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LACANIAN DESIRE AND DREAM IN H.P. LOVECRAFT'S THE DREAM-QUEST OF UNKNOWN KADATH

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Summary: H. P. Lovecraft's works are often analyzed through the lens of Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real. This article argues that other Lacanian ideas, such as desire, are also present in Lovecraft's work. Using psychoanalysis, it examines how the dreams in Lovecraft's novella *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* illustrate key Lacanian concepts, albeit within Lovecraft's unique, materialistic, and grotesque style.

Keywords: Lovecraft, Lacan, dreams, desire, fantasy, weird fiction, horror, psychoanalysis

Howard Phillips Lovecraft is widely regarded as one of the fathers of the modern horror genre, primarily known for the Cthulhu Mythos—a collection of narratives created by Lovecraft and his followers. The Mythos shares a common universe, including its characters, cosmology, and pantheon of deities, functioning as an artificial mythology. As Lovecraft's works gained popularity after his death, numerous aspiring writers emulated the Cthulhu Mythos.¹ However, they often overlooked that the mythopoetic elements of Lovecraft's stories were not their focal point; Lovecraft fundamentally explored various philosophical ideas, with the fantastical serving merely as the backdrop.² It is unsurprising, then, that scholars approach his works using diverse methodologies, including the interdisciplinary use of psychoanalytic theories. Lacanian psychoanalysis is particularly common among researchers studying Lovecraft's fiction. Those analyzing Lovecraft through the lens of Jacques Lacan's theory often focus on the concept of the Real and its manifestation in Lovecraft's fiction.³ The overlap between the Lovecraftian unknown and the Lacanian Real is evident, especially when employing post-Lacanian terms such as the "imaginary real".⁴ This focus on the relationship between humanity and the world (as the Real) is justified, as Lovecraft himself wrote: "I could not write about 'ordinary people' because I am not in the least interested in them. [...] It is man's relations to the cosmos—to the unknown—which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination".⁵

However, Lovecraft occasionally diverged from this stance, delving into the internal struggles of individuals, particularly in the short stories and

¹ S.T. Joshi, *The Cthulhu Mythos*, [in:] *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: an Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares*, ed. S.T. Joshi, Westport 2007, p. 98–99.

² Ibidem, p. 115.

³ E.g. J.L. P. de Luque, B. Noys, M. Risi, C. Laliberte. Vide the references.

⁴ Vide B. Noys, *The Lovecraft 'Event'*, retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/548596/The_Lovecraft_Event.

⁵ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Defence Remains Open!*, [in:] *Collected Essays, Volume 5: Philosophy; Autobiography and Miscellany*, ed. S.T. Joshi, New York 2006, p. 53.

novellas of his Dream Cycle.⁶ One such story, “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath” (*TDQ*), primarily explores the concept of human desire. Stripped of its usual Lovecraftian horror elements, this concept appears surprisingly close to the Lacanian notion of desire. In the present text, I will argue that *TDQ* focuses on this theme.

Although scholars have identified several potential sources of inspiration for Lovecraft’s “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath” (*TDQ*), the most probable influence appears to be Lord Dunsany.⁷ The horror elements that dominate most of Lovecraft’s works are somewhat minimized in this novella (though still present), while the narrative and scenery align more closely with Dunsanian fantasy. Beyond the horror and fantastical elements, *TDQ* also contains a psychological layer that seems to parallel some of Lacan’s concepts.

The story begins with the words: “Three times Randolph Carter dreamed of the marvelous city, and three times was he snatched away while still he paused on the high terrace above it”.⁸ Randolph Carter, the so-called “old dreamer,” is the protagonist, entirely captivated by the vision of a wondrous city in his dreams. His desire to visit and experience this place is never fulfilled, as each time he is denied by the earth gods (also referred to as the Great Ones). After long but fruitless prayers, Carter decides to confront the gods and plead (or demand) to be allowed into the sunset city⁹ of his dreams.

The next part of the story details Randolph Carter’s journey through the realm of dreams, where the earth gods are said to reside. This is the largest section of the novella; however, it is not crucial to this article. The essence of the journey narrative in *TDQ* is to highlight the hardship one must endure to reach unknown Kadath. Although filled with fantastical oneiric imagery and

⁶ *Dream Cycle* is a series of Lovecraft’s stories that, as the name suggests, focus heavily on dreams.

