

A Beginners Guide to Dream Interpretation

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Dream interpretation is the process of assigning meaning to dreams. Usually done by the individual after a particularly memorable dream, there are times when a dream is seen as important but unclear or confusing for the dreamer - so a professional dream analyzer is asked to give meaning and context to a dream in order to help the dreamer understand the message.

Although dreaming is something experienced by just about everyone, the determination of the meaning of dreams has changed considerably over the history of human development, as have the roles of those interpreting them.

In many of the ancient societies, including Egypt and Greece, dreaming was considered a supernatural communication or a means of divine intervention, whose message could be unraveled by those with certain powers.

The ancient Greek's constructed temples they called Asclepieions, where sick people were sent to be cured. It was believed that cures would be affected through divine grace through dreams experienced within their confines. Dreams were also considered prophetic or omens of particular significance

Probably the best know example of prophetic dreams in the western world is the dreams of Joseph in the Old Testament where his dreams of seven starving cows eating seven fat, wed fed cows was correctly interpreted by the Pharaoh of Egypt as indicating that Egypt would enjoy 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of drought and deprivation.

In ancient Egypt, priests rather than Pharaohs acted as dream interpreters, which again reinforced the connection to spirit and higher power which was reflected in so many dreams being included in the original version of the bible and other spiritual texts.

However in the 19th Century Dream interpretation was taken up by the secular/medical community - particularly those branching into the relatively new area of psychoanalysis during the end of the 19th Century.

Psychoanalysts became less interested in the idea of "higher message" of dreams and more focused on the idea that dreams were a way for the human psyche to communicate to itself. In other words, during our sleeping state our natural psychological defenses are at their lowest and our fears, unpopular beliefs or denied feelings are able to come to the surface through the mechanism of dreaming.

Psychoanalysts studied dreaming more scientifically than had ever been the case before and started to draw clear correlations between symbols in dreams and commonly held beliefs, fears or feelings.

In layman's terms the *manifest* content of a dream – that which is perceived in the dream, is analyzed to reveal the *latent* content of a dream - the underlying thoughts of the dream or the reasons why it was dreamt. One of the seminal works on the subject is *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud.

In modern times Freud has been oft attacked for his misogynist attitude towards women and sexual freedom, but as with everything, in this he was simply a product of his times which was the ultra repressive Victoria era. Much of what Freud had to say about dreams was enlightening and he helped develop the bridge between conscious and subconscious imagery that is still used in dream analysis today.

In Freud's most developed theory he argued that the foundation of all dream content is the fulfillment of wishes, conscious or not. The theory explains that the schism between *superego* and *id* leads to "censorship" of dreams. The unconscious would "like" to depict the wish fulfilled wholesale, but the preconscious cannot allow it — the wish (or wishes) within a dream is thus disguised, and, as Freud argues, only an understanding of the structure of the dream-work can explain the dream. In every dream in which he attempts to do so, he is able to establish a multitude of wishes on a variety of levels — conscious wishes for the immediate future.

Freud listed four transformations applied to wishes in order to avoid censorship:

- *Condensation* — one dream object stands for several thoughts
- *Displacement* — a dream object's psychological importance is assigned to an object that does not raise the censor's suspicions
- *Representation* — a thought is translated to visual images
- *Symbolism* — a symbol replaces an action, person, or idea

These transformations help to disguise the *latent* content, transforming it into the *manifest* content, what is actually seen by the dreamer.

The basis for all of these systems, he claimed, was "transference", in which a would-be censored wish of the unconscious is given undeserved "psychical energy" (the quantum of attention from consciousness) by attaching to "innocent" thoughts.

He claimed that the counterintuitive nature of nightmares represented a clash between the super-ego and the id: the id wishes to see a past wish fulfilled, while the super-ego cannot allow it; he interprets the anxiety of a nightmare as the super-ego working against the id. (He further claimed that in nearly all cases these anxious dreams are products of infantile,

sexual memories but let's not focus on this as it says more about Freud than anything else ☺.)

