

## *Chapter 2*

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### Sigmund Freud Discovers “The Secret of Dreams”

A large hall—numerous guests, whom we were receiving.—Among them was Irma. I at once took her on one side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my “solution” yet. I said to her: “If you still get pains, it’s really only your own fault.” She replied: “If you only knew what pains I’ve got now in my throat and stomach and abdomen—it’s choking me”—I was alarmed and looked at her. She looked pale and puffy. I thought to myself that after all I must be missing some organic trouble. I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance, like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that.—She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinal bones of the nose.—I at once called in Dr. M., and he repeated the examination and confirmed it. . . . Dr. M. looked quite different from usual; he was very pale, he walked with a limp and his chin was clean-shaven. . . . My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was perusing her through her bodice and saying: “She has a dull area low down on the left.” He also indicated that a portion of the skin on the left shoulder was infiltrated. (I noticed this, just as he did, in spite of her dress.) . . . M. said: “There’s no doubt it’s an infection, but no matter; dysentery will supervene and the toxin will be eliminated.” . . . We were directly aware, too, of the origin of her infection. Not long before, when she was feeling unwell, my friend Otto had given her an injection of a preparation of propyl, propyls . . . propionic acid . . . trimethylamin (and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type). . . . Injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly. . . . And probably the syringe had not been clean.

Sigmund Freud, July 23–24, 1895, in Freud  
1965a, 139–41

Sigmund Freud analyzes and interprets this dream of his in Chapter 2 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900 was the book's official publication date, although it actually first appeared in late 1899). The dream is now known as the "Dream of Irma's Injection" and also, because of its seminal importance in the development of Freud's theories, as "the specimen dream of psychoanalysis." Much of Freud's work relied directly on his own dreams and life experiences. To understand his work it is therefore essential to know something about his personal background. This chapter will start with a description of Freud's life up to the writing of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It will then examine the dream theory that Freud presents in that book, and finally it will consider some of the additions, changes, and revisions Freud made later in his career to his dream theory. Although it has become fashionable in recent years to attack Freud for being outdated, unscientific, sexist, and the like, the fact remains that virtually all twentieth-century dream psychologists have derived their basic principles and techniques from Freud's revolutionary work.

Soon after *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published, Freud wrote a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess and described the house (a resort villa outside of Vienna) in which he had experienced his dream of Irma. Freud wrote, "Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be placed on the house, inscribed with these words?—'In This House, on July 24th, 1895, the Secret of Dreams was Revealed to Dr. Sigm. Freud.' At the moment there seems little prospect of it" (1965a, 154). Although he did not live to see it, Freud's wish did come true. A marble plaque, inscribed with the exact words Freud had envisioned, was placed at the villa in 1977 (Masson 1985, 418).

#### FREUD'S LIFE

Sigmund Schlomo Freud was born in 1856 in Freiberg, Moravia, to Jacob Freud, a wool merchant, and his third wife Amalia.<sup>1</sup> As a child Freud was brought up in a rather complex network of family relations. Two sons from Jacob's first marriage lived nearby. One of them was older than Freud's relatively young mother Amalia, and the other was just a year younger than she. Freud's first playmate was his nephew—the little son of his oldest half-brother. In 1860 the family moved to Vienna, where Freud grew up and lived the whole of his life until 1938. The outbreak of World War II forced him to flee to London, where he died a year later, in 1939.

The Vienna of Freud's youth was an exciting place of optimism and opportunity. In 1867 Jews were officially granted political rights equal to those of other citizens and were increasingly accepted into mainstream society. Throughout his school years Freud, like many people in the Jewish community, followed the general trend towards cultural assimilation—he embraced the humanistic values of political liberalism, affirmed the universal goals of rationality and human freedom, and identified himself as a German rather than a Jew. But after 1880 the liberal

political atmosphere abruptly evaporated. Anti-Semitism returned with a vengeance, and for young Jewish men like Freud, hopes for assimilation were suddenly shattered, replaced by deep disappointment and bitterness.

