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The Statement that is Randolph Carter: Growth in a Nihilistic Universe

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to give a nuanced and problematized view of the notion that the literary universe of H.P. Lovecraft is purely nihilistic, in the most basic sense of the word, and instead try to show that it, in spite of this actually allows for both hope and growth for its characters. To do so, the essay will closely examine one of Lovecraft's few recurring protagonists, Randolph Carter, who in relation to Lovecraft's other characters, is much more on the outside of society than a part of it. To accomplish this, the essay will focus on those of Lovecraft's texts which feature Carter and this one's personal goals, philosophy and morals in relation to those of the society that surrounds him. Carter's character and actions and ideals will throughout this be contrasted to the philosophical ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche to try to show that adherence to Nietzschean virtues can allow a character to actually transcend the supposed intrinsic nihilism and horror of Lovecraft's universe. In examining Carter, central concepts will include, among other things: the search for beauty, the power of dreams as well as the power of passion, as well as Nietzschean concepts such as The Will to Power, Apollonian and Dionysian, The Eternal Return and Nihilism.

Keywords: Lovecraft; Nietzsche; Nihilism; Randolph Carter

Table of Contents

Introduction **1**

Carter's Awakening **4**

Dream Quest **11**

Carter against the World **20**

Transcendence **29**

Nihilisms and Conclusions **38**

"The existence of the world is justified only as an
aesthetic phenomenon"
–Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Introduction

Of the many characteristics attributed to horror writer H. P. Lovecraft over the years, there are two that have remained fixed: his eccentricity and his racism[1]. The labelling of Lovecraft as an eccentric is maybe not so strange if one takes into account that the convenient catch-all term has the ability to incorporate not just a few divergences from the norm, but a seemingly unlimited number of them. It is quite probable that even Lovecraft's virulent racism, if one were to backtrack far enough, simply would have been included under it. But as the label starts to lose its hold[2] it once again becomes apparent that there are few terms that succinctly and effectively can give any real account of the author. A less judgmental but more fitting label could be 'opinionated'. This too, is of course also a blanket term but it has the benefit of us being able to confirm it from the huge body of work which is Lovecraft's private correspondence.

It is estimated that Lovecraft wrote no less than 100.000 letters during his lifetime (De Camp 2). Of these letters, the surviving ones paint a picture of a person who has opinions on a wide range of topics which range from religion and social class to quantum physics and the theory of relativity. What is more, just as these opinions are diverse, so are they also polarising and strongly and often angrily opinionated. Juxtaposing these ideas against the wealth of new thought and science brought about by the early 20th century we see a person who is at times vehemently reactionary while at other times surprisingly progressive. So while the simplifying 'eccentric' label is fading, a new one is yet to take its place.

[1] For a brief overview see Tyree *Lovecraft at the Automat*.
[2] Simmons *Essays* xiv.

One of the more recent attempts to apply one such label is Michel Houellebecq's stand-out essay *H.P. Lovecraft – Against the World, Against Life* which credits Lovecraft with being a prophetic deterministic nihilist whose popularity in more recent decades can be attributed to the supposedly bleak state of mankind. Allowing for a less dark and much more comprehensive and nuanced reading on the subject is Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi's *H.P. Lovecraft - The Decline of the West*, which separately chronicles the changes and growth of Lovecraft's personal philosophy and morals from both his collected correspondence and from that which can be gleaned from his fiction. Unlike Houellebecq, Joshi doesn't pin Lovecraft into one specific style of thought, but he does admit that nihilism plays a large part in the author's personality.

This recent scholarly focus on nihilism is not so surprising when one consider Lovecraft's fiction and the eventual fates of almost all of its protagonists. Because, more often than not, Lovecraft's writings present the reader with an endless cosmos in which not only the actions of the characters in the story are insignificant to the world around them, but where this also applies to the whole of humanity. And when these characters meet their untimely end at the end of the stories, their deaths are often as meaningless as their lives have been. Their sole purpose, it seems, is to realize, in their final moments, the enormity of their insignificance and that everything they may think they have achieved has been for naught. As Houellebecq notes:

> Of course life has no meaning. But neither does death. And this is another thing that curdles the blood when one discovers Lovecraft's universe. The deaths of his heroes have no meaning. Death brings no appeasement. It in no way allows the story to conclude. Implacably, HPL destroys his characters, evoking only the dismemberment of marionettes. Indifferent to these pitiful vicissitudes, cosmic fear continues to expand . (32)

When considering that this is the end result of most of Lovecraft's stories the nihilist label does seem, at least crudely fitting, but at the same time Houellebecq fails to acknowledge that the partial purpose of the genre to which Lovecraft's fiction belong was to instil this dread and horror. What is more, the historical definition of nihilism brings much more to the table than simply the extreme form of cosmic pessimism which Houellebec seems to regard it as.

However it is very much true that there is a certain interchangeability to the vast majority Lovecraft's stories which, more often than not, leads to their main characters being rendered useless, either by being killed, driven insane or at the very

least faced with such horror that their quest, whatever it may have been, in the end seems utterly futile to them. And although the author had a tendency to reference or even reuse earlier characters, even those characters which are recurring, such as the painter Richard Pickman of *Pickman's Model* (1927), are not immune to the decay of Lovecraft's cosmos. In Pickman's case this involves being transformed from a once brilliant painter to a flesh-eating yet sentient ghoul in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1927). Entropy and annihilation appears to be a constant in Lovecraft's devouring universe. With this in mind it is interesting to note that there is one human protagonist in Lovecraft's lore who ultimately avoids not only mental- and physical annihilation, but also is allowed to feature as the protagonist in multiple stories, namely Randolph Carter.

This character, first appearing in 1920 and after that sporadically in the later part of what is often referred to as The Dream Cycle, is actually allowed to keep his life and sanity, in spite of the horrors he confronts. This leaves him in a unique position from where he is able to adapt and grow even after having confronted Lovecraft's supposedly nihilistic cosmos. As such the Carter stories, despite none of them being what Houellebecq refers to as Lovecraft's "great texts" or being any of his most well-known ones, are in a unique position. This position seems to be one of sanity and clarity from within the madness which, in spite of everything, still allows for Carter to follow his dreams.

Capitalizing on this, this essay aims to investigate the singular life and growth of Randolph Carter in the stories that feature him, and through this try to determine just what qualities he possesses that allow him to prevail in a universe where none of Lovecraft's other characters did. To a large extent this will be done by juxtaposing Carter's traits as well as his ethical- and moral actions to the ideals and philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, a thinker much admired by Lovecraft, and who in many ways popularized nihilism for the modern era. Because of this Nietzsche's ideas will be useful both in evaluating Carter's character as well as determining to what extent Lovecraft's universe actually is nihilistic. Through doing so the essay hopes to problematize the way nihilism viewed in relation Lovecraft's literary universe and through that broaden how that universe is viewed altogether.

The texts investigated will be all of those which feature Carter, namely: "The Statement of Randolph Carter" (1920), "The Unnamable" (1923), *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1926), "The Silver Key" (1926), *The Case of Charles Dexter*

Ward (1927), "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (1933) and "Out of the Aeons" (1933). The reason for this order is not simply because it is the order in which they were published but because they all give different accounts of Carter's persona. The two first short stories only sketch the outline of the character, while Dream-Quest delves deeper into his consciousness and sub-conscious. Finally, the last batch of stories show Carter juxtaposed to contemporary society and the universe around him as a whole, before finally tying up his story.

Carter's Awakening

The first published appearance of Randolph Carter is in the short story "The Statement of Randolph Carter" from 1920. The story is narrated through the words of Carter himself as he is makes a statement to the police after being found wandering alone and confused in a swamp in Florida. Though the story is short and compact it is still important and unique to the Carter stories for a number of reasons. First, it is of course the first story to feature Carter and therefore gives us a starting point to his development. Secondly, we know from Lovecraft's personal correspondence (Tyson 85), that the story is directly based on a dream of his, involving him and a friend. These two facts are not necessarily interesting on their own but they do give us a chance to mention that Carter sometimes is considered Lovecraft's fictional alter ego (Hanegraaff 90).

The story starts off with Carter following his friend Harley Warren to a cemetery on the grounds that the latter needs help to conduct some unspecified occult research. With the help of a book full of mystic symbols the two friends find an ancient cemetery at which they uncover a heavy stone slab. After prying it open, Warren descends into the dark passage underneath telling Carter to stay behind and wait for further instructions through the portable telephone they brought with them. Down below, Warren suddenly encounters something so dreadful that he is unable to explain it in words and then all communication stops. Trying to re-establish contact, Carter suddenly hears a monstrous voice from the telephone proclaiming "You fool, Warren is DEAD" (7), which causes Carter to pass out from fear, which concludes the story. This ending is, in some ways both typical and atypical of Lovecraft. As mentioned earlier, there is a tendency for his characters to experience a sort of annihilation through insanity or physical death through situations just as this, but here

Carter is spared those fates, possibly on account of him being the narrator, although, as we will see later, this attribute is no guarantee for survival in Lovecraft's fiction. Carter's experience is also very similar to a kind of narrative device often used by Lovecraft, where a reporter, bystander or scientist who is on the fringes of a horrible experience survives—often not grasping the full scope of the situation—to tell the story to others. In many ways all of these characters are interchangeable, differing only in how insane they are driven by the story. But the really interesting part about this ending and the shock Carter suffers from it, is how mild it is by Lovecraft's standards.

If we choose to contrast the ending with the ending of Lovecraft's most popular story, "The Call of Cthulhu", first published in 1928, we will find its narrator Francis Wayland Thurston suffering a typical Lovecraftian fate. The story revolves around Thurston's research into a primitive cult, present at many different remote places across the world, which worships an ancient and mystical being called Cthulhu. Through his travels Thurston eventually uncovers the truth about the voyage of the ship Emma which encountered the titular being in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. All of its surviving crew has by this time died from mysterious circumstances but Thurston learns of the story through the captain's diary and, upon having read it, he realizes that his life now too is in danger. What is more; knowing that Cthulhu is real and awakened, his sanity is shaken to the point where he is no longer able to cope with the world around him. Eventually his fears prove well-founded because he is suddenly murdered on the streets by one of the cult members. So in a fashion, Thurston dies two deaths: first a mental death by way of his sanity and then a brutal—yet almost mercifully—physical death. Thurston's account of his experience, like Carter's, is presented in a diegetic, written form but the difference is that while the latter survives the experience, Thurston's whole narrative is read from notes which are discovered after his death. We can see at this point that even though he had no direct contact with Cthulhu or anything supernatural at all, the mere knowledge of its existence and power is enough to drive him insane. A similarly brutal example of the utter madness which befalls Lovecraft's characters can be seen in "The Rats in the Walls" from 1924. Here Delapore, the narrator, inherits a family mansion in England from his wealthy relatives who have inhabited the estate since before the Romans. Ultimately, he discovers that his family has constructed an underground city below the mansion which was designed to house a bizarre cannibalistic witch-cult. The

realization of this somehow triggers a monstrous transformation in Delapore and he suddenly attacks his friend with whom he had descended into the city. Eventually, the authorities find him crouched over the half-eaten body of his friend and he is committed, screaming, to a mental hospital, where his sanity is never to resurface.