Freud is careful to argue that the wishes are not revealed in dream analysis for the sake of conscious fulfillment, but instead for conscious resolution of the inner conflict. His relaxed attitude towards what could be seen as "depravity" in the unconscious is summed up in Plato's words: "the virtuous man is content to *dream* what a wicked man really *does*"

According to his theory, the most basic desires come from the "id", the childlike portion of the unconscious, and as such often contained material that would be unacceptable to the super-ego. As the text was written relatively early in his career, he does not use the terms "ego" and "id", but rather "preconscious" and "unconscious", respectively. These terms themselves are not introduced until the seventh chapter of the book, until which his system of dream interpretation is incrementally constructed and argued.

Freud arrived at his theory of dreams by research (though he rejects much of the prior work), self-analysis, and psychoanalysis of his patients, as his theory developed, Freud often used dream interpretation to treat his patients, calling dreams "The royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind"

Dream analyst Carl Jung disagreed with this reading of dream communication. He did not believe that the dreams were deliberately contradictory and confusing but rather had their own determined language which connected to a higher communication model which was universal.

Although he did not dismiss Freud's model of dream interpretation wholesale, he believed that Freud's notion of dreams as representations of unfulfilled wishes, to be simplistic and naive. Jung was convinced that the scope of dream interpretation was larger, reflecting the richness and complexity of the entire unconscious, both personal and collective. Jung believed the psyche to be a self regulating organism in which conscious attitudes were likely to be compensated for unconsciously (within the dream) by their opposites.

Jung believed that archetypes such as the animus, the anima, the shadow and others - manifested themselves in dreams, as dream symbols or figures. Such figures could take the form of an old man, a young maiden or a giant spider as the case may be. Each represents an unconscious attitude that is largely hidden to the conscious mind, not, as Freud believed, directly interfered with by the conscious ego.

Although an integral part of our own psyche, these manifestations were largely autonomous and are perceived by the dreamer to be external personages.

Jung believed that material repressed by the conscious mind, postulated by Freud to comprise the unconscious, was similar to his own concept of the shadow - which in itself is only a small part of the unconscious. The Shadow was the possibly negative elements in own psyche which can challenge or obstruct us if not properly understood and developed.

Jung cautioned against blindly ascribing meaning to dream symbols without a clear understanding of the client's personal situation. Although he acknowledged the universality of archetypal symbols, he contrasted this with the concept of a sign - images having a one to one connotation with their meaning. His approach was to recognise the dynamism and fluidity that existed between symbols and their ascribed meaning. Symbols must be explored for their personal significance to the patient, instead of having the dream conform to some predetermined idea.

This prevents dream analysis from devolving into a theoretical and dogmatic exercise that is far removed from the patient's own psychological state. In the service of this idea, he stressed the importance of "sticking to the image" - exploring in depth a client's association with a particular image.

This may be contrasted with Freud's free associating which he believed was a deviation, from the salience of the image. He would expect the dreamer to have some associations with this image, and the professed lack of any perceived significance or familiarity whatsoever should make one suspicious. Jung would ask a patient to imagine the image as vividly as possible and to explain it to him in their own words with their own context. Jung stressed the importance of context in dream analysis.

Jung believed the dream was not merely a devious puzzle invented by the unconscious to be deciphered, so that the 'true' causal factors behind it may be elicited. Dreams were not to serve as lie detectors, with which to reveal the insincerity behind conscious thought processes. Instead dreams are a mish mash of several elements which need to be sifted in order to find the most important elements.

These elements may contain ineluctable truths, philosophical pronouncements, illusions, wild fantasies, memories, plans, irrational experiences and even telepathic visions. Just as the psyche has a diurnal side which we experience as conscious life, it has an unconscious nocturnal side which we apprehend as dreamlike fantasy. Jung would argue that just as we do not doubt the importance of our conscious experience, then we ought not to second guess the value of our unconscious lives.

