

An introduction to dream interpretation

The purpose of this book is to help you interpret dreams. While the self-analysis of dreams is possible and can be beneficial, the interpretation of a person's dreams by a trained therapist probably has greater benefits. This book, therefore, is designed both for therapists who wish to use dream analysis as a psychotherapeutic technique and for laypeople who are interested in the field of dream interpretation. The ability to understand dreams is certainly not restricted to therapists. Anyone, properly motivated, can gain insights and benefit from exploring the meaning of dreams. There have been many dream interpretation books, the first of them (that we have knowledge of) dating as far back as 4000 to 5000 years ago. It will be the underlying philosophy of this book to provide the reader with a solid scientific foundation for the interpretation of dreams. Also, this book will provide guidelines for ethical psychotherapeutic interpretation of dreams. Although it has already been stated that anyone could benefit from dream self-analysis, it seems reasonable to assume that one could benefit more from dream analysis with a trained professional. If it is true that some dreams symbolize deeper meanings, issues, and conflicts, then the same processes (defenses) that change these issues into dream images may prevent us from becoming aware of them while we are awake. A therapist who uses dream interpretation techniques may help people face difficult issues, ones that we might avoid on our own, or even ones of which we may not be consciously aware.

This book may be conceived of as having four sections. After the introduction, the first section provides a physiological foundation for the scientific nature of sleep and dreams. The second section provides a historical, cultural, and religious background for dream interpretation. As noted earlier, there are dream interpretation books dating back approximately 4500 years or more. Some of the earliest written records, of any kind, contain reports of dreams. Dreams have also played a fascinating history in many major religions including Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Mormonism, and others. History is also replete with reports that God speaks through dreams, and this topic is discussed in greater detail. The third major section of this book covers more modern and highly influential dream theorists. An overview is provided of the dream theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Fritz Perls. A summary of their dream

interpretation techniques is also provided at the ends of those three chapters. Finally, the fourth section provides a synthesis of dream interpretation techniques that can be applied in psychotherapy and daily life. Numerous examples are also given.

Myths of dream interpretation: a dream glossary

Throughout this book, the scientific and ethical interpretation of dreams will be stressed. So what constitutes a myth with regard to dream interpretation? To begin, there is very little or no scientific evidence that dreams may be interpreted by a universal glossary. In other words, you cannot look up a dream image (like a lobster) in a book and find out that it means that you will soon experience difficulties in your life. There is a plethora of books that contain glossaries but none are based on any scientific evidence. Dream book glossaries may be entertaining, and interestingly they have ancient historical roots (probably dating back at least to 2500 B.C.) but this approach is highly unscientific. See Figure 1.1 for a 1931 dream glossary book.



Figure 1.1: King Tut Dream Book

Self-dream analysis at the least might also be deemed inefficient, as hinted at earlier, it is a central idea in this book that trained dream interpretation therapists are probably more efficient at getting at important psychological issues than we would obtain by interpreting dreams on our own. Experienced dream interpreters with proper training may be able to see through unconscious defenses and make connections between events and issues that individuals on their own could not or would not see or make.

Psychology: the field of dreams

Psychology is probably one of the most appropriate fields to host studies of dream interpretation. Certainly other disciplines, like biology, chemistry, and evolutionary sciences contribute to the understanding of dreams, but psychology, since its inception, has been a home for the study of dreaming and dream interpretation. Wilhelm Wundt (1804–1899), a German psychologist, has often been credited with founding the scientific discipline of psychology in 1879. What did Wundt have to say about dreams? Wundt (1896) believed that dreaming was a kind of temporary insanity. Dreaming is a hallucination, he wrote. He believed dreaming gave the normal person a glimpse of what a mental disturbance would be like. He dismissed premonition dreams as baseless. And vivid dreams, Wundt thought, were most often caused by indigestion. As for the general physiological nature of sleep, Wundt thought it vital and originating from the central nervous system.

