

SIGMUND FREUD THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS (1899-1900)

Freud, Sigmund. The Interpretation of Dreams. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1965.

Chapter V: The Material and Sources of Dreams

After considering various, not least scientific, theories of dreams in preceding chapters, Freud discusses here several of his own and other persons' dreams. He concludes that the source of a dream may be: (a) a recent and psychologically significant event which is directly represented in the dream; (b) several recent and significant events, which are combined by the dream in a single whole; (c) one or more recent and significant events, which are represented in the dream-content by allusion to a contemporary but indifferent event; (d) a subjectively significant experience (recollection, train of thought), which is constantly represented in the dream by allusion to a recent but indifferent impression.

Freud comes to argue that some of our most significant dreams stem from infantile experiences. Ultimately, he is keen to stress, the most significant elements of dreams are traceable in particular to childhood experiences, not least those of an Oedipal nature. Parents, he says,

play a leading part in the infantile psychology of all persons who subsequently become psychoneurotics. Falling in love with one parent and hating the other forms part of the permanent stock of the psychic impulses which arise in early childhood, and are of such importance as the material of the subsequent neurosis. But I do not believe that psychoneurotics are to be sharply distinguished in this respect from other persons who remain normal – that is, I do not believe that they are capable of creating something absolutely new and peculiar to themselves. It is far more probable – and this is confirmed by incidental observations of normal children – that in their amorous or hostile attitude toward their parents, psychoneurotics do no more than reveal to us, by magnification, something that occurs less markedly and intensively in the minds of the majority of children. ()

Legends drawn from antiquity, he argues, confirm this impression: he has in mind the story of Oedipus in particular. Here is his summary of the play, Oedipus Rex by Sophocles:

Oedipus, the son of Laius, king of Thebes, and Jocasta, is exposed as a suckling, because an oracle had informed the father that his son, who was still unborn, would be his murderer. He is rescued, and grows up as a king's son at a foreign court, until, being uncertain of his origin, he, too, consults the oracle, and is warned to avoid his native place, for he is destined to become the murderer of his father and the husband of his mother. On the road leading away from his supposed home he meets King Laius, and in a sudden quarrel strikes him dead. He comes to Thebes, where he solves the riddle of the Sphinx, who is barring the way to the city, whereupon he is elected king by the grateful Thebans, and is rewarded with the hand of Jocasta. He reigns for many years in peace and honour, and begets two sons and two daughters upon his unknown mother, until at last a plague breaks out- which causes the Thebians to consult the oracle anew. Here Sophocles' tragedy begins. The messengers bring the reply that the plague will stop as soon as the murderer of Laius is driven from the country. But

where is he? . . . The action of the play consists simply in the disclosure, approached step by step and artistically delayed (and comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis) that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, and that he is the son of the murdered man and Jocasta. Shocked by the abominable crime which he has unwittingly committed, Oedipus blinds himself, and departs from his native city. The prophecy of the oracle has been fulfilled. ()

The play's impact, Freud argues, has less to do with the "contrast between destiny and human will" (), the traditional view, than the way in which it reminds us of deeply repressed aspects of our own identity:

His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is nothing more or less than a wish-fulfilment- the fulfilment of the wish of our childhood. But we, more fortunate than he, in so far as we have not become psychoneurotics, have since our childhood succeeded in withdrawing our sexual impulses from our mothers, and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers. We recoil from the person for whom this primitive wish of our childhood has been fulfilled with all the force of the repression which these wishes have undergone in our minds since childhood. As the poet brings the guilt of Oedipus to light by his investigation, he forces us to become aware of our own inner selves, in which the same impulses are still extant, even though they are suppressed. ()

To further support his cause, Freud contends that there is even a moment in the play when Jocasta directly alludes to a dream, which many men dream, about sleeping with one's mother.

