
An Introduction to Jung's Psychology: Dreams

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Chapter 6: Dreams and their Interpretation

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Much has been said about dreams in the previous chapters - enough probably to show how important Jung regards them as a manifestation of psychic activity. A dream, he says, should 'be regarded with due seriousness as an actuality that has to be fitted into the conscious attitude as a codetermining factor', and his experience has shown him that 'if we meditate on a dream sufficiently long and thoroughly, if we carry it around with us and turn it over and over, something almost always comes of it'.(1)

A dream is an involuntary and spontaneous psychic product, a voice of nature; and is usually obscure and difficult to understand because it expresses itself in symbols and pictures, like the most ancient writing, or the complicated letters which children sometimes enjoy producing with drawings replacing the important words. In attempting to understand the dream-language, Jung uses a method of amplification, which may be compared in some respects to the way in which inscriptions and writings in forgotten languages are deciphered by the philologist.

1. 'The Practical Use of Dream-Analysis' (C.W., 16), par. 331.

2. 'The Aims of Psychotherapy' (C.W., 16), par. 86. The first step in understanding a dream, he considers, is to establish its context. This means unraveling its network of relationships with the dreamer and his or her life., and discovering the significance of the various images it presents. For example, one's mother might appear in a dream: now, everyone has a concept of what mother implies, but for each person the image of a mother is different, and the significance of this image will even vary from time to time. The thought of mother may for one person be associated with love, care, and protection, and for another with power, anger, or frustration and so the meaning of a dream of mother can vary accordingly. As far as possible, each image or symbol must be taken in turn till its meaning for the dreamer is established as nearly as possible, and not until this has been carefully done is one in a position to understand what the dream may mean. It will be seen from this that Jung does not have a fixed method of dream interpretation (one can] not say, for instance, as the popular dream-books do, that to dream of black cats means good luck), for each dream is taken as a direct expression of the dreamer's unconscious, and only to be understood in this light.

Jung's way of dealing with dreams differs from the method of free association, which, as he says, will help to uncover complexes, but not necessarily complexes connected with the dream; in fact, free association (1) will usually lead away from the dream altogether.

When somebody dreams of a 'deal table', it is not enough for him to associate it with his writing-desk which does not happen to be made of deal. Supposing that nothing more occurs to the dreamer, this blocking has an objective meaning, for it indicates that a particular darkness reigns in the immediate neighbourhood of the dream-image, and that is suspicious. We would expect him to have dozens of associations to a deal table, and the fact that there is apparently nothing is itself significant. In such cases I keep on returning to the image, and I usually say to my patient, 'Suppose I had no idea what the words "deal table" mean. Describe this object and give me its history in such a way that I cannot fail to understand what sort of a thing it is.' In this way we manage to establish almost the whole context of the dream-image. When we have done this for all the images in the dream we are ready for the venture of interpretation.(2)

1. In 'free association' a chain of random associations is followed wherever they may lead.

2. 'The Practical Use of Dream-Analysis', pars. 320-21. A series of dreams makes a more satisfactory basis for interpretation than a single dream, for the theme which the unconscious is presenting becomes clearer, the important images are underlined by repetition, and mistakes in interpretation are corrected by the next dream.

Dreams can be interpreted on an objective or on a subjective level. In the first case the dream is related to what is going on in the environment; the people appearing in it are taken as real, and their relationship to, and possible influence on the dreamer are analysed. In the second case the dream figures are taken as representing aspects of the dreamer's personality. It depends on the circumstances of the moment which side the emphasis shall be placed. A woman dreaming of her father may need to face a problem connected with him or some aspect of her relationship to him, or she may need to recognize the male principle. (personified by the father) in herself. Generally speaking, the subjective aspect of dreams becomes more important in the later stages of analysis when the personal problems have been seen and understood.

Some dreams have considerably more than personal significance; such dreams are often vivid, and make use of surprising and even incomprehensible symbols, and their relationship to the dreamer is difficult to trace. These Jung classes as collective dreams, and to understand them use must often be made of historical and mythological analogies to find what the symbols meant to other men in other times. It may seem strange at first to think that these could have any relevance to ourselves; we have cut ourselves off from the past to such an extent that it is difficult to realize that the experiences of remote people can still have meaning for us. Yet it is so; unconsciously we still think like our distant ancestors, and to understand this is to deepen our experience, open up new possibilities, and give us the stability and vigour which come from discovering our roots.

