have nothing to cheer about in "The Silver Key."

Lovecraft declares that purely secular thought is worse than religion, which at least acknowledges an inner life for people. Secular philosophies, on the other hand, suggest that people are purely animals and that all that is to be known about a person is found in his biology. Lovecraft sees this view, still a dominant one in science and philosophy, as utterly destructive of the personality. He disdains the common suggestion that the imagination may roam freely in scientific research and that physical reality provides all the wonder a person needs.

Lovecraft does not offer a sounder view of life in "The Silver Key" than that which he condemns. He suggests that close family relationships that allow a child to explore his world provide better security than religious faith, scientific discoveries, or secular philosophy, but this does not seem to be enough to provide a sound basis for an adult life. Perhaps Carter's yearning for the love and security his family provided him when he was young is a reflection of Lovecraft's desire for such a family life.

Retaining a youth's ability to wonder and to imagine does seem a valuable trait for any adult to have, but it does not ensure survival in the modern world.

Lovecraft's view is that each individual person must make his own reality, that survival as a complete human being depends on being able to imagine ideal beauty and harmony. Perhaps he means that each person should be the author of his own life, creating it and giving it shape and meaning as if he were writing a story. Perhaps this is what writing provided Lovecraft: beauty and harmony that made his impoverished day-to-day life bearable.



## Literary Qualities

Much of "The Silver Key" is about fantasy literature and the value of Lovecraft's particular brand of fantasy, which he calls "high fantasy." This is, in Lovecraft's view, the kind of fantasy that accepts the idea that an active imaginative life is good and important. It never apologizes for being fantasy. Although Lovecraft has chosen the form of a short story to express his defense of fantasy, the story reads more like a philosophical essay than a work of fiction.

"The Silver Key" has only a very thin plot and almost no action. Instead, about two thirds of it seems a catchall condemnation of modern life. On the other hand, the ideas are lively and interesting, and the plot, such as it is, maintains suspense by making Carter's quest one that is uncertain of success.

Much of the discussion implies that Carter may never again "tramp through perfumed jungles in Kled, where forgotten palaces with veined ivory columns sleep lovely and unbroken under the moon."

The character of Randolph Carter is heavy with symbolism. Lovecraft distances himself from his fictional surrogate, Carter, by speaking in his own authorial voice at the story's end. Carter is then seen to be more than a surrogate for Lovecraft; he also represents adulthood in general. "The Silver Key" emphasizes how Carter has been beaten down. His dream world's validity has been under relentless attack in his adult years. He mistakenly believed that maturity meant scoffing at the beliefs and amusements of his youth. In so doing, he cuts off a part of himself; without his youth as a part of him he is not a whole man.

Lovecraft suggests that this is the case for most modern adults. To make themselves whole, people turn to religion, philosophy, or science, but these are not enough. Lovecraft argues that youth is an integral part of a person's identity and that the dreams and ideals of youth should be part of a fully integrated adult.

Carter symbolizes those people who lose their youthful selves as they age; they are unhealthy people doomed to unhappiness and alienation from their own lives. When the adult Carter merges with his child self, he becomes whole again and is able to lead a satisfying life.



# Themes and Characters

Many critics have been puzzled by the popularity of a story that is primarily a philosophical discussion with little plot.

Many adults are likely to wonder why the story is popular with young adults.

Perhaps the answer lies in the story's thematic similarity to J. M. Barrie's play, *Peter Pan* (1904). In Barrie's play youngsters try to remain children forever. The adult world is viewed as an unpleasant place filled with responsibilities; childhood is associated with fun, a carefree life, and imagination. "The Silver Key" also expresses sorrow at the seeming loss of imagination that comes with maturity, and childhood is seen as a refuge from a dreary adult world. This complicated theme includes nostalgia for times past, weariness with a world grown too complicated to understand, and a belief in the value of imagination.

One of the weaknesses of the story is its lack of specifics. Most of its ideas are expressed in overgeneralizations about the world's ugliness and unfairness.

These may be superficially appealing to people struggling to change from children to adults, but they make for neither good writing nor good thinking.

It is easy to find exceptions to the story's broad generalizations.

Beauty is an important theme in the story. Lovecraft repeatedly declares that the modern world denigrates the beautiful. He complains that modern fantasy literature is too full of sly satire and allegory, thus portraying itself as unrealistic and inconsequential. Instead, Lovecraft claims, fantasy should be a serious attempt to evoke wonder and awe and to provide beauty for its readers. He emphasizes the need for beauty in the imagination by making comparisons: Carter "did not dissent when they told him that the animal pain of a struck pig or dyspeptic ploughman in real life is a greater thing than the peerless beauty of Narath with its hundred carven gates and domes of chalcedony." Such dream-world places as Narath sound like great places for adventure, and on this level Lovecraft's argument works well. He shows that fantasy can provide beauty for its readers.

