

## Three representations of the fall in Lovecraft's dream cycle

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**Abstract.** The aim of this essay is to account for the recurrent motif of the fall and decay of human beings and to typify and connect the instances where this happens in the Dream Cycle of H.P. Lovecraft. Three short stories, 'The Other Gods', 'The Doom that Came to Sarnath' and 'The Quest of Iranon' will be analyzed in relation to the myths of Icarus, of Sodom and Gomorrah and of Eden, respectively.

**Keywords:** H.P. Lovecraft, Dream Cycle, myths, literary criticism

**Resumen.** El objetivo de este ensayo es valorar el motivo recurrente de la caída y el decadencia de los seres humanos así como tipificar y conectar los casos en que esto ocurre en el Ciclo Onírico de H.P. Lovecraft. Para ello, se analizarán tres relatos cortos, 'The Other Gods', 'The Doom that Came to Sarnath' y 'The Quest of Iranon', poniéndolos en relación con los mitos de Ícaro, de Sodoma y Gomorra y del Edén, respectivamente.

**Palabras clave:** H.P. Lovecraft, ciclo onírico, mitos, crítica literaria

### Introduction

As José Manuel Losada has put it, hell is the place for the fallen angel (2008: 254). This hell may be shown to be death, a collective massacre, the loss of innocence and of the will to live... We may not be angels, but we may also fall

and find our own hell. And so do so many mythical characters, as well as those from H.P. Lovecraft's Dream Cycle.

The fall of the humankind has been one of the most recurrent images in the history not only of myths and religious beliefs, but also of literature. Many instances abound, such as the fall of Adam and Eve from Eden, the falling of man in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* from the golden age to the iron age, etc. The consequences of the fall always lead to death or any other form of mortality: in the Eden story, Adam and Eve cease to be immortal and can be affected by illnesses; in Ovid's 'The ages of man' the world became more cruel and the men more violent with every passing age (gold to silver, to bronze, to iron), etc. The Fall, with capital letters, then, represents the decay from a state of bliss (which could be related to that of childhood, innocence or to the spring) to a state of mortality (related to the old age, experience and winter). As death is probably the most universal theme in any and every culture around the world —since it affects human experience, regardless of place or culture—, we should pay close attention to how this theme gets realized throughout literature. In this essay, I shall concern myself with showing how H.P. Lovecraft represents it in his Dream Cycle. So, as dreams are basically the representation of our innermost drives, it should be especially significant to analyze the image of the fall in a corpus of literature so full of dream symbolism.

I have already talked about analyzing some short stories by relating them to three very well-known myths about death and decay. But first of all, we should ask ourselves, what are the differences between those myths? How are they any different in describing the fall of their main characters, and why have I chosen to correlate these with Lovecraft's short stories?

The first of them, that of Icarus, tells us a story about a boy who was so proud that he ignored his father's warnings about not flying too close to the sun, thus

causing the wax on his wings to melt. He immediately fell into the sea and drowned. This is a case where one's own *hybris*, one's individual sin, propitiates one's own misery; in this case, Icarus's death.

The second myth tells us about how Sodom and Gomorrah are wiped out because of a sin in which the whole of society has incurred. It is not only one individual that is cursing himself because of his *hybris*, but of a whole group who partake of one, collective sin and who are eventually punished with death.

The last myth tells us about another fall: in this case, from a state of innocence to one of experience. At first, Adam and Eve treaded on the Eden in a state of complete bliss and ignorance; but then, after eating from the Tree of Knowledge (whose name is related to experience and opposed to innocence), they are transported to a world of misery and decay where illness and suffering abounds. In this case, it is not *hybris*, that is to say, pride, that makes the 'heroes' miserable, but their curiosity and their turning their backs on innocence. In the case of Iranon, he falls from innocence into experience by an act of *anagnorisis*.

The hypothesis being put forward in this essay is that the structure and theme of these three myths bear much resemblance to those of the three aforementioned short stories by Lovecraft: an in-depth analysis will be carried about to prove this point, while showing that this is consistent with Lovecraft's ruinous conception of life —while avoiding incurring into a biographical analysis.