It is difficult to make the distinction between personal and collective dreams clear without going into more detail than is possible here. In any case, there is, just as in life, no sharp line of demarcation between the two. Whatever we think or do in a personal capacity has some meaning for or influence on other people; conversely, we also belong to our time and milieu, which shape us, whether we will or no. Strictly speaking, a personal dream would arise from the personal unconscious and be concerned with the personal aspects of the dreamer's life: dreams of one's family, friends, and daily happenings are of this nature.

A collective dream(1) will, however, present archetypes from the collective unconscious and have significance for others as well as the dreamer. There is probably some reader who has told such a dream at the breakfast table, and noticed its effect upon the hearers, for the archetypes always have a certain impact on people. A collective dream has, however, considerably greater significance than any immediate dramatic effect it may have. Primitive people instinctively recognize the difference between these two kinds of dreams, personal and collective, and describe them as little and big dreams, prizing the latter, for they often tap sources of knowledge which would otherwise be closed. An interesting example is given by Rasmussen in a book on the Polar Eskimos, where one of the tribe had a vision in a dream, and because of this led the others for many days over the ice to a new place, where there was food and shelter, just as the dream had foretold. Some, however, lost faith during the journey, and these turned back, only to perish from starvation, as had also been foretold.

The collective dream was highly valued in antiquity when it was accepted as having an oracular nature and its warnings taken seriously. These dreams and their interpretation appear fanciful to us now; nevertheless, there are some parallels which we can draw with the principles of interpretation we use today. Pharaoh's dream, recorded in Genesis 41, and its interpretation by Joseph, is a collective dream of this type: 'And it came to pass at the end of two full years that Pharaoh dreamed.'

1. Jung quotes many of these dreams in his various works, and analyses a series of them in 'A study in the Process of Individuation' (C.W. 9, i). The king's dreams were of supreme importance to the people, for Pharaoh was both god and the land's representative among the gods. He was the official intermediary between the gods and the people, so that his dreams were as the voice of god conveyed to the people. It did not seem necessary, however, that Pharaoh should interpret his dreams, for in this case he sent for the magicians, who were unfortunately quite at a loss to understand the message. Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, who had previously shown his skill in dream interpretation with two of Pharaoh's servants.

And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, 'In my dream, behold, I stood upon the bank of the river. And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, fat-fleshed and well-favoured; and they fed in a meadow. And, behold, seven other kine came up after them, poor and very ill-favoured and lean-fleshed, such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness. And the lean and the ill-favoured kine did eat up the first seven fat kine; and when they had eaten them up, it could not be known that they had eaten them; but they were still ill-favoured, as at the beginning. So I awoke. And I saw in my dreams, and, behold, seven ears came up in one stalk, full and good. And, behold, seven ears, withered, thin, and blasted with the east wind, sprung up after them. And the thin ears devoured the seven good ears: and I told this unto the magicians: but there was none that could declare it to me.' Both corn and kine had tremendous significance for the Egyptians, expressed in their myths and religious ceremonies, and with a symbolic meaning reaching beyond the everyday one of food to death, re-birth, creation, &c., and as such archetypal.(1) Joseph's understanding of the dreams appears to be intuitive; earlier (when consulted by Pharaoh's butler and baker), he has said: 'Do not interpretations belong to God?' and now he says, 'It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace'. And then: 'The dream of Pharaoh is one. God hath showed Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years; the dream is one.'

1. Osiris was the Egyptian god of the corn. There were also sacred bulls who were dedicated to him and ordained to be worshipped as gods. Cf. J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*. We should make a similar statement about dream material today, for, as has been pointed out in previous chapters, the unconscious constantly uses different symbols for what consciousness regards as one and the same thing.

Joseph continues:

And the seven thin and ill-favoured kine that came up after them are seven years; and the seven empty ears blasted with

the east wind shall be seven years of famine. This is the thing which I have spoken unto Pharaoh. What God is about to do he showeth unto Pharaoh. Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt; and there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine shall consume the land. And the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine following; for it shall be very grievous. And for that the dream was doubled onto Pharaoh twice; it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass. We have already said that a series of dreams are easier to understand than a single dream, and in the same way we find to-day that important dreams are repeated if they have not been understood, or if they need to be emphasized.