Freud entered the University of Vienna in 1873 and graduated in 1881 with a medical degree. From early childhood he had been deeply interested in scientific pursuits, and he found great pleasure in satisfying his natural curiosity by means of empirical research and investigation. Once out of school, though, Freud was forced to set aside his strong desire for a life of pure medical research. In the spring of 1882 Freud had met Martha Bernays, and within two months they were engaged. Freud quickly realized that private practice, not research, was the only realistic road to financial independence and the ability to provide an acceptable home for his fiancée. So over the next four years he slowly built up his medical practice by treating people suffering from hysteria, neuroses, and other mental disturbances. He continued to do as much research as he could, however, and he published several well-received scholarly articles on neurological disorders. Finally, in September of 1886, Sigmund and Martha got married. Between 1887 and 1895 they had a total of six children together.<sup>2</sup>

In 1896 his father died, and the loss pained Freud deeply. He spoke of his sufferings in his numerous letters to Wilhelm Fliess, the ear and nose specialist from Berlin who was Freud's closest friend during those years. In his letters Freud poured out his emotions, memories, confidences, dreams, anxieties, and wishes, as well as his latest psychological speculations. He told Fliess of the various physical ailments and neurotic symptoms that had been plaguing him, and he confessed that "the chief patient I am preoccupied with is myself" (Masson 1985, 261).

Early in 1898 Freud mentioned to Fliess that he had begun writing a book on dreams. By the fall of 1899 he had completed it, and he sent a copy to Fliess. Freud anxiously wrote, "I have long since become reconciled to [the book] and await its fate in—resigned suspense" (Masson 1985, 380).

#### THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

In the preface to the second edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud admitted that his book had great personal significance for him. Looking back on the process of writing it, he found that it was "a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father's death—that is to say, to the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life" (1965a, xxvi). Farther along in his career, when he struggled with doubts about his theories, Freud said that he always regained his confidence by turning back to *The Interpretation of Dreams*. And in 1930, when he reflected on his life's many achievements, he concluded that this book contained "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" (1965a, xxxii). More than just a statement of his psychological theories, *The*

*Interpretation of Dreams* is a work that expresses Freud's most deeply held feelings and beliefs.

### Freud's Method of Interpretation

At the outset of the book Freud announces his goals: to explain the origins of dream images, to understand the relationship of dreams to other abnormal mental phenomena (like phobias, obsessions, and delusions), and to develop new techniques for treating mental illness. Freud declares that while other psychological researchers have dismissed dreams as the nonsensical products of a sleep-impaired mind, he is going to demonstrate that dreams *do* have psychological meaning and *can* be interpreted.

Two popular methods of interpreting dreams have come down to us through history, Freud says. The first is the symbolic method, which takes the whole dream as a symbolic analogy for a waking life situation. As an example of this method Freud cites Joseph's interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams in the Bible. The second is the decoding method, in which a dictionary or manual is used to translate each part of a dream into a known meaning. Freud points to Artemidorus as practicing this method of interpretation. Freud says that both of these traditional methods are arbitrary, subjective, and essentially superstitious. But he insists that modern psychologists are wrong to dismiss dreams as a subject of serious scientific inquiry. Freud says that he agrees with the popular traditions that dreams are, if properly interpreted, profoundly meaningful expressions: "I must affirm that dreams really have a meaning and that a scientific procedure for interpreting them is possible" (1965a, 132).

Freud's approach to dream interpretation is similar to the decoding method in that it breaks the dream down into parts and analyzes the meaning of each specific image. But unlike the decoding method, Freud does not translate the dream's images according to the definitions prescribed in an interpreter's manual. Rather, he looks at what occurs to the *dreamer* in relation to each part of the dream. Freud asks the dreamer to "free associate"—to describe whatever thoughts come up in connection to the dream images, no matter how random, foolish, or embarrassing the thoughts might seem. The spontaneous ideas, feelings, and memories that emerge during free association are, Freud claims, the essential clues to the underlying meaning of the dream.