Conversely, Randolph Carter's first confrontation with the horrors of Lovecraft's universe is at the same time both profound and first-hand, but it is also conveniently subdued. First, his exposure to whatever creature took his friend Warren is limited to the voice calling him a fool on the portable telephone. As shocking moments go in Lovecraft's universe this is very mild, especially when compared to, for example the description of Cthulhu by the deceased sea-captain:

> The Thing cannot be described - there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled. God! What wonder that across the earth a great architect went mad, and poor Wilcox raved with fever in that telepathic instant? The Thing of the idols, the green, sticky spawn of the stars, had awaked to claim his own. (15)

Compared to this, Carter's exposure to the voice of the horror which claimed the life of his friend, frightening as it is, is quite tame. Furthermore, unlike Thurston, Carter has no additional information about the scope of the horrors which inhabit his universe. Possibly, because of this, he survives with his sanity intact, yet shaken. This small introductory increment of horror in one way serves to inoculate him to it and, as we shall see, actually allows him to face greater terrors later on.

But what details does the story give the reader about Randolph Carter himself? In this story in particular he seems bland and passive, but the reason for this might simply be a narrative one. It is possible that Carter's character is intentionally bland in order to let the reader easily step into his role as a kind of empty-shell protagonist, and by doing so increasing the impact of an otherwise tame horror experience. Carter's main purpose in the story must after all be to report to the reader and to the police of the demise of Warren and for this purpose the character is more than sufficient. Nevertheless, it is possible to glean some information about Carter. We learn from his account that while Carter sometimes feared his friend, he had studied everything related to the occult owned and written by Warren, that he was able to understand. This tells us that he has quite a vast knowledge of the occult and this will be useful later when determining the order of the Carter stories. It is however, hard to determine whether he believed in the supernatural prior to their

experience or if Carter simply was merely interested in the subject on a scholarly level. What is certain though is that Carter as a character suffers from some kind of nervousness which renders him unfit to confront the horrors. Warren tells him before descending into the pit: "I couldn't drag a bundle of nerves like you down to probable death or madness" (5). To this Carter remonstrates, to such an extent that he himself, when looking back at the events, is surprised. But Warren threatens to abandon the effort altogether so Carter eventually gives up. In this case, Carter's inherent flaws actually save him, though his objections hint at him being either a loyal friend or very intrigued by the mystery. In the end, when examining "The Statement of Randolph Carter" alone by itself it is difficult to determine if Randolph Carter ever really was intended to be a recurring character. In most ways he resembles one of Lovecraft's many throwaway narrators, yet this story, having its origin in a dream of Lovecraft's, may have given him additional significance, especially when the author later on again chose to deal with the subject of dreams.

Carter's second appearance is three years later in the 1923 short story, "The Unnamable" which is quite similar to "The Statement of Randolph Carter" in both length and dramaturgic structure. In *An H.P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia*, S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz describe the story as a satire on the "stolid bourgeois unresponsiveness to the weird tale" (283), and it is curious that Carter should play a role in such a tale. The story involves Carter, once more the narrator, once more in a cemetery, sitting next to a run-down house, describing to his friend Joel Manton a certain unnamable beast that according to New England folklore haunts the region. Manton, a religious man and a schoolteacher by trade, ironically plays the role of the sceptic (and the bourgeoisie if one is to believe Joshi), who tries to refute Carter's tale on rational and scientific grounds, in spite of being a religious man who also believes in ghosts and spirits. Nothing, claims Manton, can ever be truly unnamable if it can be studied through scientific analysis. Carter's tale eventually reveals that they are sitting next to the house from which the beast is said to originate and fittingly enough, a few moments later the two friends are knocked over by a wind and then attacked by the very much unnamable horror — which is as impossible to describe as Cthulhu — only to wake up later in the hospital. There Manton finally accepts that the indescribable beast truly was unnamable and that there truly can be no name to describe such a horrific creature. In regards to the story, the relative brevity does not really provide much of a plot, but it does serve to give us an extended idea of Carter's life. Manton

plays role of the role of the common man whose religious scepticism towards Carter's unnamable serves to make Carter the more rational one of the two, not only because he acknowledges that there can be something which is truly unnameable in the universe, but because he knows so by this point, both from "The Statement of Randolph Carter" and from earlier in the story itself. He knows that there are things whose scope and horror are capable of making people utterly insane before they would have a chance to ever name them, things that are unexplainable and unfathomable. In short, this Carter has become partially aware of the true horrors of his world.

In this story, Carter once more serves as the narrator which, combined with the fact that the story uses, by Lovecraft's standards, an uncharacteristically large amount of direct dialogue serves, despite its short length, to give us some interesting data on Carter. We learn that the reason Carter knows about The Unnamable is because he now has become a published writer who during his research for a weird fiction tale found out about the mysterious being. As Carter argues for the creature's existence (and technically for anything that lies within the scope of human understanding) he cannot help but smirk as he reveals that the house they have been sitting next to all night is the one where the creature is supposed to reside, according to lore. This little trick is not particularly mischievous, for while Carter seems to enjoy these kinds of mind-games, once the creature actually appears, he is just as scared and surprised as Manton. As for Carter's actual view on the supernatural, he is contrasted against the religious yet superstitious Manton in this fashion:

> Especially did he object to my preoccupation with the mystical and the unexplained; for although believing in the supernatural much more fully than I, he would not admit that it is sufficiently commonplace for literary treatment. That a mind can find its greatest pleasure in escapes from the daily treadmill, and in original and dramatic recombinations of images usually thrown by habit and fatigue into the hackneyed patterns of actual existence, was something virtually incredible to his clear, practical, and logical intellect. With him all things and feelings had fixed dimensions, properties, causes, and effects; and although he vaguely knew that the mind sometimes holds visions and sensations of far less geometrical, classifiable, and workable nature, he believed himself justified in drawing an arbitrary line and ruling out of court all that cannot be experienced and understood by the average citizen. Besides, he was almost sure that nothing can be really "unnamable." It didn't sound sensible to him. (1)

As this paragraph describes Manton it also gives us one of the first, as of yet, clear ideas of Carter's character. It shows a certain duality to his views on the supernatural, or rather on things that are considered supernatural. The distinction seems to lie between what Carter believes in: the mystical and the unknown, and what Manton believes in: the supernatural. This is in many ways a good, if simplified, summary of Lovecraft's own views on religion and his dismissal of it, moreover some distinctions are needed here to understand just what makes his ideas unique within the broader genre of horror or fantasy fiction, namely his materialism and nihilism, but more on that later. There are also some other parallels to Lovecraft that can be drawn here which serve to give the text certain meta-textual angles. The most obvious one is Carter's penchant for fantastic and mystical stories that defy logic and expectations and which later in the text causes him to dismiss his friend for being too prosaic (as opposed to poetic).

This championing of the poetic as opposed to the realistic is a side of Carter which we will see much of later, but the most interesting meta-textual aspect of "The Unnamable" is the concept of The Unnamable itself. As we saw in "The Statement of Randolph Carter", the horror that took Carter's friend Warren also remained unnamed, and how was Carter to name it? He had no information about the horror, nor was there any to be had once Warren was dead. Warren, even as he ventured down and—unlike Carter—actually saw the horror, failed to convey anything specific and instead said "I can't tell you, Carter! It's too utterly beyond thought--I dare not tell you—no man could know it and live—Great God! I never dreamed of this!" (6). This particular literary device is perhaps the most common of all among the ones used by Lovecraft; his horrors, even when seemingly painstakingly described, make no real sense to the reader, having uncountable numbers of tentacles, eyes and more often than not, geometric shapes that are indescribable by human words. An exercise in just how non-specifying these descriptions are can be had by doing an image search on the internet on any of Lovecraft's horrors, which will reveal almost as many variations as there are images[3]. The strength of this technique is that the mind reading the text only can imagine parts of the creatures and never a complete whole which in turn serves to strengthen the second most recognizable attribute of Lovecraft's horrific beings, namely that of being completely alien and foreign to whatever creatures religion,

[3] With the possible exception of Cthulhu who seems to have acquired a definitive form through pop culture within the last decades.

folklore or myth might have come up with before. So not only does the text address itself and its titular unnamable being, it also addresses, in one way, all of the other unnamable horrors that inhabit and rule Lovecraft's universe. This is the world that Carter has glimpsed, and it is not compatible with something as human as religion or folklore.

Rather, this is where Lovecraft's materialism comes in, because his world in fact hardly ever gives any credence to anything traditionally spiritual and, in a sense, not to anything supernatural either. Lovecraft's beings, while not bound by the laws of time and space in the same way of humans are, are nevertheless part of the same universe, in fact, because they've existed infinitely longer than humankind and its gods they could probably be argued to be more natural to the universe than humanity is. And although Lovecraft's texts often describe them as being utterly alien, they are only alien in the sense that that is how they are perceived by humanity. It is simply that humanity lives in blissful ignorance. Consider the first sentences of "The Call of Cthulhu": "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far" (1). It is this kind of ignorance that allows Carter's friend Manton worry about incorporeal ghosts and gods, while ironically being able to dismiss Carter's claim of other unnamable beings on scientific or rational grounds. Much more can be said on the subject of Lovecraft and materialism, for instance his fascination with using mathematics and geometry as noted by Thomas Hull[4] when trying to describe his indescribables, or rather their very much physical form and which limitations this gives them as done by Graham Harman (Harman 7), but how this all relates to Carter's view of the world is a different issue.

Because if we then once more consider the Randolph Carter that we are presented with in "The Unnamable", we will see that he is, if not totally aware of the scope of the horror that surrounds him, at least not dismissive of the idea. His experiences at this point allow him to dismiss the notions of ghosts and spirits that linger on earth and gods who cleverly manipulate and help its denizens. He only fears that which does not need to make its presence known or explained, but which he deduces is out there just for this reason, out of sheer probability and from his own

[4] Hull "H.P. Lovecraft: a Horror in Higher Dimensions".

experience. This Carter is now less of a “bag of nerves”, because he has glimpsed true horror and survived, twice. First he survived an indirect confrontation, and now a direct one. And what is more, he has survived this ordeal with his sanity intact. However, this has not necessarily made him wiser or more knowledgeable, rather the unknown has wiped his slate clean of what he thought he knew and now he has become confronted and humbled by his own ignorance of the universe. It is as if he has developed a unique kind of agnosticism where he acknowledges that there are terrible beings in the surrounding cosmos, but these beings are nothing like anything described by any organized religion or folklore. In spite of these changes however, we still do not know that much about what motivates Carter. The next Carter story, however, deals just with that issue.

Dream Quest

The first two Carter stories are, in their relative brevity and straightforward narrative easy to place after one another, but after them Carter’s exploits become harder to track. In 1926 Lovecraft started writing two Carter stories, the short story “The Silver key” and the short-novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. The first one came to be published the same year while Lovecraft kept working on *Dream-Quest* until early 1927. At this point, the author was dissatisfied with the latter and felt that, as noted by Joshi and Schultz, “Randolph Carter’s adventures may have reached the point of palling on the reader; or that the very plethora of weird imagery may have destroyed the power of any one image to produce the desired impression of strangeness” (74). In the end, possibly because of Lovecraft’s dissatisfaction or his relative obscurity leading to problems with getting all texts published, *Dream-Quest* remained unpublished until posthumously in 1948. But as a source of information on Randolph Carter, the novel is of immense value, being by far the longest of the Carter stories. As such, and taking into consideration that “The Silver Key” is inherently connected to the much later short story “Through the Gates of the Silver Key”, since the latter continues directly where the former left off, it is at this juncture most beneficial to first look at *Dream-Quest*.