### *Hybris and decay*

The relationship between 'The Other Gods' and the myth of Icarus is not a difficult one to establish, because, as S.T. Joshi puts it, this story follows a pretty basic pattern of *pathos* (1996: 227). However, there are some nuances

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which I think will be interesting to bring to light. Apart from that, and whatever the opinion of the reader might be, this correlation will serve the purpose of confirming that the representation of the fall is a very recurrent one throughout Lovecraft's work.

The *hybris* in 'The Other Gods' is the main driving force that brings the action about, as it does in Icarus's myth. The main characters of both stories were in a position where they could have chosen between a normal life without incidents, where most of their wishes would have been fulfilled -that is, they were in a state of bliss and moral virtue: Barzai was the wisest man alive and knew almost every secret the gods held, whereas Icarus could have fled from his prison with his father. Instead, their ambition—which is, after all, their *hamartia*, their tragic flaw—makes them want to have even more: Barzai wants to look at the earth's gods with his own eyes, and Icarus wants to fly as high as the sun. This is the trigger that propitiates their moral decay and, thus, their fall.

Both suffer a terrible punishment for their daring; in both cases, this punishment results—or most likely does—in death, even if in Barzai's case it is difficult to ascertain whether he's actually dead or victim of a cosmic and eternal torment.

Both characters have a cautious counterpart, the *soothsayer* or *prophet* (Frye 1957: 216), who tries to prevent them from risking their lives: Daedalus, who warns his son against flying too close to the sun, and Atal the priest, who tries to convince Barzai against the undertaking of their journey. In fact, it is the presence of those cautious characters that underline the *hamartia* in the main characters, for, had Icarus and Barzai not had anyone to warn them of the risks involved in their actions, their punishment would have been felt as undeserved, and the structure of the myth and the short story would not be that of a tragedy caused by a *hamartia*, but of one where the main characters are *pharmakos*, a random victim of unforeseeable events (Frye 1957: 41).

Now let's enter into the field of the imagery, where the elements are seen as a destructive force and an obstacle to the main characters:

In Icarus's case, the demonic imagery of fire and water, as described by Northrop Frye (1957: 150), bears much significance, as the fire of the sun is the one that melts the wax of his wings, and the water of the sea is where he drowns to death. This demonic imagery of water is present in 'The Other Gods' in the form of the deadly snow. We can see how the water, then, presents itself as an insurmountable obstacle to the fulfilling of their wishes: Icarus wants to get past the sea in order to break free from his prison, whereas the snow of Mt. Ngranek is what keeps Barzai apart from the gods he desires to see so much.

The image of winter is also present, not only in the fact that both stories are tragedies. In 'The Other Gods' it is pretty easy to see how the winter acts because of the snow and the cold, which can almost be seen as a prolepsis of what is going to happen, by turning ours into a tragic mood. However, the image of winter is more difficult to see in the Icarus story, and I have to resort to Adrian Bailey, when he says that the presence of the sun and the —literal— fall of Icarus may be related to the sunset and, thus, gives us the idea of 'the decline of the sun and the fall of the year' (1997: 124). Thus, it would be this 'winter feeling' what would set the tragic mood in both stories.

Just before the moment of the punishment, there is a moment of *anagnorisis* where both Barzai and Icarus find how wrong they were, and that moment is full of the demonic imagery described above: Barzai talks of the Other Gods as "the gods of the outer hells that guard the feeble gods of earth" and talks of "that cursed, that damnable pit" (Lovecraft 1995: 69).

### *Hybris* as cause of the collective harm

'The Doom that Came to Sarnath' has been traditionally regarded only in terms of racism (Joshi 2004: 221-222; surprisingly, against all accusations against Lovecraft, Joshi argues that he is actually condemning racial hatred in this story). But that's not all there is to it.

Sarnath is a city submerged very deep in one, original sin. In this respect it could remind us of the Eden story; but here it is not one person that is committing a sin that will haunt their descendants, but the whole of a society. The human being that came for the first time to Mnar completely eradicated the species that were living in the gray stone city of Ib before them, ignoring the fact that, a hundred years later, their descendants will be obliterated because of their bloody massacre. That is why they are so closely related to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The people from these towns were so deeply submerged in their sins that, had there been just ten upright people, God would not have destroyed it (Gn 18: 32). But there were none, and so the cities were destroyed.

