

# The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath Short Guide

## The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath by H. P. Lovecraft

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# Characters

Critics in general have deprecated the characterizations of *The DreamQuest of Unknown Kadath*, noting that little space is devoted to character development. Nearly all critics agree that Randolph Carter is in fact H. P. Lovecraft, himself, and that the character's rediscovery of Boston parallels Lovecraft's return to Providence after unhappy years in New York. Carter's joy at seeing the glories of Boston is taken to reflect Lovecraft's joy at seeing Providence again.

In addition to Carter, the novel is populated by a host of eccentric characters that are as bizarre as the Dream World itself. For instance, there are the cats from Ulthar, who live double lives in the waking world and the dreaming one. They keep track of their friends and help Carter when he needs them.

Too, there is Nyarlathotep, "the Crawling Chaos," an Elder God who knows the secret of unknown Kadath. The evil one tries to trap Carter and is not so much a personality as a terrible force: "For madness and the void's wild vengeance are Nyarlathotep's only gifts to the presumptuous." *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* climaxes in a confrontation of wills between Carter and the "black messenger" of the Elder Gods — between the human imagination and the anti-imagination of the "unhallowed pits whither no dreams reach."



## Social Concerns

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (1941, please see separate entry) reveals the dark aspects of Providence, but *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* reveals the bright aspects of Boston. The novel begins with Randolph Carter dreaming of a "marvellous city": "All golden and lovely it blazed in the sunset, with walls, temples, colonnades and arched bridges of veined marble, silver-basined fountains of prismatic spray in broad squares and perfumed gardens, and wide streets marching between trees and blossom-laden urns and ivory statues in gleaming rows." Carter yearns to walk in this dream-city, Kadath, and sets out on a daring quest to find it in the Dream World, a physical dimension open to the human spirit, as well as to the Elder Gods, cats, and other mystical beings. After many exotic adventures and some narrow escapes from the Elder God Nyarlathotep and his minions, "Randolph Carter leaped shoutingly awake within his Boston room. Birds sang in hidden gardens and the perfume of trellised vines came wistful from arbours his grandfather had reared. Beauty and light glowed from classic mantel and carven cornice and walls grotesquely figured." *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* makes a simple moral point: that the land of one's dreams may be one's home. This is an ancient message that has been often stated by many writers, but Lovecraft makes his point with charm and vigor. He reminds his readers — especially Americans — that their homes need but be looked at with fresh eyes to be revealed as filled with wonders, just as Boston turns out to be the "marvellous sunset city."



## Techniques

Many readers are maddened by the florid language of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, in which there is no such thing as an ordinary mountain; it must be a "fabulous unvisited mountain." The novel is populated by "spice-fragrant wharves" and "toadlike lunar blasphemies." On the other hand, the language is sometimes evocative of mystery and setting, as in "those carven sentinel mountains that squat eternally in the grey dusk." Scholars point out that the novel is only a first draft that was set aside by Lovecraft, accounting for the awkward language and obscure plot that for some mars the narrative. In spite of such complaints, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* fascinates with its evocation of a dream world in which the physical laws are governed by the imagination, and the wandering plot represents the wandering nature of dreams.

One common complaint about dream-fiction is that it spoils the reader's willing suspension of disbelief by reminding the reader that all the events are not real but just whimsically made up. For some, this problem spoils *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* because Carroll fails to encourage his readers to pretend for awhile that his fantastic world is real. Lovecraft seems to try to get around this problem by making the world of dreams the world of the dead and, most significantly, a physical place that people can bodily visit; this way, he can encourage a willing suspension of disbelief because in the context of his novel, the Dream World is a physical reality, even though its natural laws are far more flexible than those of real life.

# Themes

is an adventure of the spirit. In it, the veteran dream-quester Randolph Carter travels through colorful domains in which some but not all the physical laws of everyday life apply. He sails on a ship to the Moon, then rides back with a host of cats who leap from the Moon to Earth. While in the Dream World, Carter has a physical presence even though he is dreaming because he is in a physically real dimension of spirits. In fact, the living may physically enter the Dream World through graves and other areas of the dead.

Therefore, the Dream World is accessible through the subconscious mind when the conscious mind sleeps, through death, through traveling through the realms of the dead, such as graveyards, and through gates opened by the Elder Gods. The premise of the novel is that the human spirit is a physical reality. This means that all human beings carry part of the Dream World with them, and like Carter, they may also take trips through the Dream World. Ultimately, this means that *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* is a journey through the human imagination, which can conjure up the dark Nyarlathotep or color an everyday scene with golden light.