William James (1842–1910), an American psychologist, wrote *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890. He is often credited with either co-establishing psychology along with Wundt or establishing psychology in America. In his epic textbook (James, 1890/1981) he had only one reference to dreams, and it is a mere footnote. Nevertheless, he was much more sympathetic to the psychological meaning of dreams than Wundt. James wrote that dreams might give us a glimpse of the ‘spiritual world.’ He noted that dreams throughout history have been considered divine revelations and often furnish us with mythologies and religious themes. Dreaming, he believed, was the other half of our ‘larger universe.’ The natural world consisted of our waking perceptions, and our supernatural world consisted of our dream images, and together they form our larger universe.

John B. Watson (1878–1935), another American psychologist is credited with being the founder of the behavioristic paradigm. One would not expect a behaviorist to be sympathetic to dreaming, but, surprisingly, Watson was. In his textbook, *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (Watson, 1919), he stated that dream analysis often reveals emotional tensions. ‘Dreams,’ he wrote, ‘are a part of a person’s sum total of reactions. They are as good indicators of the nature of his personality, of his stresses and strains and emotional life generally, as are any of his other activities.’

A new theory on the origin and meaning of dreams: Ernest Hartmann

Ernest Hartmann is a contemporary sleep and dream researcher. One of his earliest works was *The Biology of Dreaming* (Hartmann, 1967), which I read while an undergraduate. He is a world-renowned expert on the biology of dreaming, but more recently in his career he extended his interests to dreams and nightmares. At the American Psychological Association convention in Boston in 1999, I was finally able to see him speak in public. He began with an introduction that produced an audible impression on the audience when he said he had met Sigmund Freud. Because Freud died in 1939 and Hartmann did not look old enough, I was immediately skeptical. He put all our skepticisms to rest when he said that his father carried him in his arms at the age of two to meet the famous Dr. Freud.

Hartmann's (1998) new theory of dreaming builds on many previous theories and is consistent with my own dream analysis principles. First, he affirms there is no glossary of meaning. He believes that dreaming connects different thoughts. In that regard, he believes it may not be completely different than waking consciousness in that we also make connections between different thoughts and ideas while we are awake. However, he thought that dreaming allows us to make more creative and broad connections than when awake. He thought that dreaming tends to avoid well worn, 'tightly woven or overlearned regions of the mind.' He believed that this process of connecting was not random, but that it was guided by the emotions and emotional concerns of the dreamer. He saw dreams as providing a context for emotions, and, in his own words, he said, 'dreaming *contextualizes* emotion.' Part of this contextualization, he believed, was the ability of dreaming to note subtle similarities and to create metaphors for our emotional states. Thus, dreams create a story based on our emotions and psychological issues. Finally, Hartmann believed that the contextualization process thus served a purpose. By integrating new material into our dreaming consciousness and our waking consciousness, dreaming may help us become aware of problems, may help us solve them, may help us to be creative, and may calm emotional storms.

In the summary of his talk, Hartmann impressed me with a final thought. 'With dreams begin responsibilities,' he said. He told us that he liked the vagueness and uncertainty of the statement. At the same time, he thought that its roots went way back into the sands of time. He questioned whether it was to be interpreted as referring to our dreams when we sleep, or whether it was to be applied to our daydreams and imaginings. He did note, however, that if one had a big, powerful dream, one could sit back and simply say, 'Wow, that was incredible!' or he said:

You can stop smoking, you can create a new machine, a painting, a sonata, or a new religion.

You can change your life. You are free, I suppose, to do something or to do nothing at all. It is your dream. In dreams begin responsibilities.

Summary

- 1 There is no scientific evidence for a glossary approach to dream interpretation, e.g., if you dream of your teeth falling out, it means you will die.
- 2 Dream interpretation has a rich and ancient history.
- 3 Dream interpretation is probably more efficient and beneficial when conducted by a trained therapist and a client than by a self-analysis of dreams.
- 4 Dreams may provide a context for our emotions.
- 5 With dreams begin responsibilities.