Disgust with the modern world is a theme that shows up often in Lovecraft's writing. In "The Silver Key" he expresses his belief that modern pragmatic philosophies are no better than superstitions. For instance, insisting that there is no supernatural world and that only that which can be physically perceived has existence denies the reality of the life of the mind. Throughout the story, the mind's visions and ideas are portrayed as more valid than bodily perceptions.

The mind can see perfect beauty while the body only perceives part of reality, never seeing beyond the physical. Although he expresses dismay over the emphasis on guilt





in organized religions, Lovecraft views them as superior to atheism because the religions at least acknowledge the inner life of the mind.

"The Silver Key" portrays a modern life in which people are derided for having imaginations and for believing that beauty is important to their lives; modern science demands that wonder and awe be found only in physical reality.

Heeding the pragmatic philosophers and scientists, Randolph Carter loses his dream world because he can no longer believe in its reality. An author, he changes the way he writes his fantasy novels to reflect the cynicism of his time.

His new novels sell much better than his old ones, but he realizes that he has sacrificed his art to popularity and, disillusioned, he seeks out ways to recapture his dream world. It is perhaps this disaffection with modern thought that makes "The Silver Key" moving for readers, grownups as well as young adults.

Lovecraft expresses in concentrated form the anger many people feel toward educational systems and schools of thought that tell them their imaginations are unimportant or even harmful.

Some of these pragmatists argue that people should apply their imaginations to scientific research, building machines, or other realistic and practical pursuits instead of conceiving imaginary worlds. Lovecraft responds that an active imagination that can perceive ideal beauty is necessary for a whole, wellrounded mind.

Randolph Carter shows up in a number of Lovecraft's stories and in the novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*.

Nearly all critics agree that Carter is the voice of Lovecraft himself. If this is so, then "The Silver Key" is Lovecraft's defense of his type of fantasy fiction. The story is an expression of how Lovecraft uses his mental life to escape from the immediacy of poverty and loneliness.

For the young adult, loneliness is an especially important issue, because peer group rejection can be painful and a place in society is still to be earned.

Carter acutely feels the impossibility of completely sharing his inner self with anyone and the impossibility of fully understanding another. His first solution is to assume the trappings of what appears to be adult behavior. He accepts a cynical view of the world that suggests that, because people cannot fully understand each other, all attempts to understand should be ridiculed. With this comes a fashionable atheism that ridicules all thoughts of a supernatural world. However, the more Carter delves into the modern world's emphasis on physical reality the more he comes to understand that much of "physical" reality is dependent on perception.

Modern philosophy leaves an emptiness in him because it denies his inner existence and cannot supply a satisfying substitute.



By age thirty his mind has become so muddled that he loses his youthful imagination. When the modern world leaves him feeling estranged from the important aspects of leading a full life, he seeks out ways to recover his dream world. His research into the occult proves frightening but does not help him find his lost imagination. Eventually, he returns to his ancestral heritage.

Although distant from most of his relatives, he had been close to his grandfather and his uncle. "Then one night his grandfather reminded him of the key.

The gray old scholar, as vivid as life, spoke long and earnestly of their ancient line, and of the strange visions of the delicate and sensitive men who composed it." Although long dead, the grandfather visits Carter, now in his fifties, during a dream and reveals the whereabouts of the silver key. It is in a box that features such ghastly carvings that it has repelled people and remained unopened for two hundred years.

Possession of the key allows Carter to reenter the world of his youth; he returns to the old Carter home near Kingsport and becomes a child again, reliving his life and retaining his dream world. People are puzzled by his ability to know of events that would not occur for many years into the future. At the end of the story, the narrator intrudes to comment that in his fifties Carter disappeared but that he expects to see Carter again, perhaps as the new king who "reigns on the opal throne of IlekVad, that fabulous town of turrets atop the hollow cliffs of glass overlooking the twilight sea wherein the bearded and finny Gnorri build their singular labyrinths." Carter has recovered his full imagination and once again has a meaningful spiritual life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Lovecraft give so much detail in explaining why Carter is unhappy before getting the plot moving?
2. People, many of them young adults, who attended the World Fantasy Conventions of 1981 and 1982 voted "The Silver Key" into the Fantasy Hall of Fame, along with twenty-one other short stories. Yet, some critics think the story is boring and more like an essay than a work of fiction. Do you think "The Silver Key" is a great story, worthy of being called one of the twenty-two best fantasy short stories ever written? Why or why not? Is there truth in what critics who do not like the story have said?
3. Why does Lovecraft shift the point of view in the story's last paragraph so that the narrator directly addresses his audience?
4. Why would Lovecraft choose a key for Carter to use to recover his past?
5. What is the atmosphere of the story?