⁷ D. Schweitzer, *Lovecraft, Aristéas, Dunsany, and the Dream Journey*, „Lovecraft Annual” 2018, no. 12, p. 139.

⁸ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, GlobalGrey 2018 (ebook version), p. 1.

⁹ The place from Carter’s dreams is often referred to as ‘sunset city’ in the text. It is never capitalised.

nightmarish dangers, this journey has little impact on the story's resolution or the main character's development. The two important points in this section are that Carter, despite obstacles, never questions his pursuit or considers abandoning the quest, and that he is primarily a passive hero: twice he is captured and saved by his allies and rarely uses his wits to overcome impediments (and never uses physical strength).

Nevertheless, in the story's climax, Randolph Carter reaches the gate of unknown Kadath. Upon entering, he discovers that the Great Ones are missing. Instead, he encounters Nyarlathotep, an Other God fundamentally different and more menacing than the earth gods. Nyarlathotep reveals to Carter that the sunset city he dreamt of was an amalgamation of Carter's memories of New England from his youth:

For know you, that your gold and marble city of wonder is only the sum of what you have seen and loved in youth. It is the glory of Boston's hillside roofs and western windows aflame with sunset; of the flower-fragrant Common and the great dome on the hill and the tangle of gables and chimneys in the violet valley where the many-bridged Charles flows drowsily. These things you saw, Randolph Carter, when your nurse first wheeled you out in the springtime, and they will be the last things you will ever see with eyes of memory and of love.¹⁰

Moreover, the Other God reveals that the Great Ones left Kadath to take Carter's sunset city for themselves:

Far away in a valley of your own childhood, Randolph Carter, play the heedless Great Ones. You have dreamed too well, O wise arch-dreamer, for you have drawn dream's gods away from the world of all men's visions to that which is wholly yours; having builded out of your boyhood's small fancies a city more lovely than all the phantoms that have gone before.¹¹

¹⁰ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 99.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 94.

Finally, Nyarlathotep commands Carter to go to the sunset city and send the earth gods back to Kadath. The story's progression at this point becomes rapid and smooth, suggesting that everything had been pre-planned by the Other God:

So, Randolph Carter, in the name of the Other Gods I spare you and charge to seek that sunset city which is yours, and to send thence the drowsy truant gods for whom the dream-world waits. Not hard to find is that roseal fever of the gods, that fanfare of supernal trumpets and clash of immortal cymbals, that mystery whose place and meaning have haunted you through the halls of waking and the gulfs of dreaming, and tormented you with hints of vanished memory and the pain of lost things awesome and momentous. Not hard to find is that symbol and relic of your days of wonder, for truly, it is but the stable and eternal gem wherein all that wonder sparkles crystallised to light your evening path.¹²

Randolph Carter complies and mounts a shantak¹³ that is supposed to take him to his sunset city. However, as he takes flight, Carter realizes that Nyarlathotep has tricked him, and the monstrous bird is actually taking him to the void, to the central Other God Azathoth, and—most importantly—to his doom. In a final moment of clarity, Carter remembers that he is in a dream and that to save himself, he must wake up. With his last ounce of strength, he leaps off the mount and falls through the endless void. After “aeons reeled,” he wakes up in his room in Boston. Nyarlathotep, disgruntled by his defeat, travels to the sunset city and brings the earth gods back to Kadath himself.

In the following analysis, I will focus on three key elements of the story, all of which can be found in its title: dream, quest, and Kadath. The dream is the story's setting,¹⁴ encompassing all other concepts in *TDQ*. The quest, I will

¹² Ibidem, p. 94.

¹³ A monstrous bird the size of an elephant.

¹⁴ It is important to bear in mind that everything that happens in the novella is a part of a dream.

argue, symbolizes Carter's desire and obsession. Kadath, on the other hand, relates to the desires (and obligations) of other agents in the story.

The first step is, therefore, to clarify the dream aspect. If there is one belief of Lovecraft's that permeates all of his stories to some degree, it is materialism.¹⁵ This makes the concept of a dream in Lovecraft's world intricate and paradoxical. On the surface, "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" seems oneiric—the chaotic narrative structure, the main character's lack of control over his surroundings, and the dream-like landscapes described in the novella create a quintessential dream atmosphere. However, the dream in the story also appears to be, at least in part, material. Some creatures can travel between the dreamlands and the waking world,¹⁶ and the term "dreamlands" itself suggests some form of spatial existence of dreams.