The fact that Lovecraft himself was cognizant of the fact that a too large amount of weird imagery could make the novel lose its impact is maybe not surprising considering what we learned about his particular style form “The Unnamable”. This is

chiefly because, unlike most of Lovecraft stories, *Dream-Quest* does not take place on Earth, where horrific creatures exist—yet do so in obscurity. Rather, in *Dream-Quest*'s world there is an abundance of the weird and horrific in a land that is unlike Earth, quite simply because it is nothing less than the land of dreams. In such a setting, weird and horror elements lose their impact when they get mixed up together with a multitude of throwaway mystical creatures (with names like zoogs and gugs no less) that here are not only very much nameable, but also, by Lovecraftian standards, close to harmless unless encountered by the multitude. On many levels, the novel is closer to fantasy fiction than horror or Lovecraft's own brand of weird fiction. This also applies to Randolph Carter's titular quest, which is another element that is far more closely tied to fantasy. The story concerns Carter's search for a marvellous sunset city of which he dreamt three times but then never again. To him, the beauty and meaning of this city is of immense value and therefore he chooses to lock himself inside his dreams until he can find it. What follows is a long and arduous quest for information that, literally takes him to the moon and back, before eventually leading him to his goal.

The nature of a quest or adventure traditionally features a rather straightforward goal for which the hero strives. This too is the case in *Dream-Quest* and it is a new direction for Carter who up until now has been a rather passive protagonist. Whether Carter deserves the title of hero is in *Dream-Quest* is debatable though, as we shall see, but it is clear that he no longer is a passive narrator unto whom bad events simply happen. Instead, this Randolph Carter actively decides on his quest to find the sunset city even though its location and existence is unknown to most inhabitants of the dream world. As an active, striving protagonist Carter also performs more moral and immoral actions than the reader hitherto have come to expect from him. Throughout the length of the text he risks his life and those of others many times over to achieve his singular goal of reaching the city. Eventually, Carter reaches Kadath, which is not, as one might think, his coveted sunset city but the mythical city of the Great Ones within the dream land. As he arrives there, he is confronted by the messenger of the so-called Other Ones, Nyarlathotep the Crawling Chaos. Nyarlathotep, who all along has been aware of Carter's quest to find the city of his dreams, reveals to him just exactly what Carter has been longing for, in what might be one of Lovecraft's more poetic passages:

> 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.
>
> [These memories] are your city; for they are yourself. New England bore you, and into your soul she poured a liquid loveliness which cannot die. This loveliness, moulded, crystallised, and polished by years of memory and dreaming, is your terraced wonder of elusive sunsets; and to find that marble parapet with curious urns and carven rail, and descend at last these endless balustraded steps to the city of broad squares and prismatic fountains, you need only to turn back to the thoughts and visions of your wistful boyhood. (132)

In other words, the power of Carter's nostalgic longings and dreams has created this wonder within the dream world; a city which is the composite of all things he finds beautiful, or found beautiful as a child. [5]

It is at this point important to establish what we know of the powerful forces in the dream world, and without. Nyarlathotep, who interestingly also originates from one of Lovecraft's dreams involving another of his friends called Samuel Loveman (Joshi and Schultz 191), is one of the most recurring of the immortal beings in Lovecraft's mythos. He is alluded to, referred to and even featured in a number of stories in a number of different forms, but when Carter encounters him he has an appearance similar to that of an Egyptian pharaoh. This human form is fitting not only for conversing with Carter but also since Nyarlathotep is known to have influenced and interfered in human events since the dawn of mankind (Joshi and Schultz 191). In this story he acts as the ambassador to the Other Ones, who within the story and Lovecraft's universe are considered some of the most powerful beings, although if one were to try to compile some sort of a list one would note that there are never any definitive hierarchies in Lovecraft's universe. What is certain however is that Nyarlathotep acts as a voice and emissary for these entities while in the dream land while at the same time lording over the so-called Great Ones, who are the true inhabitants of Kadath. These "mild gods", as Nyarlathotep disdainfully calls them are actually Earth's gods which he is tasked to oversee. This hierarchy is expanded upon in another part of the dream cycle, more precisely in the short story "The Other Gods"

[5] The latter will be relevant in "The Silver Key".

from 1921 which involves the character Barzai the Wise scaling the mountain Hatheg-Kla in order to glimpse Earth's gods dancing, only to find that the gods he so reveres are simply the pawns of the Other Ones and which subsequently causes him to fall to his death. This Icarus-like[6] act of defiance has the consequence of forcing the Earth's gods to abandon the mountain in favour of Kadath and such, eventually sets the scenes for Carter's quest. By the time Carter arrives in the land of dreams, the Earth's gods have forsaken their new home in the city of Kadath in favour of more dancing and playing around, but this time in Randolph Carter's constructed dream city of nostalgia. This is something that Nyarlathotep finds curious, yet also bothersome, as the gods have done this against his wishes, so he tasks Carter with removing them from there. Carter accepts as the task is very much aligned with his own, and at this point it is hardly surprising that he would make such a deal, as we have seen that he throughout the story has been prepared to confront and do almost anything in order to reach his goal. This rebellious disregard and opposition of order and hierarchies is characteristic of Carter in *Dream-Quest*. From the start of his travels, he is aware that travelling to Kadath, where he can find answers to help him find his sunset city, is an affront to the powers that be. In spite of this he knowingly travels on, challenging not only Earth's gods but also beings immensely older and more powerful than them. What is more, as he does this, there are also a number of morally questionable actions he performs in order to achieve this goal.

Early on, in the town of Ulthar, Carter is in need of information from the town's patriarch, called Atal, who is said to have scaled Hatheg-Kla and survived. Atal is in fact the disciple of Barzai the Wise who accompanied him on his climb yet never saw the true horrors at the top that caused him to fall, which interestingly enough is very similar to Carter's own experiences in "The Statement of Randolph Carter". Carter needs help to identify in which part of the dream land Kadath is situated and if it is indeed the home of the Earth's gods. Atal, now 300 years old, confirms that the Great Ones indeed are Earth's gods but he is adamant to tell Carter any specific information, presumably because he does not want to anger them. Carter is frustrated and comes up with a plan to drug Atal on some powerful moon wine that he has previously acquired and once that is accomplished, Atal, in a drunken stupor, provides Carter with the information. On an even bleaker note, as he travels

[6] For an extended analysis see Olmedo and Bernardo – "Three Representations of the Fall in Lovecraft's Dream Cycle".

throughout the dream land Carter allies with not one, but two armies, and convinces them to fight for him. The first is an army of cats who saves Carter from imprisonment and certain death on the moon by going to war with the hideous moon beasts, solely on the grounds that Carter was friendly to a small kitten in Ulthar. Later, as Carter encounters his old friend from the waking world Richard Pickman, now a flesh eating—but sentient—ghoul, he manages to get an escort of ghouls to help him on his journey at no cost. What is more, later when Carter finds a group of ghouls being tortured, he reports this to Pickman and through this one simple action, as thanks, he gets to command an entire army of ghouls against the foes who block his progress. And, as these ghouls die by the hundreds, Carter stands by the sidelines commanding the soldiers. If we return to idea of Carter as a hero after considering this, it becomes hard to consider him a particularly moral one. What is more, were these his only options? And why are these creatures so keen on helping him? It is clear that Carter possesses an incredible determination to reach the alluring golden city but the reader is never given a reason why, only that he has a maddening need to find it. The narrative structure of one character questing for a prize is simple and often used to begin with, so it is hard to understand how Lovecraft would choose to so weakly motivate the actions of his protagonist to the extent that it almost seems as if the character is mind-controlled. Nothing on his travels forces him to rethink his goal and no moral action is too immoral. This Carter is, compared to the two earlier stories, where friendship played a significant part, surprisingly cold.

However, there are a couple of things we should remember about *Dream-Quest*. First, it takes place in the dream world. More specifically Earth's dream world, which, it is hinted at, is only one of many. Carter is fully aware that he is dreaming and has intentionally locked himself in his dreams, by passing through The Gate of Deeper Slumber. As we will later see, he has the ability to awaken but it is unclear what happens if he were to abruptly die while in the dream. Conversely, most of the inhabitants of the dream land seem to be permanent residents who live and die there so their lives must to them be as vital as Carter's waking life is to him. Nyarlathotep and, Earth's gods on the other hand, seem to have the privilege of existing both in the dream land and without. Considering this, any affront to either of them, whether awake or dreaming, ought to present mortal danger. Once more, rationally, Carter should have abandoned this quest long ago but he never does and that forces us to at least consider the notion that he actually has no real control of his actions, and that he

is, in one way, just playing his part as a pawn in a larger pre-determined game. His actions in this story might actually be entirely deterministic and the fact that this never occurs to Carter might not be as much a testament to his determined personality, as it is to his lack of free will.

When considering this, it is helpful to view Lovecraft's own ideas on the concept of determinism which are, as Joshi notes, rather radical:

> Determinism – which you call Destiny – rules inexorably; though not exactly in the personal way you seem to fancy. We have no specific destiny against which we can fight – for the fighting would be as much a part of the destiny as the final end. The real fact is simply that every event in the cosmos is caused by the action of antecedent and circumjacent forces, so that whatever we do is unconsciously the inevitable product of Nature rather than of our own volition. *If an act correspond[s] with our wish, it is Nature that made the wish, and ensured its fulfilment* [emphasis added]. (Joshi *Decline* 15)

Lovecraft's own interpretation of determinism is interesting because the moral implications are, as with many radical interpretations of philosophy, staggering. If we were to follow these explicitly, Carter would by all means, be justified in his moral choices, especially since his one driving, yet unexplainable, purpose is to reach the goal of his dreams. The reasons for Lovecraft's style of determinism might be hard to place but there are some peculiar notions that match those of Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Lovecraft's favourite philosophers.