The Bible story finishes with Joseph's plans to meet the crisis and Pharaoh's acceptance of them. The succeeding events showed how correct his interpretation had been for both the years of plenty and the famine came just as he had predicted from the dreams.

To ancient man the dream was sent by God, and while the Church still allows this possibility (only very cautiously and reserving to itself the right to adjudicate in the matter), popular opinion to-day has deprecated this kind of psychic activity to such an extent that it is often believed that dreams are rarely the result of physical causes, such as sleeping in an uncomfortable position, or eating a heavy meal before going to bed. Some dreams, it is true, can be traced to such causes (if, for instance, we dream we are walking in the -clothes have slipped off), but soon and wake to find the bed frequently there is little connexion between the stimulus and the form the dream takes, so that it is not an explanation of the dream in any real sense. Another fairly common belief is that dreams reproduce the events of the day before, especially if these were significant or striking. Careful recording, however, shows that dreams rarely repeat events in an exact manner; they add or subtract something, round off the experience, or can be shown to be compensatory in character. This tendency to compensate a conscious attitude is an important characteristic of the dream, and must always be taken into account when attempting to understand it. As an example of this, Jung quotes a young man who dreamt his father was behaving, in a drunken and disorderly manner. The real father did no such thing, and, according to the son, behaved in a somewhat ideal way. The young man had an excellent relationship with him - too good, in fact, for his admiration of his father prevented him from having the necessary confidence in himself and developing his own different personality.(1) In this case the dream went to the other extreme, showing the father in a most unfavourable light. It was almost as if the dream were saying, 'He is not so marvellous after all, and he can behave in a quite irresponsible manner. There is no need for you to feel so inferior.' The unconscious was drawing attention to a relationship based on an idealistic view of the father which was hindering the son's growth into manhood.

Dreams also work the other way round; if we habitually undervalue somebody, we are likely to have a highly flattering dream about him, to see him, for instance, in a much higher position than the one he would normally occupy, or doing something with ease and skill where we know we should be incompetent and clumsy.

Dreams also bring hidden conflicts to light by showing an unknown side of the character, as when a mild, inoffensive person dreams of violence, or an ascetic of sexual orgies, but more frequently the dream language is less direct than this. For instance, there are hosts of sexual symbols well known in myth as well as dream: 'the bull, the ass, the pomegranate, the horse's hoof, the dance, to mention only a few'.(2)

1. 'The Practical Use of Dream-Analysis', par. 335.

2. Ibid., par. 340. Dreams sometimes express hidden wishes, but it is too simple to class them all under this heading. The 'wish' dream is usually easy to spot; when, for instance, the hungry man dreams he is eating a wonderful meal, or the thirsty that they see sparkling water.

There are also forward-looking or 'prospective' dreams. It seems, indeed, as if space and time are creations of our consciousness, and are relative, and the unconscious does not work according to these concepts.

A simple example of the 'prospective' dream is that of getting up and dressing, when one is really asleep in bed and the alarm has gone off; but there are others which are more striking than this, like that of the woman who was shortly going to move to a new and unknown district who dreamt correctly all about the house she would live in, down to the smallest detail, even including the reason why its present owners were leaving it. Such dreams are not uncommon; Osbert Sitwell in his autobiography records some interesting examples, but our distrust of this kind of psychic activity usually leads us to dismiss them as 'just coincidence'.

Occasionally dreams seem to be clear warnings of danger, as for example that of the mountain climber who dreamed he was climbing higher and higher and then gaily stepping off into space. One would have thought that such a dream would have made the least superstitious of persons stop to think, but the man in question simply laughed. Not so very long after

he was killed in the mountains, a friend actually seeing him step off into the air.' To dream of death, however, does not necessarily indicate a fatal accident; there is symbolic as well as actual physical death, as the poets know well - the year dies, the song dies, the lover dies of love, and the mystic dies to life:

Leave nothing of myself in me;

Let me so read thy life that I

Unto all life of mine may die.(2)

1. 'The Practical Use of Dream-Analysis' (C.W., 16), pars, 323-4.

2. Richard Crashaw, 'Upon the Book and Picture of the Seraphical Saint Teresa'. Only a knowledge of the dreamer and his immediate circum. stances will show on which side the emphasis is rightly placed.

Sometimes dreams reproduce things seen, heard, or read long before and subsequently forgotten, or recall distant experiences. It is often difficult to trace whether a lost memory is really being recalled, or whether the experience actually happened, but this is not of great practical importance; what is relevant is why the dreamer had such a dream at this particular moment, and why he felt he had that particular experience.

