

# **THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS**

by

**Sigmund Freud**

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**Flectere si nequeo Superos, Acheronta movebo****FOREWORD**

In 1909, G. Stanley Hall invited me to Clark University, in Worcester, to give the first lectures on psychoanalysis. In the same year, Dr Brill published the first of his translations of my writings, which were soon followed by further ones. If psychoanalysis now plays a role in American intellectual life, or if it does so in the future, a large part of this result will have to be attributed to this and other activities of Dr Brill's.

His first translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams* appeared in 1913. Since then, much has taken place in the world, and much has been changed in our views about the neuroses. This book, with the new contribution to psychology which surprised the world when it was published (1900), remains essentially unaltered. It contains, even according to my present-day judgment, the most valuable of all the discoveries it has been my good fortune to make. Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime.

FREUD

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## The Interpretation of Dreams

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *The Scientific Literature of Dream-Problems (up to 1900)*

In the following pages, I shall demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique, every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state. Further, I shall endeavour to elucidate the processes which underlie the strangeness and obscurity of dreams, and to deduce from these processes the nature of the psychic forces whose conflict or co-operation is responsible for our dreams. This done, my investigation will terminate, as it will have reached the point where the problem of the dream merges into more comprehensive problems, and to solve these, we must have recourse to material of a different kind.

I shall begin by giving a short account of the views of earlier writers on this subject and of the status of the dream-problem in contemporary science; since in the course of this treatise, I shall not often have occasion to refer to either. In spite of thousands of years of endeavour, little progress has been made in the scientific understanding of dreams. This fact has been so universally acknowledged by previous writers on the subject that it seems hardly necessary to quote individual opinions. The reader will find, in many stimulating observations, and plenty of interesting material relating to our subject, but little or nothing that concerns the true nature of the dream, or that solves definitely any of its enigmas. The educated layman, of course, knows even less of the matter.

The conception of the dream that was held in prehistoric ages by primitive peoples, and the influence which it may have exerted on the formation of their conceptions of the universe, and of the soul, is a theme of such great interest that it is only with reluctance that I refrain from dealing with it in these pages. I will refer the reader to the well-known works of Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury), Herbert Spencer, E. B. Tylor and other writers; I will only add that we shall not realise the importance of these problems and speculations until we have completed the task of dream interpretation that lies before us.

A reminiscence of the concept of the dream that was held in primitive times seems to underlie the evaluation of the dream which was current among the peoples of classical antiquity.<sup>1</sup> They took it for granted that dreams were related to the world of the supernatural beings in whom they believed, and that they brought inspirations from the gods and demons. Moreover, it appeared to them that dreams must serve a special purpose in respect of the dreamer; that, as a rule, they predicted the future. The extraordinary variations in the content of dreams, and in the impressions which they produced on the dreamer, made it, of course, very difficult to formulate a coherent conception of them, and necessitated manifold differentiations and group-formations, according to their value and reliability. The valuation of dreams by the individual

philosophers of antiquity naturally depended on the importance which they were prepared to attribute to manticism in general.

In the two works of Aristotle in which there is mention of dreams, they are already regarded as constituting a problem of psychology. We are told that the dream is not god-sent, that it is not of divine but of daimonic origin. For nature is really daimonic, not divine; that is to say, the dream is not a supernatural revelation, but is subject to the laws of the human spirit, which has, of course, a kinship with the divine. The dream is defined as the psychic activity of the sleeper, inasmuch as he is asleep. Aristotle was acquainted with some of the characteristics of the dream-life; for example, he knew that a dream converts the slight sensations perceived in sleep into intense sensations (one imagines that one is walking through fire, and feels hot, if this or that part of the body becomes only quite slightly warm'), which led him to conclude that dreams might easily betray to the physician the first indications of an incipient physical change which escaped observation during the day.<sup>2</sup>

As has been said, those writers of antiquity who preceded Aristotle did not regard the dream as a product of the dreaming psyche, but as an inspiration of divine origin, and in ancient times, the two opposing tendencies which we shall find throughout the ages in respect of the evaluation of the dream-life, were already perceptible. The ancients distinguished between the true and valuable dreams which were sent to the dreamer as warnings, or to foretell future events, and the vain, fraudulent and empty dreams, whose object was to misguide him or lead him to destruction.