## Key Questions

is controversial; its fans enjoy its carefree ignoring of the laws of nature and its simple moral, but those who dislike it tend to hate it, despising its overblown language and meandering plot.

In any discussion with a diverse group of readers, both points of view are likely to be expressed. A constructive way to deal with the disagreement is to channel it in the direction of evaluating the importance of characterization, plot, and realistic events to fiction. The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath seems to simultaneously represent the best and worst of fantasy fiction, so a discussion of what makes it good for some and bad for others could bear fruit in a discussion that uses it as a focus for developing a better understanding of what combination of narrative elements makes fiction in general successful.

This direction of thought could be particularly fruitful for writers groups whose members are trying to learn how to write publishable fiction.

Lovecraft does not seem to have gotten beyond the first draft of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, which probably accounts its sometimes confusing plot. It is an effort to symbolically portray how the imagination can become reality; that is, he gives the creative process — that in real life makes imagination reality through hard work in fields as diverse as home construction and painting — a reality in which thought can instantly become action. Perhaps Lovecraft was unsatisfied with his working out of a philosophical point, something found in his other Dream World fiction; or, perhaps he set aside the novel and typical of his unprofessional attitude toward his writing, simply did not bother to polish it; or, perhaps his illness overtook him while he was working on the novel. In any case, he left an enigmatic book that encourages readers to contemplate the relationship between imagination and reality without offering straightforward answers. Its principal merit is its encouragement to readers to set their imaginations free, to explore freely where their bodies cannot go. A discussion that focuses on how the imagination can create and shape reality is likely to be a good one, but one that would be hard to keep focused. Given the nature of the novel, perhaps the discussion should not be sharply focused.

1. Cats figure prominently in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. How does Lovecraft tie the cats of the Dream World to those of our world?
2. Lovecraft provides the narrative with some of the trapping of his Cthulhu Mythos. Is this necessary?
3. Is *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* self-indulgent? Is Lovecraft just amusing himself, perhaps not intending to amuse anyone else?



4. Does the novel represent a desire to escape the modern world?
5. Is the conclusion too easy? Is the moral a point worth making? Is it made in an original way?
6. Try looking at your hometown as if you were from a faraway land. What about it would be exotic and exciting?

Can you look at it as Randolph Carter looks at Boston and with the eyes of imagination see its wonders? Could you write a story in which your surroundings become excitingly fresh, offering visitors adventure?

7. If Lovecraft's greatest literary strength is the creation of an atmosphere of mystery and adventure, how representative is *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* of his best skills? Can atmosphere account for its popular appeal?
8. If *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* is escapist literature, how successful is it? Do you wish to escape with Carter to the Dream World?
9. In *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, the world of Providence darkens as evil works its way into it through the obsessive learning of Ward, yet in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* the world brightens for Carter because of his imaginative experiences. What is Lovecraft saying about the relationship between the mind and reality? How does knowledge fit into his views?  
  
How does imagination fit in? Does he offer a coherent philosophy for how imagination functions?
10. The Dream World can be an inviting place for writers. Take one of its locales as described in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and write an adventure that takes place there, filling in details of the place and its inhabitants.



## Literary Precedents

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was said by her to have been inspired by a dream, and in much Gothic fiction, characters have visions in dreams.

In *Peter Ibbetson* (1891) by George du Maurier, Peter lives a life in dreams, preferring them to everyday life. While actually in prison, Peter inhabits an ideal dream world with the woman he loves. George Borrow referred to his fictionalized autobiographies *Lavengro* (1851) and *The Romany Rye* (1857) as a "dream of life," and his books share with *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* a wandering plot. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) made dream-world literature a staple of fiction for children. Its weird and eccentric characters echo those of Lovecraft's novel.



## Related Titles

The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, 1939 (circa 1926) is part of a nonsequential series of stories that focus on either the character Randolph Carter, the Dream World, or both: "The White Ship," 1919, short story; "Celephais," 1920, short story; "The Cats of Ulthar," 1920, short story; "The Statement of Randolph Carter," 1920, short story; "The Other Gods," 1921, short story; "The Silver Key," 1926, short story; "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," 1932, short story, with E. Hoffman Price.

With the inclusion of Nyarlathotep and mention of "the mindless daemonsultan Azathoth," The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath is part of the Cthulhu Mythos, even though it is the centerpiece of its own set of stories about Carter and the Dream World. Although the stories are commonly thought inferior to those of the Cthulhu Mythos, "The Silver Key" is popular with general readers, and "The Cats of Ulthar" has its fans. The former story focuses on the key that will open "the gate of dreams." Reading like a philosophical treatise, the story sets forth Lovecraft's views on the merits of dreaming.

# Copyright Information

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