What is more, in both stories the people from both societies seem to rejoice in their sin, for the clamor of Sodom and Gomorrah has grown incredibly and their sin deeply aggravated (Gn 18: 20), whereas the people from Sarnath do an annual festival in which they celebrate the destruction of Ib and despise the race they killed. This is what makes both societies unredeemable.

There is also another, almost circumstantial fact that brings both stories together, and that is their being located in a distant moment of the past. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah occurs in the Old Testament, and is in fact one of the very first of the Genesis; 'The Doom that Came to Sarnath' takes place 'in the immemorial years when the world was young'. This would put both stories

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into a sort of primeval, original state; as an instance of the primordial sins that mankind can commit.

The figure of the *soothsayer* is once again present in this myth as well, but as a more menacing presence. In the case of Sodom, they had one chance to achieve redemption, when the two angels were sent to check if the city was really as corrupted as God thought it was. After seeking refuge in Lot's house, they find that not only do the peasants have so little respect for the heaven-sent that they want to rape them, but they also completely disrespect the men's laws and traditions, for those who seek refuge under other people's roofs are to be protected by their hosts (Gn 19: 8). Right after seeing to which extent the people from Sodom had let themselves go into lust and greed, the angels command Lot to flee from the city with his family, for he is the only who is deemed an upright man. The rest of the people, after proving that they are indeed malicious and submerged into sin, are wiped out by God's wrath. In 'The Doom that Came to Sarnath' it is the figure of Taran-Ish, which warns the city of its impending doom. It is true that there is no such 'warning' in the sense that it seems that people from Sarnath could not possibly have achieved redemption; but the fact that it is not until the priests join the festivity of the destruction of Ib that Sarnath gets wiped out makes it seem that Taran-Ish's message was intended to bring fear and respect for those who were annihilated in the past.

In those stories is also present the imagery of destructive fire and water mentioned before (Frye 1957: 150).

In Genesis we are told that God made saphron and fire rain upon the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (19: 24). In San Judas, this image is repeated: it is said that Sodom and Gomorrah were punished with the eternal fire for their sins of lust (: 7). It is by fire that they were put to death, because of their moral decay. In 'The Doom that Came to Sarnath' it is water that eradicates the peasant from

Sarnath. The inhabitants of the gray stone city of Ib were inhabitants of the lake, and they worshipped Bokrug, the great water-lizard. And it is from the lake from which they once again arise to take their revenge a hundred years later. Water is present all throughout the destruction of Sarnath.

We can see, then, that no matter which element is the one that punishes those people that committed the sin; it is the natural world, which is responsible for the punishment, for the destruction of the society. The elements are presented in what Frye would call the 'demonic imagery'. But in fact the punishers could be seen as some kind of 'avengers' (in fact, the fire of Sodom and Gomorrah was sent by God himself and is, thus, 'heavenly'), insofar as they are making right that which the people from Sarnath, Sodom and Gomorrah made wrong such a long time ago. This would lead us into the imagery of the divine. But, why? It is not difficult to see the angels that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah as coming from Heaven, but the hideous inhabitants from Ib hardly seem to bear any resemblance to divine beings. However, we must consider the fact that not only do they perform the role of the 'avenger', but also that they, like the angels, come from above; more precisely, they descended from the moon in a mist. If not heavenly, at least they would have a supernatural essence, which goes beyond Lovecraft's usual materialism.

### The fall from grace

The similarities between the Eden story and 'The Quest of Iranon' are, at the same time, both clear and not very clear. They're clear in that there is a fall from grace, a passing from a state of innocence to a state of experience, which leads the main characters to their misery. They're not clear in that there seems not to



be a 'trigger' that makes Iranon deserve the punishment of falling from grace to a sin-cursed world, as he has committed no sin. I shall elaborate on this point so as to make it clear that this apparent contradiction is not such.