Lovecraft's interest in Nietzsche could have been founded in a number of areas, but it is in their mutual distaste of religion that they both were especially unflinching, both of them remaining staunch atheists for their whole lives. One of the things that motivated Nietzsche's immense dislike of organized religion was that he felt that its doctrines were based on the concept of 'free will'. Free will to Nietzsche, as he argued in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), meant that, in practice, the subservient masses in society should remain in that position, on the basis that if they behave well they will be rewarded in afterlife (Nietzsche *Beyond* pt. 21; ch. 1). If one reverses this, it also means that whatever perceived sins an individual commits, the blame lies squarely on the individual and not on one's place in life, in society, or on pure chance. The concept of free will, Nietzsche argued, was a malady that had followed western civilization around since the Greek classical era with the notion that a person is a combination of her heart and mind. Instead, he argues in *The Birth of Tragedy*, for another dichotomy namely the 'Apollonian' and the 'Dionysian'. These two qualities

are not simply Nietzsche's replacement for heart and mind; rather they represent two sides of humanity as a whole. The Apollonian is, when considered as an artist, the rational, contemplating sculptor while the Dionysian is the musician making abstract music, chaos and revelry. Prior to a certain point in classical Greek tragedy, Nietzsche argues, these two were interchangeable within the characters of the drama. The characters simply did what their instincts dictated because they felt compelled to do so by either side. As the prime examples of this Nietzsche, uses two tragic heroes: Sophocles' Oedipus and more importantly Aeschylus' Prometheus, the latter being the mythical titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity and which consequently lead to the birth of civilization as we know it. The impact of this story on western culture in general and the Indo-European people who shared similar stories, claims Nietzsche, cannot be overestimated and holds just as much meaning as the biblical Fall did for the Semitic tribes. Both stories lay the grounds for the emergence of human dominance on earth, the first through active rebellion against the gods and the second one through the more moral failures of the subjects. The key difference, Nietzsche states, is the dignity that it accords to the offence performed by Prometheus. What is more, there is a second quality to the rebellion of Prometheus and that is the self-awareness that it attributes to the perceived crime. For whereas in the Garden of Eden, mankind's downfall is a product of the Devil's insidious scheming along with mankind's inherent weaknesses, the affront committed by Prometheus has the quality of being an active rebellion where the consequences are known and expected by the rebellious force. When viewed this way, Randolph Carter confronting, not just one of Earth's gods, which would imply the Abrahamic God, but rather what seems like the entirety of Earth's gods, bears more semblance to Prometheus confronting the gods of Olympus than conventional moral sin and blasphemy against God. This distinction lets Carter's rebellion be one that is neither sinful nor immoral but rather one that seems to be born out of necessity and righteousness. Nietzsche also notes that the Greeks considered the power wielded by their gods to be dependent on their human worshippers, much like how Earth's gods are dependent on Carter's golden sunset city. This co-dependence adds to the legitimacy of his rebellion as the only way, by extension, to get Earth's gods back in their seat and focused on their duties. This interpretation conveniently justifies Carter's actions and his lack of reflection upon them. Because, this Carter is simply a device through which the power balance is restored and who forces the Earth's gods

to return to their homes and responsibilities. As a narrative device, this too would serve as a much better explanation for Carter's actions than his unexplained longing for a mysterious city.

To sum up the story in another way: Carter dreams and invents a fantastic city which is based on his nostalgia for his childhood. The beauty of this city is so great that Earth's gods choose to leave their home to go and inhabit it. In doing so, they deprive Carter of his own nostalgia and leave him without a part of himself. Unaware of this, but still cognizant of his need to find the city Carter quests for it and finds it and restores order. Carter confronts the gods because he wishes to reach his goal. As such his rebellion is active, yet still secondary and deterministic. When keeping this in mind the causality of the plot also seems very linear. Never is there a moment when Carter has to reflect on what action to take, rather the answer is always presented and the plot simply resolves itself. This lends Carter's dream a certain classical structure that would fit into a western narrative tradition akin to Oedipus the King where the main character's own actions are what spell out his doom, although when viewed individually from his perspective, they all are the sensible choices to make. It is pre-determined and set-up to the extent that even when Carter learns of the city's origin and that the gods now inhabit his dream city, he accepts the task to drive them out with neither hesitation nor surprise. The whole structure of the story is also almost strangely predictable in a way that seems to lack the surprises and strange turns that one might associate with dreams, and there is really no reason for Carter to ever question any of his actions because as Nietzsche finally summarizes, the ultimate moral of the story of Prometheus:

> And so the double nature of the Aeschylean Prometheus, his simultaneously Dionysian and Apollonian nature, can be expressed in an understandable formula with the following words: "Everything present is just and unjust and equally justified in both." (*Birth* pt. 10)

This brings us back to the subject of determinism as interpreted by Lovecraft because there is one higher power than both Earth's gods and Carter in the story and that is Nyarlathotep.

As a being of immense power, it is difficult to ascertain just what Nyarlathotep's influence on the dream quest as whole has been. What is more curious, his motives seem to be not only something else than what he presents, but maybe even something that is inherently unknowable. Because it turns out that while Nyarlathotep might have tasked Carter with banishing the gods from his city, his purpose was a

ruse and instead Carter is tricked into travelling into the deepest parts of the cosmos and a certain death. As Carter realizes this, he suddenly remembers that he can escape his dream by reaching his dream city, or rather its corporeal version in waking life. Carter thinks of Boston and suddenly wakes up in his home, sunlight shining through the window together with birds chirping in an almost too idyllic image. The novel ends with Nyarlathotep in Kadath taunting the Earth's gods after having himself removed them from Carter's wonderful dream city. We see then that this must have been the ultimate goal of the story: a return of things to their original state.

So where does this last minute betrayal lead us? Carter survives the ordeal but, as we shall see in the next story, it is unclear whether he remembers his dream adventure at all or even how much he actually actively participated in it. Because unlike the narrative up to that point, Nyarlathotep's betrayal is remarkable in how it diverges from the hitherto established narrative structure, it marks the point where Carter finally takes stock of the situation and actively saves himself from certain death by ending his own dream. What is more, there seems to be no real purpose behind this betrayal or for sending Carter to the city. From the ending we can tell that the Elder god always had the ability to remove Earth's gods from the city and no real need to send Carter there. What is more, with his infinite power and standing army in Kadath, it is impossible to fathom that he could not simply have dispatched of Carter instead of tricking him. It seems more probable that Nyarlathotep wanted Carter to survive, for whatever purpose he might have. The very action is unpredictable in a way that only supports the idea that Nyarlathotep, as Joshi and Schultz notes; "appears in such widely divergent forms that it may not be possible to establish a single or coherent symbolism for him" (Joshi and Schultz 191). More importantly, there is according to Nietzsche one power that stands above the causality of a story even in Greek tragedy: the "central point and major claim of the Aeschylean world view, which sees Moira [Fate][7] enthroned over gods and men as eternal justice" (*Birth* pt. 3). If we instead view Nyarlathotep, in all its infinite power, as a being that has both the knowledge of antique Mediterranean civilization and who actually has the capacity and interest to influence humans and even gods is it not possible that Nyarlathotep was, for its own amusement, playing the role of Fate? Or to suggest an even simpler explanation, does having this amount of power while being detached

[7] Nietzsche's brackets.

from any allegiances or morals simply not make Nyarlathotep into an actual incarnation of Fate? Either from within the story or from an outside perspective this angle serves to efficiently explain the single-mindedness of this version of Carter. And if it holds true, we too have to question the origin of the dream that led Carter on this quest to being with, and whether it actually was the first step in the deterministic chain that cause Carter to go on the quest. If we accept that then this chapter, and possible even the other ones in the story of Randolph Carter will require a second look when it comes to those events that are beyond Carter's control. This question is one which we will have to return to once Carter's place in the cosmos has been determined.

But there is also an additional complication to *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*: just where to place it in the Carter timeline. Since none of the narrative action actually takes place in the waking world, but as we will soon see there is an account for Carter's early years which we can use for this. This will also have the benefit of allowing us to gauge what kind of influence this adventure has had on the waking Randolph Carter and his world. In the end, as a portrait of Carter, *Dream-Quest* serves best in highlighting how driving his passions are and to what lengths he is prepared to go fulfil them. As we shall see in the next part there is a strong suggestion that Carter did not remember his dream quest because even though he wakes up to the sunlight of Boston—the origin of his mysterious city—his longing for beauty and marvel is all but sated.

Carter against the World

Up until now the exploits of Randolph Carter have been quite distinct from each other in terms of both Carter's character and the stories themselves. Luckily the next Carter story has the advantage of giving us a more or less complete summary of more than 50 years of Carter's life. This account is the previously mentioned "The Silver Key" from 1926, and it is here that Lovecraft decides to provide his readers with some much needed background, even though, as one shall note, with the cost of creating a slew of new confusions. While *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* often seems to polarize fans of Lovecraft on account of its fantasy setting and length, it is nevertheless an interesting divergence from Lovecraft's standard fare. The same could be said for "The Silver Key" but for different reasons. At the time of writing this work

was initially rejected by the magazine Weird Tales, which usually published Lovecraft stories, and when the magazine two years later finally decided to publish the story they were met with vehement criticism from their readers (Joshi and Schultz 245).

So what crime did the short story commit to receive such a backlash? In one way, one could say that there was too much of Lovecraft in it and too little of the weird and horrific. If "The Unnamable" showed Lovecraft's views on fiction and *Dream-Quest*—at least subconsciously—reflected his ideas on determinism, then Silver Key reflects Lovecraft's full-on assault on modernity.

Perhaps the most simplified and funny, yet also striking example of Lovecraft's views on modernity, and more specifically its art, is when Lovecraft as the self-styled old-fashioned gentleman and poetic soul, read T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and found it to be, as quoted by Joshi and Shultz: "a practically meaningless collection of phrases, learned allusions, quotations, slang, and scraps in general" (291). His disdain eventually even manifested itself in a parody poem entitled "Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance." This is much in the spirit of Lovecraft's reactionary conservatism but more than anything else, it serves to portray once more just how opinionated Lovecraft could be, because even though he despised Eliot's poem, he two years later said of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that it represented a "significant [contribution] to contemporary art" (Elliot 4). Of course, someone having varied opinions on modernist literature today is very much a simpler and altogether different thing when compared to someone who grew up in the early years of the era so there is no reason to claim that Lovecraft was being very hypocritical, in fact, as has been noted, Lovecraft and Eliot also had a lot in common like, as Charles Elliot notes, their mutual adoration for Poe and their strong classicist leanings (8). The latter which they both also shared with Nietzsche, whose influence on the modernist era is irrefutable. With this in mind it is better to not view Lovecraft's opinions on modernity, modernism, or Carter's opinions on contemporary society in Silver Key, as a general assault on the modern world—even though they easily can be read as that— but rather as series of specific attacks on areas where society and art has failed to live up to its expectations. The story begins thusly:

> When Randolph Carter was thirty he lost the key of the gate of dreams. Prior to that time he had made up for the prosiness of life by nightly excursions to strange and ancient cities beyond space, and lovely, unbelievable garden lands across ethereal seas; but as middle age

> hardened upon him he felt those liberties slipping away little by little, until at last he was cut off altogether. No more could his galleys sail up the river Oukranos past the gilded spires of Thran, or his elephant caravans tramp through perfumed jungles in Kled, where forgotten palaces with veined ivory columns sleep lovely and unbroken under the moon. (*Dream-Quest* 151)

As we can see, this thirty year old Carter is no longer the person he was in *Dream-Quest,* rather, his status as a master dreamer seems to have faded. In fact, it is hard here to ascertain whether he ever remembered his travels to and around Kadath at all, or that he interpreted it as anything more than a simple dream among many others. Or is it possible that it was that very dream which was the reason for him losing his ability to dream? A chronology of Carter's adventures up to this point will soon be required because of the many vagaries as to how the stories are ordered, but at this point we can see, when compared to the other incarnations of Carter, that this ex-dreamer Carter is quite a changed character, most probably because of his loss of the ability to dream. Here the reason for this loss is explained succinctly in the paragraph that follows the last one:

> He had read much of things as they are, and talked with too many people. Well-meaning philosophers had taught him to look into the logical relations of things, and analyse the processes which shaped his thoughts and fancies. Wonder had gone away, and he had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreamings, and no cause to value the one above the other. (151)

Carter has, in other words, grown up. From these two paragraphs there are a number of things to read, but what can be said foremost is that while Carter is not the narrator in "The Silver Key", there is a narrator here who is far from objective as to the effects modern life has on dreamers and poetic souls. Whether the narrator is a direct mouthpiece for Lovecraft's ideals is irrelevant, but it is not hard to imagine that this very biased and preachy narration was a big reason for the negative feedback the story received upon publication. At this point in the story however, Carter's troubles have all but begun.