The pre-scientific conception of the dream which obtained among the ancients was, of course, in perfect keeping with their general conception of the universe, which was accustomed to project as an external reality that which possessed reality only in the life of the psyche. Further, it accounted for the main impression made upon the waking life by the morning memory of the dream; for in this memory the dream, as compared with the rest of the psychic content, seems to be something alien, coming, as it were, from another world. It would be an error to suppose that the theory of the supernatural origin of dreams lacks followers even in our own times; for quite apart from pietistic and mystical writers - - who cling, as they are perfectly justified in doing, to the remnants of the once predominant realm of the supernatural until these remnants have been swept away by scientific explanation -- we not infrequently find that quite intelligent persons, who in other respects are averse to anything of a romantic nature, go so far as to base their religious belief in the existence and co-operation of superhuman spiritual powers on the inexplicable nature of the phenomena of dreams (Haffner). The validity ascribed to the dream life by certain schools of philosophy -- for example, by the school of Schelling -- is a distinct reminiscence of the undisputed belief in the divinity of dreams which prevailed in antiquity; and for some thinkers, the mantic or prophetic power of dreams is still a subject of debate. This is due to the fact that the explanations attempted by psychology are too inadequate to cope with the accumulated material, however strongly the scientific thinker may feel that such superstitious doctrines should be repudiated.

To write a history of our scientific knowledge of the dream problem is extremely difficult, because, valuable though this knowledge may be in certain respects, no real progress in a definite direction is as yet discernible. No real foundation of verified results has hitherto been established on which future investigators might continue to build. Every new author approaches the same problems afresh, and from the very beginning. If I were to enumerate such authors in chronological order, giving a survey of the opinions which each has held concerning the problems of the dream, I should be quite unable to draw a clear and complete picture of the present state of our knowledge on the subject. I have therefore preferred to base my method of treatment on themes rather than on authors, and in attempting the solution of each problem of the dream, I shall cite the material found in the literature of the subject.

But as I have not succeeded in mastering the whole of this literature -- for it is widely dispersed and interwoven with the literature of other subjects -- I must ask my readers to rest content with my survey as it stands, provided that no fundamental fact or important point of view has been overlooked.

*In a supplement to a later German edition, the author adds:*

I shall have to justify myself for not extending my summary of the literature of dream problems to cover the period between first appearance of this book and the publication of the second edition. This justification may not seem very satisfactory to the reader; none the less, to me it was decisive. The motives which induced me to summarise the treatment of dreams in the literature of the subject have been exhausted by the foregoing introduction; to have continued this would have cost me a great deal of effort and would not have been particularly useful or instructive. For the interval in question -- a period of nine years -- has yielded nothing new or valuable as regards the conception of dreams, either in actual material or in novel points of view. In most of the literature which has appeared since the publication of my own work, the latter has not been mentioned or discussed; it has, of course, received the least attention from the so-called 'research workers on dreams', who have thus afforded a brilliant example of the aversion to learning anything new so characteristic of the scientist. '*Les savants ne sont pas curieux*', said the scoffer, Anatole France. If there were such a thing in science as the right of revenge, I, in my turn, should be justified in ignoring the literature which has appeared since the publication of this book. The few reviews which have appeared in the scientific journals are so full of misconceptions and lack of comprehension that my only possible answer to my critics would be a request that they should read this book over again -- or perhaps merely that they should read it!

*And in a supplement to the fourth German edition which appeared in 1914, a year after I published the first English translation of this work, he writes:*

Since then, the state of affairs has certainly undergone a change; my contribution to the 'interpretation of dreams' is no longer ignored in the literature of the subject. But the new situation makes it even more impossible to continue the foregoing summary. *The Interpretation of Dreams* has evoked a whole series of new contentions and problems,

which have been expounded by the authors in the most varied fashions. But I cannot discuss these works until I have developed the theories to which their authors have referred. Whatever has appeared to me as valuable in this recent literature, I have accordingly reviewed in the course of the following exposition.

<sup>1</sup> The following remarks are based on Büchschütz's careful essay, *Traum und Traumdeutung im Altertum* (Berlin, 1868).