Freud then turns his attention to Shakespeare's Hamlet which, he argues, is "rooted in the same soil as Oedipus Rex" (): the

whole difference in the psychic life of the two widely separated periods of civilization, and the progress, during the course of time, of repression in the emotional life of humanity, is manifested in the differing treatment of the same material. In Oedipus Rex the basic wish-phantasy of the child is brought to light and realized as it is in dreams; in Hamlet it remains repressed, and we learn of its existence- as we discover the relevant facts in a neurosis- only through the inhibitory effects which proceed from it. In the more modern drama, the curious fact that it is possible to remain in complete uncertainty as to the character of the hero has proved to be quite consistent with the over-powering effect of the tragedy. The play is based upon Hamlet's hesitation in accomplishing the task of revenge assigned to him; the text does not give the cause or the motive of this hesitation, nor have the manifold attempts at interpretation succeeded in doing so. According to the still prevailing conception, a conception for which Goethe was first responsible, Hamlet represents the type of man whose active energy is paralyzed by excessive intellectual activity: "Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." According to another conception, the poet has endeavoured to portray a morbid, irresolute character, on the verge of neurasthenia. The plot of the drama, however, shows us that Hamlet is by

no means intended to appear as a character wholly incapable of action. On two separate occasions we see him assert himself: once in a sudden outburst of rage, when he stabs the eavesdropper behind the arras, and on the other occasion when he deliberately, and even craftily, with the complete unscrupulousness of a prince of the Renaissance, sends the two courtiers to the death which was intended for himself. What is it, then, that inhibits him in accomplishing the task which his father's ghost has laid upon him? Here the explanation offers itself that it is the peculiar nature of this task. Hamlet is able to do anything but take vengeance upon the man who did away with his father and has taken his father's place with his mother- the man who shows him in realization the repressed desires of his own childhood. The loathing which should have driven him to revenge is thus replaced by self-reproach, by conscientious scruples, which tell him that he himself is no better than the murderer whom he is required to punish. ()

All he has done, Freud claims, is to "have here translated into consciousness what had to remain unconscious in the mind of the hero" (). Freud's views in this regard were subsequently developed famously by Ernest Jones in his own "Oedipus and Hamlet."

However, Freud warns, just as "all neurotic symptoms, like dreams themselves, are capable of hyper-interpretation, and even require such hyper-interpretation before they become perfectly intelligible, so every genuine poetical creation must have proceeded from more than one motive, more than one impulse in the mind of the poet, and must admit of more than one interpretation. I have here attempted to interpret only the deepest stratum of impulses in the mind of the creative poet" ().

Chapter VI: The Dream-Work

Here, Freud begins by stressing the differences between his own and previous approaches to dream interpretation:

All other previous attempts to solve the problems of dreams have concerned themselves directly with the manifest dream-content as it is retained in the memory. They have sought to obtain an interpretation of the dream from this content, or, if they dispensed with an interpretation, to base their conclusions concerning the dream on the evidence provided by this content. We, however, are confronted by a different set of data; for us a new psychic material interposes itself between the dream-content and the results of our investigations: the latent dream-content, or dreamthoughts, which are obtained only by our method. We develop the solution of the dream from this latent content, and not from the manifest dreamcontent. We are thus confronted with a new problem, an entirely novel task - that of examining and tracing the relations between the latent dreamthoughts and the manifest dream-content, and the processes by which the latter has grown out of the former. ()

Freud is at pains to emphasise the verbal, rather than pictorial, basis of dreams: the dream-content appears to us as a translation of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose symbols and laws of composition we must learn by comparing the origin with the translation. The dream-thoughts we can understand without further trouble the moment we have ascertained them. The dream-content is, as it were, presented in hieroglyphics, whose symbols must be translated, one by one, into the language of the dream-thoughts. It would of course, be incorrect to attempt

to read these symbols in accordance with their values as pictures, instead of in accordance with their meaning as symbols. For instance, I have before me a picture - puzzle (rebus) - a house, upon whose roof there is a boat; then a single letter; then a running figure, whose head has been omitted, and so on. As a critic I might be tempted to judge this composition and its elements to be nonsensical. A boat is out of place on the roof of a house, and a headless man cannot run; the man, too, is larger than the house, and if the whole thing is meant to represent a landscape the single letters have no right in it, since they do not occur in nature. A correct judgment of the picture-puzzle is possible only if I make no such objections to the whole and its parts, and if, on the contrary, I take the trouble to replace each image by a syllable or word which it may represent by virtue of some allusion or relation. The words thus put together are no longer meaningless, but might constitute the most beautiful and pregnant aphorism. ()

For Freud, the dream-analyst is evidently engaged in a process of textual interpretation akin to that of literary criticism.