One curious feature of dreaming is the way that close friends or members of the same family, particularly husband and wife or parents and children, will dream the same dream without previously having told it to each other. Still more curious is the way that children sometimes have of dreaming about their parents' problems, when these have been carefully hidden from them. The dream is not usually a straightforward statement, but is symbolical and often picturesque in manner. A curious example is that of three girls who had a most devoted mother:

When they were approaching puberty they confessed shamefacedly to each other that for years they had suffered from horrible dreams about [their mother]. They dreamt of her as a witch or a dangerous animal and they could not understand it at all, since their mother was so lovely and utterly devoted to them. Years later the mother became insane, and in her insanity ... crawled about on all fours and imitated the grunting of pigs, the barking of dogs, and the growling of bears.(1)

1. 'Child Development and Education' (C.W., 17), par. 107. The most striking dreams are those which seem to arise spontaneously from the unconscious, presenting something completely strange with a vividness that compels attention. Sometimes these seem to express a tendency of the unconscious aiming at a complete change of the conscious attitude, and they can be so impressive that the dreamer is in fact changed by the experience without any interpretation being necessary. An example is the following dream of an intellectually developed woman approaching middle age:

I am in a great empty temple. At one end is a gigantic statue of the god. There is a tall priest in a robe with me. 'the atmosphere is Egyptian or Chinese. We walk over the immense empty floor towards the statue at the end. Every few steps I fall on my face and the priest calls out to the god that I am coming as a penitent and he makes confession for me aloud. Our progress is slow and solemn, but in my own thoughts I am very sceptical about it all. I think this is a queer kind of ritual and that the god over there is only a stone statue. We finally come to it. On each side of it there are steps and we go up these and so behind the altar. Once there and before leaving the temple I turn round to look again at the statue, and as I look it slowly turns round and looks at me. I find myself falling on my face in real awe and devotion at last, for it really is the presence of a god with absolution and grace pouring in on me. Somebody says: 'It's all a trick, there is a machine to turn the statue round.' But I feel passionately that it may be a trick to turn a stone statue round, but all the same it is also a god and I have experienced him. I leave the place with a sense of being illuminated and humbled and glad. The dream is of value in analytical practice because it gives a picture of inner, and also often of outer conditions of which the dreamer is unaware. The first dream that a patient brings to analysis often gives a striking summing up of his or her problem, and even a hint of how it may be solved. It is this forward-looking aspect of dreams that, among other reasons, leads Jung to insist that they shall not only be used for reductive purposes; that is, dreams do not only uncover forgotten memories and present difficulties, but appear, especially in the case of individuation dreams, to have a goal in view. Dreams at the beginning of analysis are often relatively clear and simple, and have an immediate effect. As an analysis proceeds the dreams usually grow more complicated and difficult to understand. It is at this stage that mythological themes often occur and that a wider framework than that of the dreamer's personal experience and associations becomes necessary. Sometimes the dreamer has no meaningful associations and can find no relationship to the dream situation; it is here that mythological parallels can be helpful. These will usually throw light on the collective meaning of the dream, and its relevance to the dreamer can then be worked out.

1. Cf. Michael Fordham, *New Developments in Analytical Psychology*, (London, 1957), p. 6. Jung never imposes an interpretation on a patient. He looks on it as even more important for the dreamer to understand his own dream than for the analyst to do so, while ideally the interpretation should be the result of mutual reflection and agreement. Much of his work lies in helping patients to deal with their own unconscious material, and they are encouraged to record their dreams carefully, and even to illustrate them either with pictures or models in wax or clay. No artistic ability is needed for this; in fact it is better to approach the work naively, for one is less likely to falsify the picture. The expressions of the unconscious are often most primitive, and their power is lost if there is too great an attempt to fit them into aesthetic concepts. By working on dreams in this manner the patient though he is still likely to overlook unpleasant implications) can develop his independence and learn, to some extent, to understand the unconscious himself. He makes more real the fantasies that are activating him, and so he knows better what they are. Even the mere painting of a picture can have an effect, curing a wretched mood, or bringing a release of tension. Through active co-operation of this kind the danger of floating aimlessly in an endless sea of fantasy is avoided and dreams become not only sources of information, but also

of creative power.

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