In the Eden story, Adam and Eve are in a state of complete bliss. They have everything they need: they are loved by God, everything is perfect. This finds a perfect correlation in Iranon's story, as his childhood had been also one of extreme beauty and happiness, or so he says. The Paradise and Iranon's childhood, and his remembrance of it, are basically one and the same. This becomes especially clear when we are told that "a blind man said he saw a nimbus over the singer's head"; this apocalyptic imagery used to describe Iranon is consistent with the description of Aira: the "golden lights", the "houses of marble", the "verdant valley", the "green gardens with cerulean pools and crystal fountains", and, finally, "Aira, the magic city of marble and beryl, splendid in a robe of golden flame" (73-4). Also, Aira's beauty is such that "Aira's beauty is past imagining, and none can tell of it without rapture" (74). It is important to stress at this point that the correlation is not between the Eden and Aira, but between the Eden and Iranon's conception and daydreaming of Aira, so, for as long as Iranon still believes in the existence of Aira, he is still in Eden. That is why, even after the passing of many years, "Iranon was always the same [...]" So it came to pass one day that Romnod seemed older than Iranon" (76). Iranon not only looks younger, he *is* younger, he *is* always the same. "Iranon stayed ever young" (77).

Then, Adam and Eve did what they were not meant to: they took the apple from the Tree of Knowledge so as to gain God's wisdom; they dared to venture further than they should. Their punishment was to be transported to a sin-cursed world where death, old age and misery abound. This does not seem to have an exact correlate in Iranon's story, but I shall leave this point for a later analysis.

Finally, illness and death befall Adam and Eve, as it does Iranon; both die because of their falling from their state of innocence and bliss to one of utter misery, because of the miseries of the 'real world'. We shall concentrate on this term.

In the Eden myth, we should remember that the story is told in an anagogic level and that the apocalyptic imagery, that of the world as representation, is to be found everywhere. We could call this story an 'allegory of the fall', for it explains, through metaphors and a mythical structure, the presence of evil and illness as caused by the very actions of man. The gorgeous garden imagery with which the Eden is described goes to show Nature unspoiled, the perfection of the world before it was ruined by man. But then, Man's corruption, Man's ambition to hold the same place and have the same power as God ruined the world, turned it into a dark, terrible place. Everything that there is of evil in this world is basically our fault.

Then we have Iranon's mind. He was born a beggar's child, as revealed at the end of the short story. He probably has had a very rough life; at least we can ascertain that he has had to deal with close-minded people who lived only to toil or to give themselves in to sinful pleasures. In this sense, it is Iranon's mind that is reminiscent of Eden, as it remains in a state of complete bliss, of utter innocence, even if the world around him is a 'fallen', a 'sin-cursed' world; even if everyone around him is subjected to illness, death (as his friend who died because of drinking) and toil. He is free from all that, because he *is* in Eden. He does not only look young, he actually *is* young because, in his Eden-like mind, he thinks he is. The correlation of Eden is not with the dreamlands, but with Iranon's mind, which 'magically' preserves all his qualities, because that is how the story is constructed. But then, exactly, what was that caused the fall?

The taking of the apple by Adam and Eve could be considered as a moment of *anagnorisis*. It is not exactly the fact that they ate the apple that caused the fall, but the fact that, in doing so, God recognized them as 'traitors', as people ambitious enough to try to be like him. In this act of taking the apple, God recognized Adam and Eve's nature as one of greed and deceitfulness or, at the very least, of disobedience. Thus, it was this act of *anagnorisis* from a higher authority (God) that made the individuals (Adam and Eve) fall. In this analogy, we can call God the Super Ego and Adam and Eve the ego, if we like.

In 'The Quest of Iranon', these actors are all concentrated on one individual: Iranon. It is not the committing of a sin that causes his downfall, but also an act of *anagnorisis*: when the old man tells Iranon that he was but a beggar's boy who spouted all that nonsense about Aira, he recognizes the truth, that is, that his state of blissfulness was one based on lies. Then, his Eden crumbles before the higher authority: himself, his very own reason, the understanding of the fact that what the old man is telling him is true when he looks at himself in the waters of the lake. His reason (which could be identified as the Super Ego in as much as it is related to a external 'factual truth', i.e., the old man's testimony and the lake's reflection) makes his individual (ego) self falls, and so he finally sees himself as an old man in rugged clothes. His state of innocence has turned into one of experience and demise because of an act of recognition.