The 30 year old Carter, now far from the Carter of "The Unnamable", who dismissed conventional beliefs in favour of things that were inherently unnamable or unknowable, has now gotten "dinned into his ears a superstitious reverence for that which tangibly and physically exists, and [which has] made him secretly ashamed to dwell in visions" (152), he has, in some ways, become a sort of blind materialist. In

"The Unnamable", Carter was critical of the easy answers offered to him by his friend Manton's religion and his empirical science, but here he embraces it. Of course, at this point, "The Silver Key" has yet to make a mention of Joel Manton or anything supernatural, or anything out of the ordinary, whatsoever. The narrator finally chooses to really drive the point home with:

> *They* had chained him down to things *that are*, and had then explained the workings of those things *till mystery had gone out of the world*. When he complained, and longed to escape into twilight realms where magic moulded all the little vivid fragments and prized associations of his mind into vistas of breathless expectancy and unquenchable delight, they turned him instead toward the new-found prodigies of science, bidding him find wonder in the atom's vortex and mystery in the sky's dimensions. And when he had failed to find these boons in things whose laws are known and measurable, they told him he lacked imagination, and was *immature* because he preferred dream-illusions to the illusions of our physical creation [emphasis added]. (152)

This is, in other words, what modernity does to dreamers, or so the narrator claims; it forces them to conform and set up boundaries with the help of science and forces them to abandon the irrationality that dreams represent to them. What is more, when Carter does not manage to sufficiently appreciate the wonders of science, he is chided for lacking imagination. He is told that he lacks the one thing that he—at least before losing his ability to dream—truly is good at. Carter's response to this is to actually bend to demands of society, while not fully accepting them. He starts to pretend "that the common events and emotions of earthy minds were more important than the fantasies of rare and delicate souls" (152), as if that was what society actually expected of him. Once more the narrator's disdain lies thick within text. The side effect of Carter's acceptance however causes him to grow bitter and nihilistic, as he cannot help to see "how shallow, fickle, and meaningless all human aspirations are" and this causes him to lapse into "the polite laughter they had taught him to use against the extravagance and artificiality of dreams; for he saw that the daily life of our world is every inch as extravagant and artificial" (153).

The kind of nihilistic materialism Carter has developed at this point seems more or less identical to Lovecraft's own, and this is cause enough to examine that more closely because it explains one of the author's most interesting contradictions, his attitude towards science. Dustin Geeraert notes:

> Lovecraft's materialism, derived in part from his understanding of Darwinian evolution, is well-known; even critics who disagree with this materialism, such as Wilson, admit that his work expresses it.

> While Lovecraft believes that Darwin destroyed the credibility of religious worldviews (and indeed any worldview other than a materialist one) he intellectually appreciates Darwin's discoveries, he simultaneously laments the loss of what he considers the *emotionally attractive illusions of past ages*. [emphasis added] (Geeraert 6)

Now, it is important not to mistake this for Lovecraft lamenting the loss of religious credibility, he welcomed it. But his culturally conservative ideals made him feel that Darwin's discoveries had an effect on society which led to a kind of scientific reductionism (the explanation of society by different, co-dependant disciplines like biology being in part chemistry and both of them being dependant on physics). This seems to have created a kind of cognitive dissonance within which was in many ways central to Lovecraft's distrust of modernity. His rational side appreciated the impact science had had on organized religion and rational thought, but the society he envisioned growing out of it seemed to him to fully have lost the ability to appreciate the romantic works which he loved. In light of this, it is easy to understand why Joshi claims that: ""The Silver Key" is, in fact, the one tale where Lovecraft genuinely expresses the core of his ethics—namely, his late view that, in the light of the inconsequentiality of mankind in an aimless cosmos, all we have to fall back on is tradition." (*Decline* 100) This explains why, when Carter encounters the same existential dilemma presented by the modern world, his reaction is to—ironically but perhaps not surprisingly—take refuge in religion: "In the first days of his bondage he had turned to the gentle churchly faith endeared to him by the naive trust of his fathers, for thence stretched mystic avenues which seemed to promise escape from life" (*Dream-Quest* 152). As a reason for turning to religion, the search for escape from the mundane world must be one of the least well motivated ones, but nevertheless a legitimate one. But Carter, who desperately wants to escape from the modern world's perceived lack of meaning, believes that the cure from mediocrity comes from organized religion. Unfortunately he finds that religion too, like science, ultimately wants to explain his world to him and that all it does is to try to rejuvenate the "outgrown fears and guesses of a primal race confronting the unknown"(152) which is its tenets, and what is worse, do so by co-opting science.

What Carter actually is looking for at this point is debatable. Turning to religion as an antidote to science's need to partition knowledge seems naïve and disregards hundreds of years of science performed by religious and pious people. Rather, what Carter seems to be looking for is some sort of catch-all solution to life

which would allow him, without judgement, to indulge in whatever fancies of imagination he might dream up. It is then fitting that his next stop in his search for harmony should lead him to the bohemians. But knowing that Carter initially turned to religion out of respect for his ancestors and that he actually is trying to escape the modern world tells us that this experiment probably will not work either. His reaction to the bohemians, here society's progressives, is actually even stronger than the one he felt towards the religious crowd. The bohemians, according to Carter: "did not know that beauty lies in harmony, and that loveliness of life has no standard amidst an aimless cosmos save only its harmony with the dreams and the feelings which *have gone before and blindly moulded our little spheres out of the rest of chaos*." (154) [emphasis added]. Once more, one has to marvel at what kind of standards Carter has, but he is still at this point young and idealistic, if yet in a very reactionary way, so some higher moral ground may be understandable. Nevertheless, this short statement sums up just how allergic Carter is to change, or rather, newness. If we consider what kind of culture he sees in the bohemians and contrast it with what he is asking for, we see that his ideals are next to unrealistic. The kind of beauty Carter strives for is the kind that is only beautiful when it lies in harmony with that which has come before it, in other words; there can never be a beautiful work of art which does not reference some earlier point of work. He even goes further and suggests that something can only be beautiful if it relates all the way back to the actual forming of the planets! What Carter, in other words, is suggesting here is a kind of art which can be traced back to the dawn of mankind and which from there has, in a purely deterministic fashion, evolved naturally somehow. He wants a kind of art whose value is determined by how closely it lies in harmony with some kind of hypothetical proto art. In addition, it is worthwhile to remember that Carter's adventure in Dream-Quest also held a similar notion, even if Cater was not consciously aware that his dream city—for him, more or less the essence of beauty—was constructed out of his childhood memories it is quite possible that this had an impact on his views on art itself.

The irony here is of course that modernist art, even in any kind of extreme form which Carter could have encountered it, would probably still reference some other art. Consider for example once more Eliot's *The Waste Land* which was so filled with both high-brow and low-brow references that almost all later printings also included the author's notes to explain these. In the end it is hard to imagine what kind

of beauty these bohemians produced which was wholly without connections to any other work as purely self-referential art, even at Lovecraft's time, was the norm. Consider how Nietzsche summarizes modern art in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* when the titular prophet visits the land of culture:

> I laughed and laughed, while my foot still trembled, and my heart as well. "Here forsooth, is the home of all the paintpots,"—said I. With fifty patches painted on faces and limbs—so sat ye there to mine astonishment, ye present-day men! And with fifty mirrors around you, which flattered your play of colours, and repeated it! Verily, ye could wear no better masks, ye present-day men, than your own faces! Who could—RECOGNISE you! Written all over with the characters of the past, and these characters also pencilled over with new characters—thus have ye concealed yourselves well from all decipherers! And though one be a trier of the reins, who still believeth that ye have reins! Out of colours ye seem to be baked, and out of glued scraps. (*Zarathustra* pt. 2 ch. 36)

This, much more apt—yet of course very subjective—description of modern art not only shows that it is suffering from too many ties to tradition rather too few that is the problem. And what is more, Nietzsche seems to claim, this overabundance has turned them into a mixed mess where one cannot tell one of them from the other, but rather they appear as one single entity. With this in mind, is it possible that Carter simply was unable to interpret the kind of art and beauty which the bohemians were producing? It is impossible to tell, but once more Carter's judgement on a subject seems clouded by his strictly reactionary views. Carter choses to leave these modernists, because he finds that their "cheapness and squalor sickened a spirit loving beauty alone" but not before claiming that they are "[w]arped and bigoted with illusions of preconceived illusions of justice, freedom and consistency" (154) while they at the same time denied the heritage which allowed them to champion these ideals. There is too, of course, a political angle to Carter's disdain towards these supposedly squalid bohemians, but in the end it is their perception of beauty that causes Carter to leave them. Nevertheless, much like with Nietzsche, we can see Carter's romantic view of the old upper class, and with that in mind Carter's next step is maybe not as strange as it might sound.

Because, having faced dismay at all these alternatives, Carter then tries living as "befitted a man of keen thought and good heritage" (155). But not even pretending to be an old fashioned gentleman can help him resolve his depression or make the vistas and cities he encounters during the travels he takes seem beautiful. Eventually

he even joins the French Foreign Legion during World War I where he tries to find friends, but the ones he meets are limited by crude emotions and the "earthiness of their visions" and what is worse; he still can't dream. Back home, Carter returns to writing fiction which he had given up when his dreams left him, but it seems modern life has affected him and now his writings have lost their poetic sting and instead "[i]ronic humor [has] dragged down all the twilight minarets he reared" and turned his "high fantasy into thin-veiled allegory and cheap social satire" (156). The worst thing for Carter comes last however:

> His new novels were successful as his old ones had never been; and because he knew how empty they must be to please an empty herd, he burned them and ceased his writing. They were very graceful novels, in which he urbanely laughed at the dreams he lightly sketched; but he saw that their sophistication had sapped all their life away. (156)

The elitist Carter, through hubris or depression, actually chooses to burn his writings on the account of people, ordinary people, liking them. Thankfully for the reader at this point, Carter finally discovers the then fashionable occult circles—which he also utterly dislikes—but which leads him to delve deeper into magic on his own and eventually causes him to encounter a mysterious man from the south which is none other than Harley Warren from "The Statement of Randolph Carter".