When we examine the psychoanalytic approach to dreams, a fundamental difference emerges between Freud's and Lacan's perspectives. Freud argues that "dreams are wish fulfillments and that they function to prolong sleep".¹⁷ Lacan presents the opposite view—one awakens to escape the confrontation with the Real, which manifests itself in dreams.¹⁸ In *TDQ*, we witness a peculiar transition from the former to the latter. Randolph Carter pursues a dream, and his quest starts in the dreamlands. He simply wants to fulfill a wish. However, by the end of the story, the interpretation begins to lean toward Lacan's approach. Randolph Carter is doomed—"the shantak carrying Carter] headed for those unhallowed pits whither no dreams reach; that last amorphous blight of nether-most confusion where bubbles and blasphemes at infinity's centre the mindless daemon-sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud".¹⁹ To save himself, Randolph Carter actively tries to wake up to avoid

¹⁵ D. Peak, *Horror of the Real. H.P. Lovecraft's Old Ones and Contemporary Speculative Philosophy*, [in:] *Diseases of the Head: Essays on the Horrors of Speculative Philosophy*, ed. M. Rosen, Santa Barbara 2020, p. 168.

¹⁶ For instance, zoogs. Vide: H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁷ A. Hurst, *Dernda vis-à-vis Lacan: Interweaving Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis*, New York 2008, p. 221.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 221–222.

¹⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 98.

the confrontation with Azathoth. This narrative perfectly aligns with Lacan's approach to dreams.

However, returning to the “wish fulfillment” aspect of Carter's dream, it is important to note that the object he pursues is also a dream. The sunset city, mentioned in the first sentence of the story (referred to as the “marvellous” city in that instance), is clearly stated to be a dream, a fantasy—and Carter is fully aware of this. What he is not aware of is that behind this fantasy lies a hidden desire that ultimately becomes a threat. This again aligns with Lacan: “Given that the object in fantasy is connected to the Other's desire, the goal is not to approach it”.²⁰ Carter, however, does the opposite. He is willing to embark on a journey filled with dangers and perils to a place “no man [has] ever been to”²¹ just to chase a dream, an illusion.

Considering the above, one can ask—what exactly is the goal of Carter's quest? The title suggests it is unknown Kadath. In the story, the ultimate goal appears to be the sunset city—a particular dream, a fantasy. However, the ending of the narrative corrects this assumption: the sunset city is not a place; it is “the sum of what [Carter had] seen and loved in youth”.²² What Randolph Carter desires is not merely a fantasy or an illusion in the form of a dream, but essentially a placeholder for something long lost. For Lacan, desire is always unconscious²³ and cannot be expressed through language.²⁴ Both criteria apply to *TDQ*—the sunset city symbolizes a deeper, unarticulated desire revealed to Carter only at the end of the story. Simultaneously, it is never explicitly stated what exactly this desire is. Nyarlathotep describes it as follows:

These, Randolph Carter, are your city; for they are yourself. New England bore you, and into your soul she poured a liquid loveliness which cannot

²⁰ J. Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation: the Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI*, transl. B. Fink, Cambridge 2019, p. 427.

²¹ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 2.

²² Ibidem, p. 94.

²³ J. Lacan, *Anxiety. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, transl. A.R. Price, Cambridge 2014, p. 26.

²⁴ J. Lacan, *Écrits: a Selection*, transl. A. Sheridan, foreword M. Bowie, London 2001, p. 209.

die. This loveliness, moulded, crystallised, and polished by years of memory and dreaming, is your terraced wonder of elusive sunsets.²⁵

This description keeps the essence of Carter's desire rather vague. Interestingly, however, New England takes on the role of the mother in this fragment—not only due to “giving birth” to Randolph Carter but also by being referred to with the feminine pronoun “she.” However, declaring that Carter's desire is simply an Oedipal desire for the mother (as a specific place in this instance) would be an oversimplification. While this is partially true, he also yearns for an intrinsic quality that once allowed him to perceive this place in a particular way and is now missing. One word that comes to mind to describe this desire is nostalgia. Although it is not a term typical of Lacan, Jane Gallop notes its appearance in his writing in connection to the Phallus and castration. Nostalgia is a sentiment for the past. The phallic phase is the object of nostalgia as it is “irretrievably past,” ended by the mother's castration.²⁶ In *TDQ*, this castration perhaps occurs when Randolph Carter ceases to perceive New England in a childish idealistic way.