### The Dream of Irma's Injection

Freud demonstrates this method by looking at his "Dream of Irma's Injection." Freud examines this dream very carefully, image by image, and he ponders the meaning of the various thoughts that come to his mind in connection with each element. As he goes on, he notices a recurrent theme beginning to appear: the dream presents a number of different explanations for Irma's pains. First it's "her

own fault" for not listening to Freud; then her pains are apparently due to some physical disease; and then her troubles are caused by the "dirty syringe." In waking life, Irma was in fact a patient of Freud's, and he had been only partly successful in curing her illness. Some of Freud's medical colleagues (represented in the dream by Otto and Dr. M.) knew of the case, and Freud worried that they blamed him for Irma's persistent sufferings. But the dream portrays Freud as utterly blameless: in the dream Irma's pains are not Freud's fault, but are caused by a variety of other things.

At the end of his analysis Freud concludes that the dream shows how he *wishes* things were: he wishes he were blameless for Irma's pains. The motive for having the dream was this wish, and the dream represents the wish as fulfilled. This, Freud says, is the essence of dreams. This is the secret that was revealed to him at that house in 1895: *dreams are the fulfillments of wishes*.

### Manifest and Latent Contents

The immediate objection to Freud's argument is, but what about nightmares? How could a terrifying dream filled with fear and anxiety possibly be the fulfillment of a wish?

Freud responds by saying that we must distinguish between the *manifest* and the *latent* contents of dreams. The manifest content is the surface of the dream, the images that we remember when we awaken. Underlying the dream's surface is the latent content, the deeper thoughts and feelings that Freud says are always expressions of wishes. When a dream is created the latent content becomes transformed in such a way that the underlying wish is heavily distorted, thus masking its original nature. This process of distortion, or *censorship*, is necessary because the latent wishes are often immoral or antisocial, relating to our basic sexual, aggressive, and egotistical instincts (in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud makes his original statement about the Oedipus complex, the tremendously powerful but deeply unconscious yearning in all men to kill their fathers and sleep with their mothers [Freud 1965a, 281–301]). He offers a few examples of dreams whose wishes are obvious in the manifest content (e.g., children's dreams and dreams of "convenience," in which a hungry person dreams of eating, or a thirsty person dreams of drinking). However, such obvious dreams are rare, and generally dreams do disguise their wishes. Freud always denied the popular misunderstanding of his theory that all dreams are motivated by sexual wishes. He says that while sexual wishes do indeed express themselves in dreams, other wishes appear as well. (1965a, 194, 432).

In his dream of Irma, the latent content involves deeply self-centered wishes that Freud felt were socially unacceptable. Such wishes are taken by a part of the psyche Freud calls the "censoring agency" and transformed in such a way that their immoral nature is hidden.

So one explanation Freud gives for the occurrence of nightmares is that frightening dreams do indeed fulfill wishes: the fear is created by the failure of the censoring agency to mask the wishes well enough. Nightmares are dreams in which the censor's defenses buckle, and the immoral wish succeeds in breaking through during sleep. Freud also offers a second explanation for frightening dreams. He says that many people have "a masochistic component in [their] sexual constitution," a sense of pleasure in being hurt or humiliated (1965a, 192). For such people, a terribly unpleasant dream could well be fulfilling a wish, a *masochistic* wish.

Freud notes one more possible explanation for why a dream might not appear to be the fulfillment of a wish. He recalls a patient to whom he had explained his theory of dreams. The next day she reported to him a dream of going on vacation with her mother-in-law. In waking life his woman strongly disliked her mother-in-law and had recently decided to go on vacation by herself. The dream, then, reverses the positive solution she had just reached; it seems to be the exact opposite of what the woman truly wished. The woman challenged Freud, insisting that her dream proved that his theory was wrong. After a moment's pause, Freud responded that the wish motivating her dream was exactly this, *to prove him wrong*. Freud noted that around the time of the woman's dream he had inferred that she must have suffered an earlier psychological trauma that was partly responsible for her current illness. At first the woman disputed this, but later admitted that Freud was right. Her dream was thus motivated by a very deep and powerful wish that Freud would be wrong, that that earlier trauma had never happened (1965a, 185). Freud goes on to say that readers of his book may have similar "counter-wish dreams," which will apparently disprove Freud's dream theory but will in fact stem from the wish that his theory about the sexual, aggressive, and egotistical instincts found in all humans not be true.