Modern Interpretation

In 1953, Calvin S. Hall developed a theory of dreams in which dreaming is considered to be a cognitive process. Hall argued that a dream was simply a thought or sequence of

thoughts that occurred during sleep, and that dream images are visual representations of personal conceptions only.

In other words Hall linked the actual events in dreams to the current situation of the dreamer themselves. This made the interpretation of dreams far more personalized and distinctive, based on the beliefs, circumstances and experiences of the dreamer, rather than universal archetypal imagery.

For example, if one dreams of being attacked by friends, this may be a manifestation of fear of friendship in general, or could relate to an actual situation where a person is feeling unsure of a particular friend's loyalty, or could indicate a sense that they have lost trust in a social group to support them in a difficult upcoming situation. The interpretation is far more reliant on the dreamer linking the dream to a current circumstance or issue.

His ideas were linked to Jungian Psychology but rejected the idea that telepathic or prophetic elements could exist in the dream state or that there was a higher "subconscious language" which needed to be learned in order to understand a dream.

In more modern times dream analysis has linked dream and dream images back to spirituality and connection to higher consciousness.

Edgar Cayce is an example. Cayce claimed that through dreaming, people are given access to their spirit, and further, that all possible questions could be answered from the inner consciousness given the proper awareness.

This branch of dream analysis was more useful in determining and considering prophetic and lucid dreaming where images or elements of dreams came "true" in some way during the dreamers waking life.

Prophetic dreams have been recorded around such historic moments as The Sinking of The Titanic in 1908 and the destruction of New York's Twin Towers in 2001. However much controversy still surrounds this area of dream analysis and most writings still focus more on the psychological, and now spiritual, revelations available through dream imagery.

The spiritual aspect of dreaming is not new however, deriving most of its understanding and framework from the shamanic vision quests of indigenous peoples of America, Africa and Australia. Dream images and visions were routinely used to mark a rite of passage for members of certain tribes and connect them to their higher purpose, life paths or guardian/totem entities.

Animals, ancestors and archetypal imagery were common in vision quests or totem meditations and rituals. Because of their universal accessibility for the questor and the

tribal elders, simply meaning all people involved in the quest would have a shared understanding and knowledge of these images, it made discussion and interpretation of these images much easier.

Jung connected to these same ideas in his “universal unconscious” theory in the 1800’s although he focused more on the more modern connection of human archetypes and symbols which were more acceptable and familiar to city dwelling people after the industrial age.

The shamanistic model of dream work gained popularity in the consciousness movement through the work of two dream researchers and authors, Ariadne Green and Stanley Krippner. In Ariadne Green’s model outlined in her book *Ariadne’s Book of Dreams*.

According to Green, dreams are viewed as coming from three interior worlds, the upper world, lower world and the middle world, honoring the indigenous shaman’s perspective on the terrain of the soul.

Some dream characters are viewed as messengers who bring insights and gifts of wisdom from the divine realms while others enter the stage to bring new insights into the dreamer’s personality. Animals in dreams are viewed as powerful archetypes from the lower world that initiate the dreamer and lend spiritual power and healing potentials.

Whether you use the traditional, Freudian, Jungian or Shamanistic analysis model, the interpretation of dreams is ineffective if it does not include the modality of the dreamer, rather than the interpreter.

Just as Jung understood that forest animals and ancestor symbols would not resonant with the people of post industrialized Europe, so too is it important to gain an understanding and insight into the belief systems, experiences and current environment of the modern dreamer. After all the dreams are designed to speak to them, in a language and context which is framed by their understanding, so it is essential that the modern dream analyzer respects and honors the dreamers individual experience and perspective in any analysis.

Individual dream analysis is available by Gabianne through the Mysterys By Mail website. Contact gabianne@mysterysbymail.com.au for more information.