At this point it is finally possible to piece together Carter's other adventures for a timeline which is logical enough to work along with the development of his character. Joshi and Schultz give us this chronology for the works starring Carter:

1. *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*
2. "The Statement of Randolph Carter"
3. "The Unnamable"
4. "The Silver Key"
5. "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (245)

Comparing the list to what we have learned about Carter's development, we see that Carter as a young dreamer, after his adventures in the dream land, loses his ability to dream. Whether this is because of Nyarlathotep, from the experience itself, or from growing older is unclear, but in any case it seems as if the experience has had a profound effect on him on his personality, because the Carter of "The Silver Key" is not the one we would expect if reading the stories in that order. *Dream-Quest* Carter wakes up in a sun-drenched room, realizing that his golden city was memories of his childhood Boston, pieced together into an amalgam city of all things he found

beautiful. The Carter of "The Silver Key" on the other hand, we learn directly, has not only lost his ability to dream but the ability to see beauty in the world, even though he actually lives in the—actual—city of his dreams. It seems the experience caused him to forget about his revelation, while also depriving him of his ability to dream. In other words, all of Carter's problems stem from his adventures in *Dream-Quest* which deprived him of access to beauty.

Eventually, after having spent seven years with Harley Warren and experienced this one's death, and after returning to his roots in Arkham[8] where he encounters The Unnamable, Carter gives up on magic. Instead he chooses to retire from the world and spend his autumn years reflecting on his past life. He briefly considers suicide but decides against it more out of force of habit than anything else. Suddenly though, his dreams start to return. He dreams small dreams at first, about relatives and childhood memories until he one night dreams about his grandfather. In the dream the grandfather tells him about his ancestors who, dating back to the crusades where they learned magic from the Muslims, have been students of the occult. And also about his other ancestor Edmund Carter who barely escaped the Salem witch trials and who in his attic hid an antique box that contained a great silver key. Upon awakening Carter remembers this dream and proceeds to find the box and key tucked away where no one would ever have looked. Eventually he takes them to his family estate, a place that he hasn't visited in 40 years, where he finds an old cave in which he used to play as a child. Somehow, through instinctive use of the key, Carter is transported back to his childhood, at the age of 10 where he suddenly starts to forget what he was doing as his mind melds with his 10-year-old self. He feels the silver key in his pocket, but cannot remember from where he got it, so he goes off to play. In present time, the narrator tells us, that on that day Randolph Carter disappeared from the face of the earth and is presumed dead, but this is only a matter perspective claims the narrator, stating that he knows Carter is not dead and that he will see him again.

At the end of "The Silver Key", Carter finally finds what he has been looking for by returning to his childhood. However, this was not just simply a case of nostalgia; it was a way to rediscover beauty and the ability to dream by returning to his childhood. As far as Lovecraft's tales go, this is probably one of the most

[8] Fictional town which feature in many of Lovecraft's famous works like *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* and "Herbert West–Reanimator". Has a dark history in more ways than one.

sentimental and tame endings he has ever written. However the strength of the story is the wealth of information it has given us on Carter's early life and his character, and how it highlights his uniqueness in Lovecraft's universe, mostly through his failure to fit in. As a child he saw wonder and beauty in the world around him, but as this faded—as it should with age—and he tried to adapt, he refused to accept any of the choices made available to him. Retaining his appreciation for beauty but not finding anything like it in the modern world then caused him to resent all parts from a position of superiority. But ironically he himself is not better, we learn that his own works of writing has lost their edge and it is not hard to imagine that they might never actually have possessed the beauty for which he longs, if we consider that the beauty which he champions was the one perceived by a child full of wonder at the world around him and in his dreams. Because while Carter is quick to discard any of the alternatives he turns to for beauty—and almost so fast one has to wonder if he even gave them a chance—he never is shown to produce anything of beauty himself. He seems to hunger for a kind of beauty that is unrealistically beautiful. But then again, if we remember Carter's golden sunset cities maybe this isn't surprising. He has developed a taste for beauty so exquisite that it can only be found in the naiveté and wonderment of childhood or in extended trips to the land of dreams. If one keeps this in mind, Carter suddenly seems less a reactionary and surly old man and more of a tragic figure who has glimpsed a magical sort of true beauty and lost it. His perseverance however allows him, after many decades, to achieve his goal, in a way.
Now, having established both Carter's unique character and the society which he shaped it against, we will finally soon be able see just how these factors allow him to survive-—and even rise above—Lovecraft's menacing universe as he finally is fully exposed to it.

Transcendence

Out of the final three stories which mention Carter only two directly feature him and only one actually has him contributing to the story. The last one is "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" which is a longer story Lovecraft wrote together with his correspondent, and fellow author, Edgar Hoffmann Price during 1932-33. The story effectively continues—and ends—the tale of Randolph Carter which began with "The Silver Key" as well as ends Carter's adventures altogether. But let us first

acknowledge the very brief reference to Carter which appears between the two works in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* from 1927[9], one year after "The Silver Key". The reference is simply a minor character remembering a piece of advice given to him by Carter: "It was the sign of Koth, that dreamers see fixed above the archway of a certain black tower standing alone in twilight—and Willett did not like what his friend Randolph Carter had said of its powers. (55)" What little useful information we can take away from this is that Lovecraft still at this point liked the Carter character enough to use him, not having faced the criticism, against "The Silver Key" yet, and that Carter's defining trait when referred to by outside characters, is that of a dreamer. But this reference is also the only mention of Carter up until "Through the Gates of the Silver Key", seven years later. As mentioned, "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" was written in collaboration with Price who, unlike most readers, was enamoured with "The Silver Key" and who, when visited by Lovecraft in New Orleans, suggested there should be a story which accounts for Randolph Carter after his disappearance. He even sent Lovecraft a manuscript entitled The Lord of Illusion, which purported to do just that, and through Lovecraft's heavy editing[10] the story was eventually finished in April 1933, seven years after Lovecraft finished "The Silver Key".

The story opens four years after Carter's disappearance, in New Orleans, where four people have gathered to discuss the settlement of Carter's estate. They are Carter's executor Etienne-Laurent de Marigny, the elderly Ward Phillips, the lawyer Ernest B. Aspinwall and the mysterious Swami Chandraputra. De Maringy, the owner of the house and New Orleans local, works as a stand-in for Price who Lovecraft met there for the first time[11]. In the story he is one of Carter's old friends from the French Foreign Legion who, unlike the other members did not share the crudeness Carter saw in them, but instead shared his tastes and outlook.

Keeping this in mind it is perhaps not surprising that old Ward Philips is the stand in for Howard Philips Lovecraft himself, but interestingly enough he might also be the narrator from "The Silver Key". Because Ward has published a tale which "hinted that the lost one now reigned as king on the opal throne of Ilek-Vad" (*Dream-Quest* 172) which is exactly what the narrator suspects happened to Carter at the end

[9] Although released only posthumously in 1941(Joshi and Shultz 31).
[10] Price estimated that Lovecraft kept not more than 50 of his original words. Yet Joshi maintains that Lovecraft left the basic structure of the story intact. (Joshi *Providence* 646).
[11] Joshi *Providence* 646.

of "The Silver Key". This does have some interesting implications: if one considers Ward Phillips, as the name hints, as Howard Philips Lovecraft himself, then it technically would mean that Lovecraft could have included him in this story to hint that the very subjective views expressed by the narrator about the modern world in "The Silver Key" actually were his own opinions, not just Carter's. If so, it is a curious move by the author, but as we shall see, the implications of it on Carter are almost none.

Philips and de Marigny are both adamant that Carter is still alive and that he found a way to leave this time or dimension somehow, as his disappearance left so many strange clues, like the footsteps of a child. Aspinwall, Carter's cousin and also lawyer to the family, does not believe Carter is still alive and suggests that his inheritance should be split up amongst the relatives. The Swami then claims that he knows what truly happened and begins to tell the story of what he believe happened to Carter. In a strange tone of voice, Swami Chandraputra tells the others how Carter indeed went to Arkham and there performed a ritual which gradually yet seamlessly turned him into his 10-year-old self in 1883. Carter spends a day with his aunt and uncle and the following morning he goes to a nearby cave which radiates the sort of power which the key is designed to work with. Through some instinctive turns of the key Carter is then transported outside of time and space, where all things exist and do not exist simultaneously. In the process he also loses his corporeal form and becomes a sort of a free flowing consciousness. He then sees Earth in its most primeval state and that there were cities and strange vegetation long before humans arrived there. This kind of a realization of humanity as an insignificant speck is not uncommon to Lovecraft as has been previously mentioned. In fact, another one of Lovecraft's most famous novellas *At the Mountains of Madness* from 1930, the maddening reveal of the story concerns an expedition finding a terrifying and ancient city on Antarctica. But unlike Lovecraft's other protagonists, to Carter this realization doesn't cause him despair and madness but rather, fundamentally, transforms his personality:

> He had wished to find the enchanted regions of his boyhood dreams, where galleys sail up the river Oukranos past the gilded spires of Thran, and elephant caravans tramp through perfumed jungles in Kled beyond forgotten palaces with veined ivory columns that sleep lovely and unbroken under the moon. Now, intoxicated with wider visions, he scarcely knew what he sought. Thoughts of infinite and blasphemous daring rose in his mind, and he knew he would face the dreaded Guide without fear, asking monstrous and terrible things of him. (182)

No longer is Carter the naïve dreamer who searches for beautiful and mysterious vistas, instead, upon learning about his place in the universe he suddenly gains a new set of dreams and goals.

The Guide is an entity of which Carter has read of in the Necronomicon, a mythic tome often featured in Lovecraft's stories which contains a seemingly endless amount of forbidden knowledge. With the help of the knowledge he has gained from the book Carter is able to locate and communicate with this guide, 'Umr at-Tawil, the ancient one who resides in a strange structure near wherever Carter is. The Guide greets Carter and informs him that he has passed through the first gate but what still awaits him is the Ultimate Gate and that the choice whether or not to proceed is up to Carter. He can also turn back or stay with'Umr at-Tawil and the other Ancient Ones in his present location, which we learn is an "earth's dimensional extension" which is in some way all possible versions of Earth, existing simultaneously. From this Carter also realizes that he himself is not unique either:

> There were "Carters" in settings belonging to every known and suspected age of earth's history, and to remoter ages of earthly entity transcending knowledge, suspicion, and credibility. "Carters" of forms both human and non-human, vertebrate and invertebrate, conscious and mindless, animal and vegetable. And more, there were "Carters" having nothing in common with earthly life, but moving outrageously amidst backgrounds of other planets and systems and galaxies and cosmic continua. Spores of eternal life drifting from world to world, universe to universe, yet all equally himself. (191)

As he passes through the Ultimate Gate this realization finally gets to Carter and he experiences his first own Lovecraftian existential dread in a way that seems almost uniquely tailored to him: he starts to lose his identity. Because while the normal existential dread in Lovecraft's stories usually ends with the character's realizing the utter insignificance of their existence in an indifferent universe, Carter's realization is one of being *just one* of an endless number of similar, almost identical, beings. He suddenly and instinctively knows that there was a Carter from Boston who stepped into a cave and was transported to another time, but confused as he is, he no longer knows if he ever was that Carter. For a singular character like Carter's this is of course particularly draining but before he can turn mad he encounters Yog-Sothoth, one of the Great Old Ones.