On the basis of this analysis of unpleasant feelings in dreams, Freud gives the following definition of the nature of dreams: "A dream is a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish" (1965a, 194).

### The Dream Work

Looking more carefully at how latent wishes are transformed into the manifest content of the dream, Freud says that two basic sources are used in this process. One source is the "day residue," neutral or indifferent memories from regular day-to-day life. Recent images of ordinary activities are used in dreams as highly effective masks for underlying wishes—like "the sheep's clothing that hides the wolf" (1965a, 216). The other source of material for this process is more distant memories from the dreamer's past. Such recollections reach back to the earliest childhood expressions of those powerful instinctual wishes. The deeper the analysis of a dream goes, Freud claims, the closer one comes to the "track of experiences in childhood" which run throughout the dream's latent content.

The process of transformation itself Freud calls "the dream-work." Freud says that dreams are not, strictly speaking, creative or original in their formation. They are simply a reworking of material already in the psyche. The "essence" of the dream, then, is the dream-work, and not the latent wishes and thoughts which have been transformed by it (1965a, 179, 544–545). He describes four specific dream-work mechanisms that change latent thoughts, wishes, and memories into the manifest images of the remembered dream.

The first dream-work mechanism is *condensation*. Freud notes that sometimes the interpretation of a very simple dream image leads to a whole array of complex meanings. What happens, Freud says, is that the dream image serves as a "nodal point" at which many different latent thoughts converge. Looking at another one of his own dreams, the "Dream of the Botanical Monograph," Freud finds that a single dream image—looking through a book he has written—reveals, upon analysis, many different meanings: the dream image relates to a book he had in fact once written, and to a recent day's memory, and to his relationship with a colleague, and to his wife's personal likes and dislikes, and to a particular scene from his childhood. All of these latent thoughts are condensed into the manifest dream image of looking through the book. The mechanism of condensation is most clearly evident in dreams with characters that combine the features of two different people (e.g., the face of one person with the hair of another person), or with settings that combine details of two or more different places (e.g., a house from one place set in a different city or neighborhood). Freud found in analyzing his "Dream of Irma's Injection" that the character of Irma represented in condensed form a total of eight different women.<sup>3</sup> Freud says that such dream images are "overdetermined"—they contain a multitude of different and complexly-related meanings.

*Displacement* is the second dream-work mechanism. People often wonder why the emotions they feel in dreams are so often out of sync with what actually happens in the dream. For example, a trivial little incident in a dream might make a person cry hysterically, or flee in terror, or explode in anger. Freud explains these kinds of dreams by saying that the dream-work frequently shifts emotions associated with a particular latent thought or wish to a seemingly unrelated dream image. This displacement of emotional intensity is yet another way that the dream's latent content is masked: the feelings of sadness, fear, or anger that appear in the dream are not really connected to that trivial manifest image, but are in fact connected to certain repressed thoughts and wishes in the latent content. In such dreams the center of emotional intensity has been moved from its original place to a seemingly unimportant location within the dream (although Freud notes that his dream of Irma's injection does not shift the center of emotional intensity in this way (1965a, 341)).

The third mechanism of the dream-work is what Freud calls the *considerations of representability*. Because dreams are primarily visual experiences, Freud says a major part of the dream-work process involves transforming latent thoughts and

wishes into visual images. One example of this would be a dream of a king and queen, which would visually represent latent thoughts about masculine and feminine powers. Another example would be a dream of being chased by a monster, which would visually represent latent thoughts about a frighteningly strong instinctual urge. Freud acknowledges that it is often very difficult to translate a dream's visual images back into the original latent content, but he insists that this difficulty is due to the psychological resistance people feel toward the deeply disturbing wishes underlying their dreams. In fact, the dream-work's goal is just this, to prevent those wishes from entering people's awareness. Dreams, Freud says, "are not made with the intention of being understood" (1965a, 377). This explains why we remember so few of our dreams—we don't want to remember them, we resist them.