The fact that the three actors in the Eden myth are reduced to just one in Lovecraft's story may cause some confusion, and the first thing we may think is that it is due to the author's strong beliefs in individuality, which makes every other character seem not even clearly delimited. This is a story about Iranon, and all the action is not only concentrated, but actually caused by him. But there is also another explanation.

According to Bailey, some scholars have identified the snake in the Genesis as Eve himself (1997: 152). If this was the case, there would also be an act of self-destruction: she contained within herself the 'seed' that would cause hers and Adam's fall—as we all do, after all, as we drift from a state of innocence into one of experience—, as did Iranon. It was the Tree of Knowledge, i.e., wisdom and maturity—and thus the maturity of the fruit would represent the maturity of Eve—, which provoked their demise. The Tree, then, would be identified with the old man in 'The Quest of Iranon' as the trigger that gave the main characters the knowledge to make them fall into a world of experience and decay.

## Conclusion

Few beings have ever been so impregnated, pierced to the core, by the conviction of the absolute futility of human aspiration. The universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles. A figure in transition towards chaos. That is what will finally prevail. The human race will disappear. Other races in turn will appear and disappear. The skies will be glacial and empty, traversed by the feeble light of half-dead stars. These too will disappear. Everything will disappear. And human actions are as free and as stripped of meaning as the unfettered movements of the elementary particles [...] All that exists is egotism. Cold, intact and radiant.  
(Houellebecq 1991: 32)

This statement by Michel Houellebecq perfectly summarizes the whole of Lovecraft's work. He was pessimistic and deeply attached to his childhood. 'He recognized in his own strange affections for graveyards and old buildings, his aversion to other human beings' (Tyson 2010: 80). It is no wonder that most of his works deal with hopelessness, horror and death.

So, if myths are the universal representation of the human being's innermost perceptions of reality, and literary works the personal interpretation of myths, we can expect that the works of H.P. Lovecraft contain the most pessimistic representation of human experience possible. Thus it is not strange that the works analyzed—as well as many other—contain the prevailing motif of the fall of mankind, for life is meaningless and may only lead us into mortality and death.

The psychoanalyst may even argue that Lovecraft's pessimistic attitude has a lot to do with his traumatic experiences. It is not difficult to argue that it was his painful transition from childhood to adulthood—which even led to a mental breakdown that lasted for five years (Joshi 2004: 81), during which he slept all day and walked around all night in his dressing gown (Houellebecq 1991: 30)—that led him to write 'The Quest of Iranon' in 1921. For, is it not this moment, this passing from an ideal, happy childhood to an unsatisfying adulthood through a traumatic event, easily relatable to the fall from Eden to the sin-cursed world? The relation between Iranon and H.P. Lovecraft is not a difficult one to make. And the same happens with most of the characters from the Dream Cycle.

In 'The Silver Key' (1926), Randolph Carter becomes fed up with life at the age of thirty-one—the same age Lovecraft had when his mother died (Joshi 2004: 256). This had caused Lovecraft not only to feel fed up with the world, but actually to contemplate suicide (Lovecraft, quoted on Joshi 2004: 256). The conclusion of the story is that the main character finds the way back to his childhood—exactly the same that Lovecraft would wish to do.

In 'Celephäis' (1920), the main character, Kuranos, becomes completely unable to live in the 'real world' and instead begins to take drugs in order to spend as much time as possible in the Dreamlands, where he finally gets to live forever more while his mortal body dies. In my opinion, this story goes to show that

Lovecraft actually wanted to live, but that he did not find himself suited for the 'real' world. That is why he constructed the Dreamlands, which are but the representation of the symbols and myths he digested and reconstructed in his childhood, when he 'acquired a half-sincere belief in the old gods and nature-spirits' (Lovecraft 1922, quoted on Tyson 2010: 21).

That is why I chose the theme of myths to analyze H.P. Lovecraft's Dream Cycle. Because his life experience is so imbricated in his literature that one feels the need to relate his stories with the most basic and meaningful patterns of experience of the humankind.

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Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Dra. Margarita Carretero Gonzalez for her aid, support and guide while I was writing this essay and for relying on me, as well as the whole of the English Department of the University of Granada and the Vicerrectorado de Política Científica e Investigación for granting me the scholarship with which I was able to undertake this project. Without the help of them all, this essay could not have been done.