However, there is one more problem hinted at earlier regarding the quest and its goal—if the goal is ultimately the sunset city, why is it called “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath” and not “The Dream-Quest of the Sunset City?” One explanation may be that Randolph Carter never actually reaches the sunset city but does reach Kadath. The other explanation may be that he is never supposed to reach the sunset city.

The Thing (Freudian *das Ding*) is, in Lacan's words,²⁷ “the mother, is also the object of incest, is a forbidden good, and that there is no other good”.²⁸ It is the object of primordial desire, located beyond the pleasure

²⁵ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 95.

²⁶ J. Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, New York 1985, p. 146–147.

²⁷ It is also worth noting that Lacan heavily draws on Heidegger's conception of the Thing. Vide G. Riera, *Abyssal Grounds: Lacan and Heidegger on Truth*, „Qui Parle 9” 1996, no. 2.

²⁸ J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, transl. D. Porter, New York 1992, p. 70.

principle²⁹—separated from the subject as “he cannot stand the extreme good that das Ding may bring him”.³⁰ *TDQ* evokes this term not only due to its connotation with the maternal New England as the object of desire but also because Carter seems to go beyond a certain limit, beyond the pleasure principle, at some point in the story. Identifying this precise threshold is challenging. It may be when Carter steps through the gates of unknown Kadath (the transgression of seeking gods) or when he mounts the shantak—a hellish bird—under Nyarlathotep’s command.

To further examine this limit, we should perhaps move from Freud to Lacan, as he replaces Freudian das Ding with his term—*objet petit a*. As Žižek explains, it is “[the] void filled out by creative symbolic fiction, [...] the empty frame that provides the space for the articulation of desire”.³¹ It is the object-cause of desire, a fantasy. In *TDQ*, the void in Carter is filled with the dream of the sunset city, which is essentially a symbolic fiction. It is articulated but not entirely due to the gap between desire and speech.³² The more complete meaning of the sunset city is revealed to Carter only at the end of the story.

Moreover, *objet petit a* and The Thing are similar in that, as Lewis Kirshner writes, each “represents an imaginary link between the infantile body and the mother—the breast, for example. However, it is neither a concrete feature of her anatomy nor a specific memory but the fantasy of a loss established retrospectively after the child has been ‘subjectified’”.³³ In *TDQ*, the “imaginary link” is between infant Carter and the mother New England. It is the loss of “the sum of what [Carter has] seen and loved in youth”.³⁴

²⁹ In short, it is the need for gratification, vide J.E. Barnhart, *Freud's Pleasure Principle and the Death Urge*, „The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy” 1972, no. 3(1).

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 73.

³¹ S. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London 1994, p. 76.

³² J. Lacan, *Écrits: a Selection*, op. cit., p. 209.

³³ L. Kirshner, *Rethinking Desire: the Objet Petit a in Lacanian Theory*, „Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association” 2005, no. 53, p. 6.

³⁴ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 94.

In the Lacanian concept of desire, there is a certain intrinsic opposition. On one hand, it manifests in the Symbolic without crossing the pleasure principle, implying a clear division between enjoyment and suffering. On the other hand, it may manifest as an unconscious striving for *jouissance*, where it becomes an “impossible fantasy of contact with the real”.³⁵ Randolph Carter seems to act according to the latter form of desire. In the sequence where he is led into the void by the shantak, he experiences what may be called *jouissance*:

Onward unswerving and relentless, and tittering hilariously to watch the chuckling and hysterics into which the siren song of night and the spheres had turned, that eldritch scaly monster bore its helpless rider; hurtling and shooting, cleaving the uttermost rim and spanning the outermost abysses.³⁶

The wording of “spanning the outermost abysses” is worth noting since Lacan writes about the dangers of approaching the Other’s desire: “*jouissance* [...] is dangerous because it exposes the true abyss of desire to the subject”.³⁷ The “siren song of night” also evokes semantic associations with *jouissance*—something sexually alluring that is, however, ultimately unbearable and disastrous.

Jouissance exists beyond the pleasure principle and entails suffering.³⁸ This undoubtedly applies to Carter in this fragment. Furthermore, *jouissance* “implies precisely the acceptance of death”.³⁹ Although not explicitly stated, it can be interpreted that at this point, Carter has accepted his own demise. “Doom” is mentioned several times regarding Carter while he rides the shantak. However, then comes the realization:

Onward—onward—dizzily onward to ultimate doom through the blackness where sightless feelers pawed and slimy snouts jostled and nameless

³⁵ L. Kirshner, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 98.