In the course of representing the latent content in visual images the dream-work makes extensive use of symbols drawn from the popular culture of dreamer's social world. Male genitals may be represented in dreams by images of knives, guns, sticks, towers, snakes, and any other long, pointed object. Female genitals may be symbolized by images of boxes, ovens, rooms, ships, and vessels of various kinds. Symbols of sexual intercourse include flying, climbing stairs, and any image of up-and-down or back-and-forth movements. Freud notes that these same symbols appear abundantly in mythology, folklore, proverbs, and jokes. In some cases, then, he says the interpreter of a dream can go outside the dreamer's personal associations and find clues to the dream's latent meanings by referring to these common cultural symbols.

The fourth and final dream-work mechanism is *secondary revision*. Secondary revision works to smooth over the rough edges of the manifest dream. It fills in the gaps, makes minor revisions and additions, and generally gives the manifest dream a more orderly appearance. A common instance of this mechanism's work is revealed when a person tries to describe the connection between two different dream scenes. The person might say, "First I was in my home, and then I must have flown, or something like that, to a beach." What has happened, Freud says, is that two different dream scenes have been made to seem connected. By adding in the vague notion of flying, the dream-work has transformed the two scenes into one dream. This effort to create order and coherence links the dream-work mechanism of secondary revision with the activities of waking thought. Just as people seek order and coherence in their waking perceptions, so do they in dreams. Despite the connotations of its name, Freud insists that this fourth dream-work mechanism does not operate after the others have created the dream. Rather, secondary revision works directly on the latent dream material, right alongside the other dream-work mechanisms (although many years later Freud says that secondary revision occurs once the other dream-work mechanisms have finished performing their functions [1965b, 19–20]). And like those other mechanisms, secondary revision helps to disguise the latent meanings of the dream by strengthening the deceptive facade of the manifest dream. Freud mentions the extreme

example of dreams in which the dreamer suddenly thinks, "This is only a dream." Freud says such "dreams within a dream" occur when the censoring agency has failed, and a forbidden wish has broken through. The very rational thought "this is only a dream" diminishes the importance of the dream—and thus fulfills the wish that what has just been dreamed *didn't happen* (1965a, 373–374).

### Freud's Model of the Psyche

In the final chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud discusses what dreams reveal about the fundamental nature of the human psyche. Having investigated the complex operations of the censoring agency and the four mechanisms of the dream-work, Freud concludes that the "mental apparatus" is composed of three "systems": consciousness, the preconscious, and the unconscious. Consciousness functions to perceive and process information from both external and internal sources. The preconscious system involves mental operations and processes that are not currently in the field of consciousness but could easily enter awareness if given attention. The unconscious system includes those instincts, wishes, memories, and other mental processes that have been repressed or denied access to the conscious and preconscious systems because of their deeply unsettling nature.

The formation of dreams, in what is known as Freud's "topographical" model of the psyche, can be explained as follows. When we fall asleep, a conflict soon arises between two different desires: on the one hand, we need the rest that peaceful sleep brings us; on the other, various unconscious urges take advantage of the weakened power of consciousness in sleep to assert themselves. But those urges are so immoral that they threaten to disrupt the person's sleep. So, in order to accommodate both the wish to sleep and the wish to satisfy unconscious urges, the mind (the "psychic apparatus") creates dreams as a compromise. The unconscious urges are transformed by the four mechanisms of the dream-work and are allowed a disguised, hallucinatory fulfillment that prevents their real nature from disturbing sleep. Dreams, Freud says, function as "the guardians of sleep" (1965a, 267).