<sup>2</sup> The relationship between dreams and disease is discussed by Hippocrates in a chapter of his famous work.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *The Method of Dream Interpretation*

### THE ANALYSIS OF A SPECIMEN DREAM

The epigraph on the title-page of this volume<sup>2</sup> indicates the tradition to which I prefer to ally myself in my conception of the dream. I am proposing to show that dreams are capable of interpretation; and any contributions to the solution of the problem which have already been discussed will emerge only as possible by-products in the accomplishment of my special task. On the hypothesis that dreams are susceptible of interpretation, I at once find myself in disagreement with the prevailing doctrine of dreams -- in fact, with all the theories of dreams, excepting only that of Scherner, for 'to interpret a dream', is to specify its 'meaning', to replace it by something which takes its position in the concatenation of our psychic activities as a link of definite importance and value. But, as we have seen, the scientific theories of the dream leave no room for a problem of dream-interpretation; since, in the first place, according to these theories, dreaming is not a psychic activity at all, but a somatic process which makes itself known to the psychic apparatus by means of symbols. Lay opinion has always been opposed to these theories. It asserts its privilege of proceeding illogically, and although it admits that dreams are incomprehensible and absurd, it cannot summon up the courage to deny that dreams have any significance. Led by a dim intuition, it seems rather to assume that dreams have a meaning, albeit a hidden one; that they are intended as a substitute for some other thought-process, and that we have only to disclose this substitute correctly in order to discover the hidden meaning of the dream.

The unscientific world, therefore, has always endeavoured to 'interpret' dreams, and by applying one or the other of two essentially different methods. The first of these methods envisages the dream-content as a whole, and seeks to replace it by another content, which is intelligible and in certain respects analogous. This is symbolic dream-interpretation; and of course it goes to pieces at the very outset in the case of those dreams which are not only unintelligible but confused. The construction which the biblical Joseph placed upon the dream of Pharaoh furnishes an example of this method. The seven fat kine, after which came seven lean ones that devoured the former, were a symbolic substitute for seven years of famine in the land of Egypt, which according to the prediction were to consume all the surplus that seven fruitful years had produced. Most of the artificial dreams contrived by the poets<sup>1</sup> are intended for some such symbolic interpretation, for they reproduce the thought conceived by the poet in a guise not unlike the disguise which we are wont to find in our dreams.

The idea that the dream concerns itself chiefly with the future, whose form it surmises in advance -- a relic of the prophetic significance with which dreams were once invested -- now becomes the motive for translating into the future the meaning of the dream which has been found by means of symbolic interpretation.



A demonstration of the manner in which one arrives at such a symbolic interpretation cannot, of course, be given. Success remains a matter of ingenious conjecture, of direct intuition, and for this reason dream-interpretation has naturally been elevated into an art which seems to depend upon extraordinary gifts.<sup>2</sup> The second of the two popular methods of dream-interpretation entirely abandons such claims. It might be described as the 'cipher method', since it treats the dream as a kind of secret code in which every sign is translated into another sign of known meaning, according to an established key. For example, I have dreamt of a letter, and also of a funeral or the like; I consult a 'dream-book', and I find that 'letter' is to be translated by 'vexation' and 'funeral' by 'engagement'. It now remains to establish a connection, which I am again to assume as pertaining to the future, by means of the rigmorole which I have deciphered. An interesting variant of this cipher procedure, a variant in which its character of purely mechanical transference is to a certain extent corrected, is presented in the work on dream-interpretation by Artemidoros of Daldis.<sup>3</sup> Here not only the dream-content, but also the personality and social position of the dreamer are taken into consideration, so that the same dream-content has a significance for the rich man, the married man, or the orator, which is different from that which applies to the poor man, the bachelor, or, let us say, the merchant. The essential point, then, in this procedure is that the work of interpretation is not applied to the entirety of the dream, but to each portion of the dream-content severally, as though the dream were a conglomerate in which each fragment calls for special treatment. Incoherent and confused dreams are certainly those that have been responsible for the invention of the cipher method.<sup>4</sup>