³⁷ J. Lacan, *Desire...*, op. cit., p. 427.

³⁸ J. Lacan, *The Ethics...*, op. cit., p. 184–185.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 189.

things tittered and tittered and tittered. But the image and the thought had come, and Randolph Carter knew clearly that he was dreaming and only dreaming, and that somewhere in the background the world of waking and the city of his infancy still lay. Words came again—"You need only turn back to the thoughts and visions of your wistful boyhood." Turn—turn—blackness on every side, but Randolph Carter could turn.⁴⁰

Randolph Carter thinks of one solution, the last thing he can do to save himself – wake up. He leaps off of the monstrous mount and falls through the void:

Off that vast hippocephalic abomination leaped the doomed and desperate dreamer, and down through endless voids of sentient blackness he fell. Aeons reeled, universes died and were born again, stars became nebulae and nebulae became stars, and still Randolph Carter fell through those endless voids of sentient blackness.⁴¹

This fragment further evokes an irruption of *jouissance* as both time and space are suspended. Carter falls through "endless voids" as "aeons reel" and the entire universe dies around him—a moment stretched to eternity. He ultimately rejects his desire but remains trapped in this nightmarish *jouissance*. He is only free when he finally manages to wake up from the dream:

Stars swelled to dawns, and dawns burst into fountains of gold, carmine, and purple, and still the dreamer fell. Cries rent the aether as ribbons of light beat back the fiends from outside. And hoary Nodens raised a howl of triumph when Nyarlathotep, close on his quarry, stopped baffled by a glare that seared his formless hunting-horrors to grey dust. Randolph Carter had indeed descended at last the wide marmoreal flights to his marvellous city, for he was come again to the fair New England world that had wrought him.⁴²

⁴⁰ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 99.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 100.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 100.

Randolph Carter wakes up in his room in Boston. While this might initially seem like a cliché ending—where “he realized he already had what he had desired”—there is a significant shift in the wording compared to the earlier reference to New England. Previously, New England “bore” him (implying that it “gave birth” to him), but now it is described as having “wrought” him (meaning “made” or “created”). Additionally, New England is no longer referred to as “she,” but as an impersonal “world.” This change signifies a loss of its symbolic role as the mother, which can be interpreted as Carter rejecting this primordial incestuous desire or, at the very least, rejecting the pursuit of it.

Finally, we must consider the last element of the title: “unknown Kadath.” Kadath, like the sunset city, is a place but also represents something more. It signifies the Great Ones, the earth gods—obstacles and tyrants that prevent Randolph Carter from fulfilling his desire. Initially, Carter is unaware of why the gods obstruct his access to the sunset city. However, by the end of the story, it becomes clear that the Great Ones obstruct the dreamer’s path to pursue their own desires, thus becoming an opposing force to Carter:

They are gone from their castle on unknown Kadath to dwell in your marvellous city. All through its palaces of veined marble they revel by day, and when the sun sets they go out in the perfumed gardens and watch the golden glory on temples and colonnades, arched bridges and silver-basined fountains, and wide streets with blossom-laden urns and ivory statues in gleaming rows. And when night comes they climb tall terraces in the dew, and sit on carved benches of porphyry scanning the stars, or lean over pale balustrades to gaze at the town’s steep northward slopes, where one by one the little windows in old peaked gables shine softly out with the calm yellow light of homely candles.⁴³

In the story, the earth gods take on the role of the father in Lacanian psychoanalysis—the figures of authority and lawgivers. They are depicted as a primordial, obscene father, akin to what Slavoj Žižek describes as the “Master of Enjoyment,” who ‘who can see me also where I enjoy, completely

⁴³ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 93.

obstructs my access to enjoyment'.⁴⁴ In the same way, Randolph Carter is repeatedly "snatched away" from the sunset city, his enjoyment – perhaps not quite his desire, as he desires what is beyond the sunset city itself – the lost state.

In this sense, they are not only a failed (non-ideal) father but also failed gods. Nyarlathotep characterizes them as follows: "The gods love your marvellous city, and walk no more in the ways of the gods"⁴⁵ – as having succumbed to their desire for the "marvellous city" (the sunset city, the symbolic mother), thus losing their divine nature: they can no longer be considered the ideal father. Nyarlathotep's claim that "the earth has no longer any gods that are gods, and only the Other Ones from outer space hold sway on unremembered Kadath"⁴⁶ reinforces this. It is more or less a repetition of the previous quote, but supplemented with "the Other Ones [...] hold sway on unremembered Kadath" which puts the Other Gods in opposition to the earth gods They hold power over Kadath, which symbolizes godliness itself. They are the real gods and seem much more akin to God from the Judeo-Christian tradition. They seem more like concepts beyond human comprehension.

