

The Interpretation of Dreams Part 1: Method and Materials

“Humanity has in the course of time had to endure from the hands of science two great outrages upon its naive self-love. The first was when it realized that our earth was not the center of the universe, but only a tiny speck in a world-system of a magnitude hardly conceivable; this is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus, although Alexandrian doctrines taught something very similar. The second was when biological research robbed man of his peculiar privilege of having been specially created, and relegated him to a descent from the animal world, implying an ineradicable animal nature in him: this transvaluation has been accomplished in our own time upon the instigation of Charles Darwin, Wallace, and their predecessors, and not without the most violent opposition from their contemporaries. But man’s craving for grandiosity is now suffering the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavoring to prove to the ‘ego’ of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind. We psychoanalysts were neither the first nor the only ones to propose to mankind that they should look inward; but it appears to be our lot to advocate it most insistently and to support it by empirical evidence which touches every man closely.”-- *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1915-17)

Exploratory Questions

- Why do we want to understand and explain ourselves? Is it a necessary activity?
- How does the search for mental health already recognize an anthropology and, therefore, an ethic?
- How do we recognize symptoms? How do we determine what they are to begin with?
- What constitutes representation of something?
- How do we know when we’ve represented (stood for or presented) something or person?

Three Phases in the Development of Freud’s Theory

- I. *Unconsciousness-Preconsciousness-Consciousness* (1895-1919): Freud’s “first topography,” which grows out of his energy model of the human psyche, is focused on the tensions and releases within the individual psyche. *The Interpretation of Dreams* is within the first phase.
- II. *Id-Ego-Superego* (1920-1939): Freud’s “second topography” is actually developed midway through his career, and he first mentions it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Here, the internal tension of the inner psyche must now adjust to the demands that the instinctive drives and the larger society place upon it.
- III. *Eros, Thanatos, Ananke* (1927-1939): In some ways this third phase is concurrent with the second, but it begins to develop its full cultural power with *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and its Discontents*. Here, Freud uses the three mythic figures of Sex, Death, and Determinism as powerful forces that war with one another, not only in the psyche, but also in all aspects of human culture.

General Observations on His Method

- 1) Classicism: Freud’s used the opening chapter to show not only his knowledge of past theory and ideas, but also his classical education and Western training. He also showed this throughout the book with various allusions. Why did he do so? In part, as a cultured Jew to show his rightfully place in German and European society; in part, to also convince his readers that as a man of culture, he was to be trusted.

- 2) Autobiography: How much does Freud keep his reader's interest through personal narrative? Freud's use of his personal dreams, while ostensibly as evidence for his theories, also act as stories about life, as kinds of gossip and diversion. (e.g.'s.. the political scatology dream; his dream of Rome; his love-hate feelings toward Catholicism.)
- 3) Words: His love of word play includes favoring the means of the word over that of the image. Freud tends to assume that pictures are a subordinate means of explanation, while words can more readily manifest our various drives—without them we cannot say what the representation is.
- 4) Narrative and Memory: The various elements of fear, desire, anxiety, jealousy, and so forth are uncovered within a narration of remembered events. They make “sense” as evidence, as stimuli, because they are set within a context and personal events.
- 5) Interiority: Despite Freud's later boast that along with Copernicus and Darwin, he was displacing the self-assurance of the rational self, his work cannot exist without its predecessors—Rousseau, Descartes, and even Augustine. The “turn inward” has a long historical past behind it. The irony is that Freud's claim is to discover that the self is not the purveyor of truth, yet to do so, he must treat its narratives as symptomatic.
- 6) Motivation: Actions have “motives,” that is they have causes, often latent and repressed. The desire within the dream manifests in certain complex manners.
- 7) Archaeology: A backwards search from the manifest to latent, Freud begins with the symptoms and reads back towards their latent causation. This also involves the collecting of material, yet often material he expects to find in some form. Ironically, the latent becomes more known in analysis than does the manifest, which is finally only a signature of the more hidden depths. The pattern is always one of unmaking the manifestation's illusions.
- 8) Puzzling: The need to decipher and explain, the need for “a fresh discovery” (174), evinces a fear of mystery. The surreality of dreams typically ends in the mundane, the ordinary, the banal and the shabby of everyday life or perverse underlife.
- 9) Biologism: His Darwinian assumptions of our “dark genesis.” We are reduced beings, no longer (for never) the image of God. We are driven by evolved desires that mask our pretense of reason.

