



## **DREAMS: ARE THEY THE ROYAL ROAD TO YOUR UNCONSCIOUS?**

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Dreams have always been a source of mystery for me. I have always had vivid dreams, full of rich imagery, metaphor and emotion. When talking about my dreams to family, friends and colleagues, I have tried to decode them, understand them and pull apart their meaning, waiting for them to reveal hidden truths about me and my life, past, present and future. However, I am often left wondering whether my dreams have any 'real' meaning, or whether they are just a by-product of the day to day mental processing which is essential to the upkeep and maintenance of our brains.

Throughout history, different cultures have had different relationships with dreams. For example, in Europe during the middle ages, dreams were a source of temptation or associations with the devil. Yet within Islam and Christianity dreams are seen as divine intervention. Neurological explanations of dreams suggest they assist with memory formation, problem solving or are a product of random brain activation. Whilst psychotherapists such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Fritz Perls have focused on the interpretation of dreams and how they have a significant and personal meaning - the meaning and purpose of dreams have been debated for time immemorial.

For me, both professionally and personally, I see dreams as a way of processing our day to day lives, as well as giving us a glimpse of our hopes, fears, desires



and fantasies – some of which might be difficult to accept or acknowledge in our waking lives.

One of the theories I find most fascinating is Freud's dream theory which is based on his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). The underlying belief within Freud's dream theory, is that dreams can put the dreamer in touch with parts of the self which are usually concealed during waking life, symbolism being of central importance. Freud stated that dreams were the "royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" Freud (1900).

### **Freud's Topographical model**

To understand Freud's dream theory, we must first understand Freud's topographical model of the mind. Freud developed a topographical model of the mind, where he structured the mind into three different parts. The three hypothetical levels within the mind are:

- system unconscious,
- system preconscious and,
- system conscious.



Freud used the analogy of an iceberg to describe these three levels. First came the conscious, which was above sea level. Then, below the surface of the sea was the preconscious, and then below that was the unconscious at the deepest, lowest level.

### *System Unconscious*

The unconscious is believed to contain all sorts of significant and disturbing material which is too threatening to acknowledge fully, and therefore needs to be kept out of awareness. There is no way of knowing what is stored in the unconscious mind without the help of a psychotherapist, and consists of wishes, fantasies and desires, which are usually infantile in nature. This mental process is picture like and completely illogical.

### *System Preconscious*

This subsection contains thoughts and feelings that a person is currently unaware of, but which can easily be brought into consciousness. It exists between the unconscious and conscious. The preconscious is like a mental waiting room so to speak, in which thoughts remain until they 'succeed in attracting the eye of the conscious' (Freud, 1924, p. 306).



Within the preconscious, words can be linked to mental images, which can then be available to consciousness. However, for the unconscious material to enter the system preconscious, it must pass through a censor. The task of the censor is to act like a buffer and to decide which thoughts can be put into words, and which should not enter this stage, protecting the conscious mind from distressing or painful thoughts.

### *System Conscious*

The conscious mind is probably the easiest to understand of all three systems. The conscious mind consists of all mental processes of which we are aware of and is seen as the tip of the iceberg. Another censor lies between the preconscious and the conscious mind and has been referred to as the “gatekeeper of consciousness”.

### **Freud’s dream theory**

Freud’s topographical model suggests that a metaphorical censor protects the consciousness from repressed wishes, desires and fantasies. These repressed wishes are assumed by Freud to be infantile in nature and are unacceptable individual needs or ideas. However, during sleep this buffer is weakened, and censorship is compromised.



Therefore, infantile wishes filter through in a disguised form since the censor is only partially alert and active. These unconscious infantile wishes, desires and fantasies are heavily disguised to protect the dreamer from anxiety and enable the dreamer to remain asleep.

### **Dream work**

Freud explained that there are two different types of content within dreams, the latent content, and the manifest content. The latent content is the underlying, unconscious feelings and thoughts. The manifest content is made up of a combination of the latent thoughts and the images being seen in the dream. The latent content allows our hidden thoughts from our unconscious to be unlocked and eventually become conscious.

“The task of dream interpretation is to unravel what the dream-work has woven.” SIGMUND FREUD

According to Freud, a process called “dream-work” (in German known as Traumwerk) enables the dreamer to remain asleep and dream of disguised unfulfilled wishes and allows unconscious thoughts to be transferred into consciousness. This process of dream-work can be



analysed to study the manifest content of the dream, so that one can understand what the latent content is trying to convey. Dream-work consists of five sub-processes:

### *Displacement*

This refers to the role of symbols in dreams where something appears in a dream as a substitute for something or someone else involved in the wish.

### *Condensation*

This refers to when one thing or person represents many things, and they have been condensed into one thing.

### *Consideration of representability*

This means that something is transformed to have concrete representation.

### *Secondary vision*

This is where the dream is tied up to appear like a narrative or story, so that it is logical and acceptable.



## *Symbolism*

This is where something or someone acts as a symbol for something else.

### **To dream or not to dream?**

Although Freud provides some useful insight into the world of dreams, for me his explanations rely too heavily on his sexual theories. I agree that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious and have latent and manifest content. However, I am reluctant to accept that our dreams are limited to expressing the Oedipus and Electra complexes as Freud suggests.

When I have explored my dreams, they indeed appear to be heavily disguised in symbolism and metaphor. My dreams are normally woven with the day's events, and the events in my past, combined with a rich tapestry of mixed emotions.

One of the most helpful and interesting things I have done throughout different periods of my life is to keep a dream diary. The curious thing about reading back my dreams, is that I can still remember dreaming those dreams. I can remember the feelings and sensations I felt in the



dreams, as though I was experiencing them first hand. And sometimes, I have an aha moment because my dream makes total sense of where I was during that period of my life.

I may still not be any closer to understanding the function or purpose of my dreams, but for one thing I am sure- my dreams offer me something different to my day to day reality. They offer me a creative and imaginative way to connect with myself, which can only be a good thing in this sometimes grey world.

## References

Freud, S. (1900) *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by Joyce Crick in 1999. Oxford University Press.

Freud, S. (1924). *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Joan Riviere.