Yog-Sothoth, while only playing a central role in one other story[12] yet mentioned in many, is in this story a being of immense power that exists outside of time and space. Its actual power and relevance in the universe as a whole is debatable since most of Lovecraft's mythos is constructed and placed in hierarchies by other authors after Lovecraft's death, his friend and fellow writer August Derleth in particular. (Joshi *Icons* 112) Lovecraft himself never tried to establish this kind of mythology however but rather seemed to invent new beings as often as possible. This is of course consistent with his style of horror we saw referenced in "The Unnamable" where a being's detachment from folklore and science is its true strength as a horror element. From Carter's point of view the experience is harrowing yet momentous in a way which eclipses even his encounter with Nyarlathotep:

> In the face of that awful wonder, the quasi-Carter forgot the horror of destroyed individuality. It was an All-in-One and One-in-All of limitless being and self—not merely a thing of one Space-Time continuum, but allied to the ultimate animating essence of existence's whole unbounded sweep—the last, utter sweep which has no confines and which outreaches fancy and mathematics alike. (193)

For Carter, an atheist who for a human has great knowledge about the universe's secrets this is akin to meeting God, and his fear is understandable. Yog-Sothoth voicelessly starts communicating with Carter and informs him that he is one of only eleven beings from Earth's dimension who have arrived where he has now, and only five of those were humans. It tells Carter that his quest for beauty, and now, for knowledge, is good and that it will reveal to him the secrets of the cosmos should he wish it. Unflinchingly, Carter accepts and Yog-Sothoth starts transmitting to Carter the secrets of the universe. Most of these revelations are repetitions of what Carter learned before approaching the being: the naiveté of seeing space and matter represented in only three dimensions, how time is not a straight line but rather some vague wave-like structure and, most of all, that all beings are derivative projections of different archetypal personas. Carter furthermore learns that his archetype is the 'supreme archetype' from which "all great wizards, all great thinkers, all great artists, are facets of" (200).

Having realized how many different varieties of him there are scattered across the cosmos, Carter—in the end still a dreamer—now becomes infatuated with the idea of gathering more knowledge and realizes that he has the ability to visit each of these

[12] "The Dunwich Horror" from 1929

personas and see an endless variation of life. Carter sees an utterly alien world with five suns inhabited by strange clawed creatures and expresses his wish to visit it because it reminds him of his dreams. Yog-Sothoth confirms that this is within Carter's ability and shows him the correct symbols needed to travel there but cautions Carter that he will need to remember these to return. Carter, however, is impatient and obsessed with the prospect of exploring strange new worlds and fails to properly remember the symbols. Yog-Sothoth finishes the preparations and suddenly Carter inhabits the body of the wizard-creature Zkauba on the planet Yaddith. The problem is however that the Zkauba aspect is disgusted when it realizes what has happened. Unlike Carter it is angry and hostile to the notion that it is an aspect of such a creature as Carter and that this one has entered its body. But despite this, it still retains power of its body for most of the time. But Carter is nothing if not patient and as years pass he learns how to manifest control over the body until he eventually manages, during one of those states, to create a drug which suppresses the Zkauba aspect. Now in full control Carter desperately tries to return to his own body and time, but he has forgotten the right symbols to complete the process. Instead he spends centuries figuring out his time and place in the universe before he finally comes up with a plan to return to earth. He manages to construct and launch a primitive space vessel which he directs towards earth before placing himself in suspended animation. For 10.000 years he drifts through the cosmos before, finally, landing on earth in the year 1930. There he dons a disguise he has constructed and starts researching certain manuscripts which will allow him to return to his human form. These manuscripts are said to be part of the Carter estate.

In New Orleans, as the Swami finishes the story, de Marigny and Phillips look at him with astonishment while the lawyer, Aspinwall is outraged and accuses the Swami of being the one who murdered Carter on account of telling such a mad tale. The Swami tells them that there is a second kind of proof he has but that they will not like it, he claims that he is Randolph Carter. Angry Aspinwall rips the clothes of the Swami and exposes the wizard-creature Zkauba, the shock of which causes Aspinwall to have a heart attack and die. The shock of these events also allows the Zkauba-aspect to re-impose its control on the body and it suddenly moves towards a mysterious coffin shaped clock which it enters and promptly disappears into. Moments later the clock, or rather Carter's space vessel, disappears, leaving only the two stunned men. On that uncertain note, Randolph Carter's adventures end. His only

other appearance is in a short appearance in "Out of the Aeons" from 1933 where he, under the guise of Swami Chandraputra examines some ancient scrolls, just prior to the events in New Orleans.

When all is over, Carter's final fate remains unknown to the reader, the postscript of "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" mention different rumours about the Swami's lodgings and how he was a non-disruptive tenant but none of them are very informative. As such, Lovecraft gives Carter an ambiguous send-off in which the protagonist at least does not lose his mind or life but instead remains the temporary hostage of an ancient alien wizard from across the stars. All things considered—in Lovecraft's universe—things could have been worse.

Randolph Carter has gone from a naïve dreamer to knowing the secrets of the universe and lived thousands of years. Not without complications perhaps but he has managed to transcend the inherent entropy of Lovecraft's universe. But why did he succeed? Was it that he was simply single minded and determined, or was it that his quest for beauty was in itself noble? Consider once more Lovecraft's thoughts on determinism: "If an act correspond[s] with our wish, it is Nature that made the wish, and ensured its fulfilment." Now, taken on its own, that quote can justify mostly any moral or ethical choice one would have to take, but considering Lovecraft was using it to explain the concept of destiny it receives another possible interpretation: follow your wishes, and act upon them.

So what was Randolph Carter's wish? If one were to sum it up in one word one could say it was 'beauty'. Carter longed for the beauty from his most exquisite dreams and the vague nostalgic impressions of his childhood. His determination to rediscover the beauty of these worlds kept him searching for them his whole life—unconsciously in *Dream-Quest* and consciously in Silver Key—until he finally rediscovers and returns to his actual youth. In the process he rejects modern life in all its forms because none of these forms can aid him in this very specific quest. It is only through ancient and forbidden magic he is eventually able to reach his goal. Carter using the silver key is the final act which fulfils his wish, and this action, as well as any others performed in *Dream-Quest* and elsewhere are entirely justified in his quest for beauty. But what is more, it is only in achieving this goal that he is able to finally change and, through that, acquire and strive for new, even loftier, goals.

This view on determinism and personal goals is, in some ways, very similar to Nietzsche's concept of Will to Power. Consider this passage from text by the same name:

> My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (-its will to power:) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement ("union") with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on- (*The Will to Power* §636)

Nietzsche is here talking both about astral bodies and humans, however, both comparisons fit Carter. His singular determination in finding beauty is not unlike that of a bullet or a planetary body blindly flying through the cosmos. In fact, he has even had his share of literal flights through the cosmos. As he finally achieves the goal of finding his childhood and meets Yog-Sothoth, their similar ideals and leanings change Carter's direction through life and instead sends him flying towards a new goal: pure knowledge. It should be noted that while the concept of Will to Power often is seen as an excuse to wield and attain power of different sorts—especially over others—there are also readings which are much more in lieu with Nietzsche's other opinions on life. Robert C. Solomon gives an interesting interpretation of the concept:

> Nietzsche displays considerable confusion as to whether power is an expression of strength or the desire for strength, whether it is the motive (the source of the drive) or the goal , whether it is the feeling of power or the achievement of power, as well as whether it is power over others or power over oneself that is at issue. Nietzsche's warrior metaphors certainly make it seem as if it is power over others that is at issue, but the whole of Nietzsche's campaign for a rich passionate life make it clear that it is power over oneself, self-mastery, that is at stake. But, as I suggested above, this does not mean mastery over one's passions, master - slave style. It rather refers to the cultivating, *enriching and heightening of one's passions* [emphasis added]. (Solomon 86)

And it is these passions, or in Carter's case, single passion that allows one to achieve one's goals.

But is passionately striving for something one wants enough to warrant eternal life and ultimate knowledge in Lovecraft's universe? Considering how often his protagonists are scientists who nevertheless meet horrible deaths there must also be something else that makes Carter the dreamer special, something in his nature that makes him never give up or succumb to despair. More specifically, why does not

Yog-Sothoth, a being described in all other stories as pure malevolence, kill Carter? There is a second of Nietzsche's concepts which become central towards the end of "Through the Gates of the Silver Key", namely the concept of eternal return. Just like the concept of Will to Power, Eternal Return is open to multiple interpretations, but in the case of Carter's adventures there is a much simpler solution, because the concept is basically given unto the reader by Lovecraft as his protagonist approaches the answers to all his questions. If we recall the many versions of Carter we now realize exist, has existed and will exist, and then look at the section in where Nietzsche first mentioned the concept we will see some interesting similarities:

> The Heaviest Burden. What if a demon crept after you into your loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to you: "This life, as you live it at present, and has lived it, you must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh […] "Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth, and curse the demon that spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment in which you wouldst answer him: "you are a God, and never did I hear anything so divine!" If that thought acquired power over you as you art, it would transform you, and perhaps crush thee; the question with regard to all and everything: "Do you want this once more, and also for innumerable times?" would lie as the heaviest burden upon your activity! Or, how would you have to become favourably inclined to yourself and to life, so as to long for nothing more ardently than for this ultimate sanction and seal? (Nietzsche *Science* sec. 341)

The question Nietzsche is asking here is, on the basic level, exactly how much one is prepared to suffer for the hope of salvations, or rather: if one were forced to choose between the two choices presented by the demon at one's darkest moment; would you choose to experience it again forever, knowing that the pain you have experienced and will experience always will be with you, or would you be content with what you have had? The secret to survive this burden lies in your disposition towards yourself and to life.

And this is where Carter is at his strongest. Throughout his life he has been prepared to suffer to achieve his dreams, never giving up in face of danger or for the comfort of giving up, even though his ratio of suffering compared to joy has been skewed massively against him his whole life. And as we have seen, Carter is prepared to endure thousands of years of hardship only for the chance of one time achieving his goal. But the second similarity here is how similar Nietzsche's whole demon metaphor is to Carter's actual encounter with Yog-Sothoth. The difference is that this

demon does not present Carter with a choice but rather reveals that another, more literal, version of eternal occurrence has been happening all along.

Nihilisms and Conclusions

We have seen that Carter's universe, and the stories involving him have an interesting relation to the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, but what does applying these thoughts on the stories mean in terms of how they are interpreted? Can they give an explanation for why Carter's adventures and his eventual fate, are so different to those of Lovecraft's other characters? Lovecraft himself may have been very interested in philosophy but how are we to tell if this applies to his weird fiction? Considering that philosophy deals with life's big questions it is probably best to start at as a large scale as possible, which is the world which Randolph Carter inhabits. It serves then to return to the idea of a nihilistic and deterministic universe and see if this actually applies to Carter's.