Ultimately, what the psychological study of dreams reveals is the operation of two fundamentally different modes of human psychological functioning. Freud calls them the *primary process* (generally unconscious) and the *secondary process* (generally preconscious and conscious). Primary process thought is instinctual, wishful, irrational; its sole concern is to seek pleasure. In contrast, secondary process thought is sober, controlled, rational; its works to regulate the fulfillment of instinctual wishes in accordance with the demands of reality. Primary process thought is infantile, and interested in nothing beyond the individual's own wishes and desires. Secondary process thought is mature, and aware of the social and physical limits on satisfying those deeper instincts. The thoughts of children, primitives, and people with mental illnesses are governed by the primary process; the thoughts of sane modern adults are governed by the secondary process.

So the "core of our being," in Freud's view, consists of unconscious wishful impulses, of primary process yearnings for pleasure. Secondary process modes of thought develop later, and they help us channel those wishful impulses in more effective ways, by means of clear, rational perceptions of reality. Freud believes that this psychological development of ever greater secondary process control over the primary process occurs in each individual's growth from childhood to adulthood and also in the human race's growth from primitive to modern civilization. A later term Freud uses for this process of channeling and controlling is *sublimation*.

As helpful as dream interpretation may be in treating people with mental illnesses, Freud argues that the greatest value of interpreting dreams lies in the profound insights it gives into the fundamental nature of the human psyche. For this reason he declares that "*the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind*" (1965a, 647). Freud says that dreams do not give us any knowledge about the future, at least in the sense that ancient peoples have always believed. Rather, dreams give us greater knowledge of the *past*, both of the dreamer's childhood and of humankind's primal stages of psychological development. Freud concludes his book by granting that perhaps dreams can be said to lead us into the future—by expressing those powerful and indestructible wishes that do indeed motivate all our life's activities and achievements.

#### FREUD'S LATER WRITINGS ON DREAMS

Over the next forty years of his life Freud made no fundamental changes to his dream theory. He repeatedly said that nothing had ever persuaded him to alter the basic principles laid out in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. However, he did make dozens of small additions and editorial revisions to the book, as a general effort to keep it up to date with new developments in dream research. And in his later writings he addressed two subjects that were not directly examined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: post-traumatic dreams and telepathic dreams.

#### Post-Traumatic Dreams

In his 1920 work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud introduced a new view of the psyche, what is often called the "second topography" or the "structural model of the mind" (Gedo and Goldberg 1973). In this new view the psyche is made up of three "agencies": the *id*, the source of our instinctual energies and desires; the *superego*, the source of internal judgment, criticism, and morality; and the *ego*, which struggles to reconcile the demands of the *id* and the *superego* and to adapt the person's desires to the necessities of reality.

Freud developed this new "structural" model of *id-superego-ego* in part because the earlier topographical model of unconscious-preconscious-consciousness did

not adequately explain post-traumatic dreams. People who have suffered a terrible trauma recently (e.g., in wartime combat) or in the distant past (e.g., in early childhood) frequently have recurrent dreams that directly replay the traumatic experience, with all the extremely fearful emotions that came with it. Such dreams, Freud realized, did not make sense in terms of the wish-fulfillment theory—what wish could possibly be satisfied by these terrible recurrent nightmares?

Freud acknowledged that traumatic dreams are not fulfilling any instinctual wish for pleasure. Rather, he decided that such dreams are motivated by a wish for mastery, a wish that reflects a more reality-based effort to overcome and control the anxiety arising from the traumatic event. These dreams express a wish not of the *id*, but of the *ego*. Freud's new structural model of the psyche allowed him to distinguish dreams generated by purely instinctual wishes (coming from the *id*) from dreams created in the service of waking life adaptation (coming from the *ego*). Post-traumatic dreams, then, are the only exceptions that Freud admits to his theory that dreams fulfill repressed instinctual wishes.

#### Telepathic Dreams

In a number of his later writings Freud examined the question of whether telepathy is possible in dreams (1953a, 1953b, 1953c, 1965b). Freud was generally suspicious toward all claims to occult knowledge because they appeared to him to be nostalgic efforts to revive religious superstitions in the face of modern scientific progress. Nevertheless, he insisted that telepathy should be investigated like any other phenomenon to determine if it could be empirically verified. So what does a scientific examination reveal about telepathy, the alleged extrasensory perception of other people's thoughts or far-distant events?

