

DREAMS

There is some material on dreams in other files on this web site – especially those about the theories of Freud and Jung. This file, however, is a general, simple introduction into my own opinions about what dreams are and what they are for.

What are Dreams? My opinion.

Dreams are simply mental events. Memories – of the distant past, of the immediate past, arguably, sometimes, of the future. Thoughts, feelings, scenes, scenarios, stories. Sometimes very like waking reality, sometimes bizarre, sometimes scary or negative, sometimes peaceful and helpful. But events that are taking place **inside** the psyche. The really curious thing about dreams is that ego-consciousness (the waking 'I' of the psyche) is occasionally present and can view the dream material. I think of this as a great privilege. And I see dream material as being like a gigantic water wheel, made up of memories, visions, archetypes – whatever – slowly rotating in the psyche and glimpsed periodically: so, at any one time, you may see one of an enormous number of possible themes or scenes. The wheel may get a little stuck when you are having a recurrent dream but, more usually, the same theme or scene will be seen only at relatively long, and apparently arbitrary, intervals. I also believe that it is often a mistake to think that dreams have some **purpose** in showing themselves. As if there were another ego in the unconscious mind trying deliberately to tell us something. I think that we can learn a lot from observing our dreams – but the dream material itself is simply **there**.

Other Theories about What Dreams are.

These theories generally come from dream labs and from therapists who try to interpret their clients' dreams. For example, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, who each examined around 40,000 dreams during analysis. These guys knew their stuff (but see below).

Dreams are junk. Material from the day, or unwanted older material, seen as it is thrown out.

Dreams are Material from the day being stored. Material from the day being taken for a walk down the memory banks. So that, when you see such a dream, you see the recent material plus, perhaps, the older stored material that current material is being integrated with.

Dreams are continuations of waking thinking. (Alfred Adler's theory) Dreams like this seem to be seen during the earliest parts of the night's sleeping and just before awakening. The most famous example of this sort of thing is the story of Kekule, the 'inventor' of organic chemistry. Organic chemistry is based on knowing about glucose and similar chemicals. These are made up of **rings** of carbon atoms attached to one another. In Kekule's day it wasn't known that such molecules existed and scientists couldn't explain the behaviour of organic molecules (for example, glucose). One night, while working on this problem, Kekule had a dream. A part of this dream consisted of six snakes moving about. Suddenly each snake seized the tail of the snake in front of it in its mouth, thus forming a ring. Kekule woke with the realization that glucose had a ring structure. Most 'thinking' dreams are much simpler than this of course.

Dreams are repressed sexual drives or memories. (Sigmund Freud's theory) Freud believed that humans are motivated by irrepressible drives, especially sex. And that these demand expression. But we forbid the expression of much of this material. Many memories (for example of childhood sexuality) are also forbidden. So forbidden drives and memories are **repressed** – made permanently unconscious. These then express themselves unconsciously – in part at least in dreams. So dreams represent repressed sexuality – often (rather illogically) still disguised.

Dreams are all of this PLUS. (Carl Jung's theory). Jung didn't deny that all of the above theories were true of **some** dreams. But only some. He also thought that dreams could, at times, be manifestations of what he called the collective unconscious. He theorized (on the basis of observing the dreams of both severely psychotic and mentally healthy patients and clients) that the unconscious mind has two levels.

The first level (the personal unconscious) contains memories from one's life – rather as described by Freud. Including our **complexes** – feeling-toned bits of psychic material. Our personal mother complex, for example. The second level – the collective unconscious – contains the archetypes (see also Jungian theory described elsewhere). There are instinctive abilities to respond to universal human situations. To create a mother complex, for example. The archetypal great mother, then, lurks underneath the personal mother complex. All this is described in more detail in the files under Jungian Theory, von Franz and Fairytales. But, to be a little simplistic, Jung thought that we can see the great archetypal stories in our dreams. We may see, or take part in, the myth of the hero, or see the great earth mother or the abandoned child.

But Dreams are not Stupid

The unconscious mind is, in some sense, aware of what is going on in the outer world. And it seems to respond to this, to a limited degree. My impression, from the dreams I have worked with, is as follows. If you are in Freudian therapy, you will have some dreams with a hidden sexual content –perfectly good Oedipal dreams, for example, still occur, but rarely. If you are in Jungian therapy you are likely to have more profound, archetypal dreams at least sometimes. If you are helping out as a ‘victim’ in a sleep lab. You are likely to have dreams of having wires stuck in you and being abducted by aliens. And so on.