Lacan associates the role of the father with the Eternal God as symbols of the desire for order.⁴⁷ However, Lovecraft's portrayal of gods offers is much more nuanced. In Lovecraft's fiction, the father and gods as creators in the traditional sense are not linked. The gods are not shown as creators of humanity or even of the universe itself. For instance, in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, it is described that "[it] was a song, but not the song of any voice. Night and the spheres sang it, and it was old when space and Nyarlathotep and the Other Gods were born",⁴⁸ suggesting that the gods emerged simultaneously with space. Consequently, these deities do not inherently possess any innate authority. Moreover, Lovecraft's conception of divinity is complex, as

⁴⁴ S. Žižek, *The Metastases...*, op. cit., p. 206.

⁴⁵ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 94.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 94.

⁴⁷ J. Lacan, J. Mehlman, *Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar*, „October” 1987, no. 40, p. 89.

⁴⁸ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 98.

it involves multiple gods rather than a singular god-father figure. There are at least two distinct categories of gods in his works: the Other Gods and the Great Ones (earth gods).

If we consider a dichotomous relationship between these two categories, the Other Gods can be interpreted as representing the “dead” or “ideal” father—a concept discussed by Jane Gallop in her feminist reading of *Écrits*. This ideal father figure is characterized as being detached from desires (including the desire for the mother), thus being either dead, asleep, or at least blind to such desires.⁴⁹ When we overlay this concept with the earlier idea of God as desiring order, we encounter a figure of a god who has become blind to the pursuit of order.⁵⁰ This aligns closely with Lovecraft’s depiction of the Other Gods, who are described as “blind, voiceless, tenebrous, and mindless, with their soul and messenger being Nyarlathotep”.⁵¹

However, in Lovecraft’s fiction, the Other Gods are still “prohibitive” deities. They play a central role in the narrative as the primary source of danger. As Randolph Carter observes, “the Great Ones were very dangerous creatures to seek out, and [...] the Other Gods had strange ways of protecting them from impertinent curiosity”.⁵² Nyarlathotep further asserts that it is “unlawful for men to see”⁵³ the Great Ones. Consequently, mortals are prohibited from seeking out these deities, with the Other Gods enforcing and presumably enacting this prohibition. According to Slavoj Žižek, this aligns with Lacan’s concept of the “real father”—a figure embodying the authority of the law.⁵⁴

For Lacan, God and the Big Other are conceptually equivalent,⁵⁵ with the Big Other being the Symbolic.⁵⁶ Consequently, God can be seen as a component

⁴⁹ J. Gallop, op. cit., p. 180–182.

⁵⁰ Thus, Nyarlathotep is a god referred to as ‘crawling chaos’.

⁵¹ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 50.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 93.

⁵⁴ S. Žižek, *The Big Other Doesn’t Exist*, „European Journal of Psychoanalysis” 1997, no. 5. Retrieved from: <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/the-big-other-doesnt-exist/#block-1>.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ S. Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, New York 2007, p. 8–9.

of the Symbolic. However, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lovecraft's fiction diverge significantly in their treatment of deific entities. In Lovecraft's works, gods are not contingent on belief; they are depicted as concrete, material entities. This portrayal emphasizes knowledge over faith or devotion in the relationship between gods and humans within the Lovecraftian universe. This focus on forbidden knowledge is central to Lovecraftian horror,⁵⁷ contrasting sharply with the traditional conception of God in real life.

This shift from faith to knowledge changes the position of God. God, as an abstract concept *known* to exist, no longer resides in the symbolic. This "name of God [...] exists in the Real".⁵⁸ There are two named Other Gods mentioned in *TDQ*: Nyarlathotep and Azathoth. The former is the messenger of the Other Gods, while the latter is the central Other God.