Freud then proceeds to identify the precise processes which comprise what he terms the 'dream-work' by which the true meaning of a dream is obfuscated. The first is 'condensation' by which he means something like 'compression': the first thing that becomes clear to the investigator when he compares the dream-content with the dream-thoughts is that a tremendous work of condensation has been accomplished. The dream is meagre, paltry and laconic in comparison with the range and copiousness of the dreamthoughts. The dream, when written down fills half a page; the analysis, which contains the dream-thoughts, requires six, eight, twelve times as much space. The ratio varies with different dreams; but in my experience it is always of the same order. As a rule, the extent of the compression which has been accomplished is under-estimated, owing to the fact that the dream-thoughts which have been brought to light are believed to be the whole of the material, whereas a continuation of the work of interpretation would reveal still further thoughts hidden in the dream. We have already found it necessary to remark that one can never be really sure that one has interpreted a dream completely; even if the solution seems satisfying and flawless, it is always possible that yet another meaning has been manifested by the same dream. Thus the degree of condensation is - strictly speaking - indeterminable. ()

The question arises: how exactly is this process of condensation accomplished? Basically, through condensation, two or more key items at the latent level of the dream are condensed into or fused with one another. Freud then proceeds to discuss some of his own key dreams. Elsewhere, Freud uses the term 'over-determination' to refer to the process by which the presence of a single element in the dream-content is in fact a function of several determinants in the dream-thoughts.

Freud then turns to a discussion of the second key technique involved in the dream-work - 'displacement' - by which he means something like 'transference.' In a nutshell, he argues, "that which is obviously the essential content of the dream-thoughts need not be represented at all in the dream. The dream is, as it were, centred elsewhere; its content is arranged about elements which do not constitute the central point of the dream-thoughts" (). He continues: it

now becomes very probable that a psychic force expresses itself in the dream-work which, on the one hand, strips the elements of the high psychic

value of their intensity and, on the other hand, by means of over-determination, creates new significant values from elements of slight value, which new values then make their way into the dream-content. Now if this is the method of procedure, there has occurred in the process of dream-formation a transference and displacement of the psychic intensities of the individual elements, from which results the textual difference between the dream-content and the thought-content. The process which we here assume to be operative is actually the most essential part of the dream-work; it may fitly be called dream-displacement. ()

Freud concludes: “[d]ream-displacement and dream-condensation are the two craftsmen to whom we may chiefly ascribe the structure of the dream” ().

Freud finally turns his attention to what he terms the ‘means of representation’ in dreams. Here, Freud is interested in grasping what techniques of association substituted at the manifest level of the dream for the logical relations (e.g. of cause and effect or either-or) which must inhere in the dream-thoughts that comprise the latent level of the dream if these are to be meaningful at all. He argues that the

essential dream-thoughts commonly reveal themselves as a complex of thoughts and memories of the most intricate possible construction, with all the characteristics of the thought-processes known to us in waking life. Not infrequently they are trains of thought which proceed from more than one centre, but which are not without points of contact; and almost invariably we find, along with a train of thought, its contradictory counterpart, connected with it by the association of contrast. The individual parts of this complicated structure naturally stand in the most manifold logical relations to one another. They constitute foreground and background, digressions, illustrations, conditions, lines of argument and objections. When the whole mass of these dream-thoughts is subjected to the pressure of the dream-work, during which the fragments are turned about, broken up and compacted, somewhat like drifting ice, the question arises: What becomes of the logical ties which had hitherto provided the framework of the structure? What representation do ‘if,’ ‘because,’ ‘as though,’ ‘although,’ ‘either-or’ and all the other conjunctions, without which we cannot understand a phrase or a sentence, receive in our dreams? To begin with, we must answer that the dream has at its disposal no means of representing these logical relations between the dream-thoughts. In most cases it disregards all these conjunctions, and undertakes the elaboration only of the material content of the dream-thoughts. It is left to the interpretation of the dream to restore the coherence which the dream-work has destroyed. ()

In short, “logical relations between the dream-thoughts do not obtain any particular representation in the dream” ().

Freud finishes the chapter by examining the forms into which particular examples of logical argumentation, not least ‘cause and effect’ or ‘either -or,’ are transposed in dreams. He contends that the presence of the former (a relationship of consequence) at the latent level is often represented by a succession of dreams, or parts thereof (i.e. what appears to be a mere sequence) at the manifest level. Similarly, the presence in the dream-thoughts of the latter in the form of alternatives which imply the necessity of choosing between them is often represented by a mere juxtaposition of possibilities in the dream-content without any sense that these are mutually exclusive. It is, Freud argues, the task of the dream-interpreter to restore the original logical relations that have been masked in this and related ways through the intervention of the dream-work.