And, when in therapy, you may well have what are termed ‘beginning dreams’. Dreams that tell you, in symbolic form, what you are going to get out of your therapy. I can remember working for a while with a (very respectable) client whose ‘problem’ was that he was attracted to the wife next door. He felt that he could not resist having an affair (the other party was willing). His first dream in therapy was that his house was on a steep hill and was threatened by an onrushing stream of water gushing out of the ground. He feared that the foundations were giving way. He approached the house and looked under it. On closer inspection, the rush of water was just a tiny trickle that didn’t affect the foundations of the house at all. It doesn’t take a genius to interpret this dream. The rushing water was emotion/passion. The house his home. He was not going to have a big affair. He didn’t. But

It is Generally Not Easy to Interpret Dreams.

Especially one’s own. The reason for this is that one’s own dream is not separate from oneself. You can’t stand back and look at it objectively (at least not without a lot of practice). You and it are both part of the same psyche. And many dreams are overwhelming to the poor ego. Note here that your ego, when dreaming, often seems smaller and less in charge than the waking ego. One can argue that this is as it should be. We can normally ignore our unconscious mind when awake: but perhaps we see it as it really is when we dream!

Other people’s dreams are usually extremely hard to interpret. I find that it generally takes about half-a-dozen sessions with a client before I even begin to understand how their dreams operate and the sorts of meanings that they contain. Perhaps when our ancestors lived in tribal societies, sharing close relationships, religious and social views and understanding of the outer world, the sharing of dream symbols was more common and dream interpretation by the group was relatively easy. But not now. We all have different experiences, memories and views on every possible subject; so we dream alone. Apropos of which – beware of ‘experts’ who claim to have ‘dream dictionaries’ or to interpret dreams at the drop of a hat (or dollar).

Remembering Your Dreams.

Easy enough with a little practice. If you wake up after a dream, the temptation is to try to write the dream down immediately. Only (usually) to find that the dream evaporates like water as you write. This is because when you are dreaming your short-term memory mechanisms are switched off. Of course. So far as the unconscious is concerned, the dream material is already stored in the unconscious, so why store it twice? The thing to do is to close your eyes and go through the dream in your mind (thus switching on short-term memory) at least twice. Then go back to sleep. Chances are you will remember the dream in the morning – so, for this purpose, keep a dream diary and a biro that works, beside your bed if you want to keep a log of your dreams.

When do you Dream?

You can dream at any point in the night and at any stage of sleep. When you first fall asleep you enter a shallow stage of sleep. Stage 1. Then stage 2. Then, as you go into deep sleep stage 3 and 4. Then you come back...stage 3...stage 2...stage 1....then, instead of waking up you enter rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Most but not all dreams occur in REM sleep: during this, brain activity is very like wakefulness. Most 'big dreams' occur now and you experience vivid material. However, as your big muscles are switched off in REM sleep, you can't move. So, if you are being chased by a dragon in a dream, you can't actually run away and run into the bedroom wall. There are all sorts of articles around about this phenomenon. Most people have 3-4 such 'cycles' of sleep during the night.

Do Dreams Change as We Get Older?

Some say yes. Some say no. Jung himself said that the dreams of old people are much the same as in the young. That the unconscious has no knowledge of death or the limitations of life. And that, therefore, one should behave, when awake, as though 'one had to live centuries'. Then you will be in harmony with your own unconscious mind and you will simply 'feel better'.

Others disagree. Any experts on this subject out there?

What is the Purpose of Dreaming?

It isn't clear that dreaming has any deliberate purpose, as I have said. But dreaming does diminish a little with age, suggesting that, after middle age, one needs to take in new material a little less. Perhaps because much of what one sees now is already known and stored!

If dreaming is artificially prevented, though (e.g. by waking up a subject in a sleep lab whenever REM sleep occurs or by the use of sleeping pills – some of which repress dreaming), then REM rebound and dreaming rebound will try to occur. Long, vivid dreams that, if dreaming has been prevented for too long, may even intrude into waking consciousness. This can be almost hallucinatory, but that's another topic entirely.