The worthlessness of both these popular methods of interpretation does not admit of discussion. As regards the scientific treatment of the subject, the symbolic method is limited in its application, and is not susceptible of a general exposition. In the cipher method everything depends upon whether the 'key', the dream-book, is reliable, and for that all guarantees are lacking. So that one might be tempted to grant the contention of the philosophers and psychiatrists, and to dismiss the problem of dream-interpretation as altogether fanciful.<sup>5</sup>

I have, however, come to think differently. I have been forced to perceive that here, once more, we have one of those not infrequent cases where an ancient and stubbornly retained popular belief seems to have come nearer to the truth of the matter than the opinion of modern science. I must insist that the dream actually does possess a meaning, and that a scientific method of dream-interpretation is possible. I arrived at my knowledge of this method in the following manner.

For years I have been occupied with the resolution of certain psychopathological structures -- hysterical phobias, obsessional ideas, and the like -- with therapeutic intentions. I have been so occupied, in fact, ever since I heard the significant statement of Joseph Breuer, to the effect that in these structures, regarded as morbid symptoms, solution and treatment go hand in hand.<sup>6</sup> Where it has been possible to trace a pathological idea back to those elements in the psychic life of the patient to which it owed its origin, this idea has crumbled away, and the patient has been relieved of it. In view of the failure of our other therapeutic efforts, and in the face of the mysterious

character of these pathological conditions, it seemed to me tempting, in spite of all the difficulties, to follow the method initiated by Breuer until a complete elucidation of the subject had been achieved. I shall have occasion elsewhere to give a detailed account of the form which the technique of this procedure has finally assumed, and of the results of my efforts. In the course of these psychoanalytic studies, I happened upon the question of dream-interpretation. My patients, after I had pledged them to inform me of all the ideas and thoughts which occurred to them in connection with a given theme, related their dreams, and thus taught me that a dream may be interpolated in the psychic concatenation, which may be followed backwards from a pathological idea into a patient's memory. The next step was to treat the dream itself as a symptom, and to apply to it the method of interpretation which had been worked out for such symptoms.

For this a certain psychic preparation on the part of the patient is necessary. A twofold effort is made, to stimulate his attentiveness in respect of his psychic perceptions, and to eliminate the critical spirit in which he is ordinarily in the habit of viewing such thoughts as come to the surface. For the purpose of self-observation with concentrated attention it is advantageous that the patient should take up a restful position and close his eyes; he must be explicitly instructed to renounce all criticism of the thought formations which he may perceive. He must also be told that the success of the psychoanalysis depends upon his noting and communicating everything that passes through his mind, and that he must not allow himself to suppress one idea because it seems to him unimportant or irrelevant to the subject, or another because it seems nonsensical. He must preserve an absolute impartiality in respect to his ideas; for if he is unsuccessful in finding the desired solution of the dream, the obsessional idea, or the like, it will be because he permits himself to be critical of them.

I have noticed in the course of my psychoanalytical work that the psychological state of a man in an attitude of reflection is entirely different from that of a man who is observing his psychic processes. In reflection there is a greater play of psychic activity than in the most attentive self-observation; this is shown even by the tense attitude and the wrinkled brow of the man in a state of reflection, as opposed to the mimic tranquillity of the man observing himself. In both cases there must be concentrated attention, but the reflective man makes use of his critical faculties, with the result that he rejects some of the thoughts which rise into consciousness after he has become aware of them, and abruptly interrupts others, so that he does not follow the lines of thought which they would otherwise open up for him; while in respect of yet other thoughts he is able to behave in such a manner that they do not become conscious at all -- that is to say, they are suppressed before they are perceived. In self-observation, on the other hand, he has but one task -- that of suppressing criticism; if he succeeds in doing this, an unlimited number of thoughts enter his consciousness which would otherwise have eluded his grasp. With the aid of the material thus obtained -- material which is new to the self-observer -- it is possible to achieve the interpretation of pathological ideas, and also that of dream-formations. As will be seen, the point is to induce a psychic state which is in some degree analogous, as regards the distribution of psychic energy (mobile attention), to the state of the mind before falling asleep -- and also, of course, to the hypnotic state. On falling asleep the 'undesired ideas' emerge, owing to the slackening of a certain arbitrary (and, of course,

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