Freud studied a number of instances of telepathy in both waking and sleeping states, and he found that many of them could be accounted for by ordinary psychological operations of perception and reasoning. But other cases could not be so easily explained, and here Freud granted that genuinely telepathic, extrasensory modes of perception might be at work. He said that sleep seems to provide an especially good setting for such extrasensory perceptual modes to operate, and the information they convey is transformed by the dream-work just like any other latent content material. While scientists may not yet fully understand how telepathy operates, Freud argued that there is no reason to deny that it exists, nor to be frightened by it: "in my opinion it shows no great confidence in science if one does not think it capable of assimilating and working over whatever may perhaps turn out to be true in the assertions of occultists" (1965b, 49).

#### FREUD'S ANSWERS TO THE THREE BASIC QUESTIONS

Freud's answers to the three basic questions about dreams, posed in Chapter 1, can be summarized in this way:

### Formation

During sleep, unconscious urges, wishes, and thoughts rise up to seek expression and fulfillment. Because this unconscious material is generally immoral and antisocial (relating to sexual, aggressive, and egotistical desires), it threatens to disrupt the individual's ability to sleep restfully. So the unconscious material is halted by a censoring agency in the psyche and transformed by the four mechanisms of the dream-work (condensation, displacement, considerations of representability, and secondary revision). What results is a deceitful manifest dream, put together out of bits and pieces of thoughts, memories, cultural symbols, and so forth, that has no apparent connection to the latent wishes and thoughts underlying it. Freud compares a dream's formation to the way that elaborate new facades were built over ancient Italian churches—the church's public front served as a mask to hide the original structure lying behind.

### Function

In Freud's view dreams serve two important functions. One is to protect sleep, to allow the psychic apparatus to rest peacefully. The other is to provide a partial fulfillment, in hallucinated form, of those powerful unconscious urges, wishes, and desires that rise up during sleep. By gaining some measure of satisfaction through dreams, those unconscious forces put less pressure on waking consciousness; this helps people function more effectively in their daily lives. (In the exceptional case of people who have suffered extreme traumas, their dreams may serve the ego-related function of mastering anxiety and thus adapting better to reality.)

### Interpretation

Dreams are not meant to be understood, Freud says. On the contrary, they are meant to deceive, to hide their true meanings from the dreamer. Furthermore, people actively resist understanding their dreams because those true meanings are so disturbing. Nevertheless, Freud argues that dreams can be interpreted, by a process of reversing the dream-work: by tearing down the dream's manifest facade, breaking it into pieces, and carefully reconstructing the original thoughts and wishes that motivated the dream's formation. An interpretation of a dream should begin by asking the dreamer to free associate to each image of the dream, describing whatever ideas, feelings, and memories spontaneously arise in connection with those images. At certain points the interpreter may go outside the dreamer's free associations and rely on the meanings of common cultural symbols to explain particular dream images. Dream interpretation has both practical and theoretical value for Freud. Practically, it aids in the treatment of mentally disturbed people. Theoretically, it gives valuable insights into the fundamental nature of the human psyche.

### NOTES

1. Peter Gay notes that "the names that his father inscribed for him in the family Bible, 'Sigismund Schlomo,' did not survive Freud's adolescence. He never used 'Schlomo,' his paternal grandfather's name, and after experimenting with 'Sigmund' during his later years at school, adopted it some time after he entered the University of Vienna in 1873" (1988, 4-5).

2. Gay suggests that their long engagement, during which time both Freud and his fiancée appear to have been celibate, generated a high degree of sexual tension in Freud; and "those more than four interminable years of waiting left their imprint on the formation of Freud's theories about the sexual etiology of most mental ailments" (1988, 38).

3. The eight women represented in the dream are Irma herself, the governess, Irma's friend, Freud's wife, Freud's daughter Mathilda, the sulphonal patient named Mathilda, Freud's patient with nasal septal necrosis, and the 80-year old woman Freud gave morphine injections.

# An Introduction to the Psychology of Dreaming

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*Kelly Bulkeley*

1997

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PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut  
London