Does the way Lovecraft phrases his ideas—his style—evoke any particular feelings in you? Does it help you appreciate the story?

6. Lovecraft alludes to events that he never explains, such as Carter's visit to the graveyard in the South. Does this make the story better or worse? Why?
7. If you are new to reading Lovecraft, does this story encourage you to read more of his works? Why or why not?

Would you like to learn more about Randolph Carter?

8. Why is Carter so thoroughly alienated from society? Why does his education make his life worse, not better?
9. Is Lovecraft right to believe that childhood imagination is all important to happiness in adulthood? How could someone preserve his youthful imagination while still growing up to be a mature and responsible adult? Does a person have to surrender the fantasies of youth in order to grow up?
10. Why does Lovecraft seem to condemn everything about modern life? Do you agree with his views?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The character of Randolph Carter appears in other Lovecraft stories and the novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. Does his character grow from the first story to the last, or is he always the same? Why would he be such a wonderful dream explorer in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and such a failure as a dream traveler in "The Silver Key"?

2. Some of Lovecraft's complaints in "The Silver Key" about modern fantasy writers seem to match James Branch Cabell, who in Lovecraft's time was regarded by many readers as a great writer. Compare Cabell's fantasies to Lovecraft's. What in Cabell's approach to fantasy would Lovecraft condemn?

You may want to begin with Cabell's *The White Robe* (1928), a collection of stories, and *Jurgen* (1919), a novel.

3. "The Silver Key" and the other stories voted into the Fantasy Hall of Fame may be found in *The Fantasy Hall of Fame*, compiled by Robert Silverberg and Martin H. Greenberg (New York: Arbor House, 1983). Compare the other stories in the book with "The Silver Key."

Are any of the stories similar to "The Silver Key"? How are they different?

Which is the best story in the book? If it is not "The Silver Key," what makes it better than the Lovecraft story?

4. Read Lovecraft's other stories about the dream world and describe it. What is a dream world? Can people enter it while awake, through graves perhaps?

What kind of people live there? What are their laws and customs? Do any of the places mentioned in "The Silver Key" appear in Lovecraft's other writings?

5. Many critics believe that Randolph Carter represents Lovecraft himself.

What about the character of Carter supports that belief? Do you agree with that view, or do you see Carter's significance in another way?

## For Further Reference

Beetz, Kirk H. "H. P. Lovecraft: 1890-1937," In *Popular World Fiction: 1900-Present*, edited by Walton Beacham and Suzanne Niemeyer. Washington, DC: Beacham, 1987. A general introduction to Lovecraft's life and work, with in-depth analyses of the novelette "The Dunwich Horror," the novel *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, and the novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*.

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Derleth, August. "H. P. Lovecraft and His Work." In *The Dunwich Horror*, by H. P. Lovecraft. New York: Lancer, 1969.

This introduction to a collection of Lovecraft's stories is one writer's tribute to a friend and offers insight into Lovecraft's life and work.

Joshi, S. T., ed. *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980. This collection of articles includes new studies written for this volume. The volume includes the most influential articles on Lovecraft, such as Fritz Leiber's "A Literary Copernicus," and offers a useful index. Students will find this book an invaluable resource.

Wilson, Colin. "H. P. Lovecraft: 1890-1937." In *Science Fiction Writers*, edited by E. F. Bleiler. New York: Scribner's, 1982. A good introduction to the major issues of Lovecraft's fiction.

## Related Titles

"The Silver Key" is part of a nonsequential series of stories that focus on either the character Randolph Carter, the dream world, or both: "The White Ship," "Celephais" (1920), "The Cats of Ulthar," "The Statement of Randolph Carter" (1920) "The Other Gods" (1921), "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (1932, with E. Hoffman Price). The novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* is the centerpiece of the Randolph Carter dream world tales. In it, Carter sets out to find the fabled city of Kadath and has a variety of fantastic adventures. Although these stories are commonly thought to be inferior to those that focus on Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, "The Silver Key," "The Cats of Ulthar," and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* still have many fans.



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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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