A General Critique of His Method

His conclusion (or premise) is that no dream material is without meaning or significance. All dreams are wish-fulfillments, even when not obviously the case. This raises the issue of evidence and theory. Freud's method has a heavy confirmation bias. The theory and practice readily (and too easily) absorb any counter-examples. The very fluidity of the signs in dreams allows one to fit them into the theory with so many transformations. Even details that seem inconsequential can become highly significant as they are transformed within the interpretative schema. Wish-fulfillment that is not obviously so, is either condensed or displaced, and thus, concealed and repressed, and has its ultimate source (and non-spatial location) in the tension and shame of childhood, even infancy. Is it really possible, then, to confirm or deny Freud's theory if no true counter-evidence can be summoned, if no true control group can be found? Freud's seems to employ the wish to sleep as a kind of covering case, one that he will eventually replace with his concept of the superego.

Additional Criticisms of Freud's Account

"It must be admitted that Freudian [literary] criticism too easily degenerates into a grotesque Easter-egg hunt: find the devouring mother, detect the inevitable castration anxiety, listen, between the syllables of verse, for the squeaking bedsprings of the primal scene."—Frederick Crews

1. The suggestibility of the patient and the temptation to guide the patient to a particular interpretation or a particular set of evidence.
2. The debatability of dream-meaning itself would suggest that it is difficult or impossible to establish a meaning that arises before the individual's interpretation.
3. His tendency to generalization means that Freud often overlooks particulars or counter-evidence..
4. The problem of Freud's gender bias; his often unartful, even sexist assumptions about women and their dreams are now acknowledged as mostly wrong.
5. The more general problem of assuming that sexual obsession is at the heart of hysterics, neurosis, or even general human existence displaces too easily other considerations such as the will to make meaning, the need for power and affirmation, the need for order and harmony, etc.
6. His assumption that strong emotion is in need of regulation and suppression itself shows a particular long-standing Western bias.
7. The quasi-religious nature of his anti-religious attitudes are often noted.
8. Modern REM-dream neurology has advanced since his time---dreaming has uses from information processing to emotional release to creative thinking.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Freud reject about the symbolic and cipher methods of dream interpretation? (157-158). How does he, nonetheless, employ them in part? (cf. 162)
2. Why is free association a necessary technique for Freud's purposes? (160ff.)
3. Look back through his dream analysis on pages 164-175. What does he reveal about himself in the process? Does some of this escape his analysis?
4. What makes the dream of convenience an example of Freud's theory of wish-fulfillment?
5. What makes anxiety-dreams a seeming challenge to his theory? How does he absorb them into his approach? (185ff.)
6. Explain the analogy of dream censorship and substitution with that of the political writer (190-192).
7. What function does the notion of identification serve? (195-196)
8. Explain the following: "*The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish*" (203).
9. What are Freud's categories of dream significance? (217)
10. Do you find Freud's libidinal readings of objects convincing? Why and/or why not? (219ff.)
11. What do Freud's dreams of Rome and of Hannibal reveal about himself? Is this the only way to read such dreams? How important is the personal desire and context for such readings? (225-229)
12. How important are stimuli to Freud's theory? (244ff.)
13. What role does narrative play in making even strange dreams intelligible? (cf. 252)
14. Is Freud correct to conclude that all dreams are convenience dreams in that they repress reality? (255-256)
15. Is the embarrassment at nakedness dream as typical as Freud's suggests? (260ff.)
16. Why does Freud use Oedipus Rex and Hamlet to illustrate his theories about childhood sibling rivalry and childhood jealousy of opposite sex parents? (263-278)