Nyarlathotep is a peculiar character in both the Lovecraftian and Lacanian sense. He is paradoxical, referred to as "crawling chaos", yet he serves the remaining Other Gods and enacts their law. He is undoubtedly the looming antagonist of the novella from the very beginning. However, what is anomalous about this character is that he actively shows malice, while other cosmic or eldritch beings in Lovecraft's fiction are typically either indifferent to humans or predatory in a primordial sense. He consciously tricks Carter so that the dreamer falls to his doom, as the narrator states, "Nyarlathotep planned his mocking and his tantalising".⁵⁹

These characteristics resemble more the counterpart of a godly figure—the devil—than an actual god. This notion is even explicitly stated in *TDQ* as Nyarlathotep is described as a "regal figure; whose proud carriage and swart features had in them the fascination of a dark god or fallen archangel".⁶⁰ The "fallen archangel" is a blatant reference to the devil. However, it does

⁵⁷ Vide D. McWilliam, *Beyond the Mountains of Madness: Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror and Posthuman Creationism in Ridley Scott's "Prometheus"*, „Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts" 2015, no. 26.

⁵⁸ C. Crockett, *Interstices of the Sublime Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory*, New York 2007, p. 141.

⁵⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 99.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

not necessarily mean that he is the opposite of a god, as Freud in “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis” ascribes the role of the father both to God and to the devil—or, more precisely, the role of a father-substitute. The Austrian psychoanalyst connects the devil as a father-substitute with the fear and hatred a son may feel towards his father.⁶¹

In Lovecraft’s fiction, Nyarlathotep is somewhere between the Other Gods and the Great Ones. He is definitely not a mindless, blind, and voiceless Other God. In fact, he is the only character in the story whose utterances are written as direct speech. He is malicious, cruel, and enjoys spewing chaos, which brings him close to the Father-Jouissance⁶² figure, but at the same time, he has clear disdain towards the Great Ones—the failed gods—and ultimately brings them back to Kadath to restore order.

Mariangela Ugarelli Risi argues in her article that Nyarlathotep represents the Real in Lovecraft’s works. Since Nyarlathotep is ever-changing, a “horror of infinite shapes”,⁶³ and a god of a thousand faces, he cannot be “pinned down;” therefore, he is the same in nature as the Real.⁶⁴ However, Nyarlathotep is simultaneously one of the more human gods in Lovecraft’s fiction—he is evil in the strictly moral sense, and not indifferent. He interacts with people in a fairly human way—he can use human speech, for instance. He still, at least partially, functions in the Symbolic. However, the second god named in *TDQ* is a far better representation of the Real.

Azathoth is mentioned by name six times in the novella, and his name is followed by the phrase “whose name no lips dare speak aloud” twice. His real name is only voiced by the narrator. This threatening aura is justified in the final part of the story, as Azathoth becomes the ultimate danger to Randolph Carter when the dreamer is dragged to the Other God. Carter

⁶¹ S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, transl. J. Strachey, A. Freud, A. Strachey, A. Tyson, London 1953, p. 4007–4012.

⁶² S. Žižek, *The Big Other Doesn’t Exist*, op. cit.

⁶³ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest...*, op. cit., p. 91.

⁶⁴ Vide M. Risi, *Into the Sightless Vortex of the Unimaginable. Nyarlathotep or the Trajectory of the Lovecraftian Signifier*, „Revista de investigación sobre lo Fantástico” 2023, no. 10.

saves himself by waking up. In this sense, Azathoth is also the Real we—in Lacan's interpretation of dreams, as mentioned earlier—wake up to avoid confronting.

Considering the above, it can be inferred that Azathoth is either a representation of the Real or the Real itself; I believe one can argue both. Clayton Crockett writes that “God as Thing is a metonym for the Real, or the object of primary desire”.⁶⁵ Therefore, the Real may be the object of desire in “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath.” It still remains in concurrence with Lacan, as internal desire also implies a fantasy of the subject unifying with the Real. This, however, inevitably creates a problem with the placement of the sunset city—and everything it symbolizes—as the object of Carter's desire. To elucidate this confusion, it must be stated that *TDQ* is not only about desire as such but also about the Lacanian limit: crossing the pleasure principle and falling into jouissance. Lovecraft continuously presents this process as a transition. The moment Carter crosses the limit, Lovecraftian horror emerges and devours the oneirically idyllic fantasy: obsession turns into suffering, a dream turns into a nightmare, the Imaginary turns into the Real, The Thing transforms from the mother New England into the monstrous father-god in the void. This is again emblematic of Lovecraft's aforementioned materialism—this transition is depicted as entirely material and visual. However, it simultaneously remains inherently Lacanian.

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⁶⁵ C. Crockett, op. cit., p. 59.

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