Nihilism in itself is a complex concept and simply calling Carter's universe nihilistic raises an important question: what is it actually that is nihilistic in the universe? Is it the universe as a whole or rather, is it its inhabitants? If we assume that Lovecraft wanted to depict the nihilism people have accused him of harbouring, in his texts, would he then depict it in his protagonist Carter or the world around him? As we have seen many times, Lovecraft's stories often end with their main characters being exposed to the real, horrifying truth about the world that surrounds them, sometimes even turning mad in the process. And while existential dread is not necessarily a part of the definition of nihilism, this sort of awakening nevertheless always serves to shatter whatever non-nihilistic views of the world these characters might have held prior to this. Gone are any notions of gods or good and evil. Instead, there is now only a realization that the infinite surrounding universe contains such infinite horrors which that the very existence of humanity utterly insignificant. That Lovecraft's characters have these similar realizations tells us not only that it is a useful narrative device in horror fiction, but also that part of the horror and possibly, even most of it derives—not from the immortal monstrosities themselves but—from the realization that their existence deprives the universe of any possible meaning for humanity. This is the ultimate truth to Lovecraft's cosmos: humanity is but an insignificant speck and the ancient beings that fill the cosmos are utterly cruel yet at

the same time utterly indifferent to them. Because these beings care nothing if humanity would know about them, rather it is humanity which has sealed itself in a self-imposed ignorance and it is only Lovecraft's throwaway characters—scientists and reporters—who break through this in search of knowledge. It is, in other words, the characters who drive themselves insane. We see then that in Lovecraft's universe, ultimately, human existence is without any meaning whatsoever. There cannot ultimately be any room for any earth gods, human morals or any other human concept in a universe filled with immortal beings that could wipe out humanity on a whim and—as it is often implied in Lovecraft's endings—probably soon will. Seeing then the nihilistic basis for Lovecraft's cosmos, let us return to Nietzsche's definition of the concept.

For although Nietzsche is most probably the one modern philosopher who is most often associated with nihilism, there is still quite a lot of confusion as to what Nietzsche really meant when he referred to the concept. Alan White in *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth* notes that Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*, alone, offers the following multitude of nihilisms:

> "Active" and "passive" nihilism are paired, as are "theoretical" and "practical" nihilism, and "complete" and "incomplete" nihilism. Other forms appear in relative isolation, including "authentic" nihilism, "contagious" nihilism, "ecstatic" nihilism, the "most extreme" nihilism, "first" nihilism, "final" nihilism, "fundamental" nihilism, "genuine" nihilism, "philosophical" nihilism, "radical" nihilism, "religious" nihilism, "tired" nihilism, and "suicidal" nihilism (15).

From all these variants, White identifies three which he deems central to understanding Nietzsche's basic view on the concept: religious nihilism, radical nihilism and complete nihilism. One might be surprised to learn that these three nihilisms are actually, together, able to encompass most of humanity. This is until one remembers that Nietzsche's view of the cosmos as a whole, very much like Lovecraft's literary version, is one which is more or less entirely nihilistic and all-encompassing.

Knowing this, it might not be as surprising to learn, despite the strange and contradictory name, that those who fall under the label of religious nihilists actually consist of almost the entirety of humanity. The religious nihilist is a nihilist only unconsciously, because although he or she sees the world around for what it is, they also refuse to accept only this, opting instead to apply on the world, for instance, religion or moral codes, justified by their own psychological needs. In "The Silver

Key" most, if not all, of the groups Carter visits fall under this category. The faithful and religious people Carter visits try to justify and explain their worldview to him but he feels that religion radiates "the awkwardness with which it sought to keep alive as literal fact the outgrown fears and guesses of a primal race confronting the unkown [sic]" (*Dream-Quest* 153). The bohemians and artists Carter visits afterwards may have thrown away religion but they still apply ideas of good and evil (culturally inherited from religion) and therefore, according to Carter, fail to "see that good and evil and beauty and ugliness are only ornamental fruits of perspective" (154). Finally, there is Joel Manton in "The Unnamable" who as we noted felt justified in "drawing an arbitrary line and ruling out of court all that cannot be experienced and understood by the average citizen" (1). Manton is of particular interest as his dialogue with Carter was about these very lines which essentially shield people from the cosmos. And Manton himself being the kind of person to actually dismiss things which fall outside the scope of his religious framework is probably the single best example of a religious nihilist in the Carter stories. From this it is clear then that Carter's search was ultimately impossible among normal people because the beauty he was searching for was of a more primal, truthful kind which never could be explained by individuals or groups who could not see or accept the world for what it is.

From his shunning of most of society, it is clear that Carter is not a religious nihilist. His singular striving for a beauty which lies simply in harmony sounds sublime in its simplicity even though it is never properly explained. Most probably it is connected to dreams or at least the kind of beauty that can be found in them, the kind of beauty which Carter was ridiculed for longing for by others as they "told him he lacked imagination, and was immature because he preferred dream-illusions to the illusions of our physical creation" (*Dream-Quest* 152). And it is here that Carter differs from other characters and protagonists in Lovecraft's universe. He is aware that the world is simply what it actually is, and he refuses to add a layer of morals or a religion on to it to explain away or justify its nihilism. This is where the radical nihilist comes in because whereas the religious nihilists are, as we noted, unconscious of their nihilism and unconsciously build structures to keep it away, the radical nihilist is conscious of these. What is more, this serves to highlight just why Randolph Carter in "The Silver Key" is sufferingly from such heavy existential angst: he finally knows that the universe and society with it is inherently nihilistic and unable to provide him with any help, yet he still yearns for the harmonious beauty of dreams, a beauty to

which his only route seems to have been permanently denied him. With this in mind Carter's, and the narrator's, pessimistic and elitist tone towards society in "The Silver Key" can almost seem justified but for one thing: that very pessimism is a relic from the religious nihilists and to acknowledge it in oneself is to hold oneself back. This, White claims, is the inherent problem with the radical nihilists; they "retain the values that pass judgement" (White 18). What is more, this active nihilism is also through those old values more or less a still a kind of belief, a belief in "the absolute immorality of nature, its aimlessness and meaninglessness" (18). It is here then we see the problems with radical nihilism and how, despite its name, it cannot be the final form of nihilism since it still retains so much of the values of the religious nihilists. It also shows us that the Randolph Carter that we meet in "The Silver Key" is still very much a flawed person, despite the narrator and Carter himself laying the blame on contemporary society. But even this, claims White, is a trait of the radical nihilists who:

> [P]ossess *belief* rather than knowledge, are governed by *feeling* rather than by rationality, and rely on *judgment* rather than insight; they are also *immodest, inconsistent, and illogical*. Perhaps, of course, there is nothing wrong with any of that, at least in Nietzsche's view. After all, his writings contain various polemics against logic and rationality and their demands for consistency, and against the traditional philosophical view *that "passion" is inferior to "reason"* [emphasis added]. (20)

As a description of the young Randolph Carter searching for meaning through beauty in "The Silver Key", this passage is more than a little fitting, and his passion trumping his reason can be seen in *Dream-Quest,* where his obsession with the city of his dreams makes him risk his life numerous times, as well as in the both silver key-stories where his search for beauty and truth respectively to him are the only things of importance. It is because of this somewhat ironic that it is his obsessions, or rather his radical nihilism, which also holds Carter back. His reactionary reactions to modern society in "The Silver Key" betray that he still has a veiled interest in contemporary society and its values, it is just that, in spite of its promise of modern wonder, to Carter the world is just making up new forms of religious nihilism and he, nostalgic by nature, despises these new forms even more than the old ones. For Carter to actually move forward he will need to abandon not only these objections and values that pass judgment, for it is only then he will be able to advance to the final stage of nihilism: complete nihilism. And this is what Carter finally achieves in "Through the Gates of the Silver Key".

Through being determined and, in a way, completely deterministic—at least by Lovecraft's definition of following and acting on the goals one longs for—Carter has reached the primal beauty and nostalgia of his childhood. His will has brought him where he wanted, but even though he might, finally, be content at this point his trajectory is still in motion. The silver key which turned the old and bitter Carter into the 10-year-old Carter also initiated the process of dissolution of Carter's self. Carter was now two Carters and this blurring of the Self also serves to dislodge Carter from the bitter throes of radical nihilism, something which was present in his older self, but not his younger one which has access to beauty. The second use of the silver key by this Carter hybrid then serves to fully dislodge Carter from the single lifeline and goals of that Carter as well as from radical nihilism. What instead appears here is instead the new, almost Zen-like Carter who has lost the trivial elitism and disdain which we saw in "The Silver Key". This is the definition of the complete nihilist, someone who, like Carter, have left behind the 'values that pass judgement' of the religious and radical nihilists and as such has become more, not less through it. Nietzsche suggests, notes White that: "one who is left with nothing in this manner has gained rather than lost. In denying that the world requires "purpose," "unity," or "truth" of the sort posited by religious nihilists and despaired of by radical nihilists, one may regain the world of becoming in its original innocence" (21). And as Carter's self becomes an amalgam of other Carters these values lose their hold on him since they only are applicable to a single Carter and not the whole.

It is interesting then that this transcendence over the self and into complete nihilism is not something which Carter achieves through reflecting on life, as Nietzsche intended, but rather through the accidental dissolution of the self through magic. The fact that this was to happen through the passionate—yet bitter—quest for beauty might however, very well have been considered redeeming features to Nietzsche. In one way, it is as if Carter's strong 'will to power' combined with the radical nihilist's 'passion before reason', by themselves, transcended the traditional rules. Or in other words: Carter's passion before reason has led to reason through passion. And just as Nietzsche once self-described himself as Europe's first complete nihilist (White 21) so does Randolph Carter when he finally passes through the ultimate gate becomes one of the first humans in Lovecraft's universe to do the same, at least in a fashion. And what is more, Carter's eventual embrace of infinite facets of himself when conversing with Yog-Sothoth is more or less the literal acceptance of

Nietzsche's demon proposing to let one relive all the pain and joy of life—or lives in Carter's case—in return for eternal life. We see then that what Carter has achieved is not only transcendence over his own life, it is the transcendence over some of the biggest challenges posed by life according to Nietzsche, and Carter, through sheer passion and adherence to Nietzschean virtues, has prevailed.

This makes Carter unique in Lovecraft's universe. He has not defeated or rid his universe of the cruel immortal beings which inhabit it, but this was never his goal to begin with. Instead he has transcended above such fears with the dissolution of his self and his old radical nihilist values by fully accepting the real universe around him. As such, he is open to be eradicated at a whim by these beings, but that is something which he has accepted, and probably must expect along with the prospect of eternal life in such a capricious universe.

Yet, as we leave him trapped inside the body of an alien wizard-creature we know that he has the determination to work for a single goal for over 10.000 years ingle goal without giving up, and as such he is more likely than not to eventually resolve the problem with the Zkauba aspect. With this, we finally see that there is the possibility of hope and growth in Lovecraft's nihilistic universe. However this is not achieved by somehow fighting and defeating the cruel immortal beings which inhabit it, rather it comes from accepting the universe's *own* inherent nihilism along with them. As such, the soul-shattering fear-factor which they—and the universe—represent is rendered moot and, like Carter, one is able to continue one's pursuits towards where one's passions drive them, no matter where they lead.

It is hard to discern if this was ever Lovecraft's intention with the Carter stories but it does help to explain why the author, not even in the end, chose to kill off the character. Perhaps he wanted to leave hope for, if not himself, then for other people similar to himself and Carter, and in doing so he created a small escape through pure passion from an otherwise entropic and cruel cosmos.

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