

Freud's dream symbols and jung's viewpoint



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Actually - and I confess this to you with a struggle - I have a boundless admiration for you both as a man and a researcher, and I bear you no conscious grudge... My veneration for you has something of a "religious" crush.-Carl Jung, in a letter to Freud, 28 October 1907A transference on a religious basis would strike me as most disastrous; it could end only in apostasy, thanks to the universal human tendency to keep making new prints of the cliches we bear within us. I shall do my best to show you that I am unfit to be an object of worship.-Freud to Jung, 15 November 1907Sigmund Freud wrote copiously, though inconsistently, on the question of dream-symbolism. Picking his ideas apart will reveal their uncanny similarity to Jung's work on the collective unconscious in dreaming. In that context, how might we understand the two thinkers in relation to another? But first, Freud's use of the term symbol must be made clear. The manifest content is the stand-in for the latent content of a dream. Interpretation consists merely in replacing any manifest image by its determiner. Free association is the primary means of accomplishing this feat. This necessarily implies that any given dream object acts as the representative of an idea that the censorship has carefully blocked from consciousness. Following this logic, a reader ought to have little trouble calling any dream image a symbol.* The very first image Freud analyses lends itself to this all-embracing characterization:" The hall - numerous guests whom we were receiving. We were spending that summer at Bellevue, a house on one of the hills adjoining the Kahlenberg...On the previous day [before the dream] my wife had told me that she expected that a number of friends, including Irma, would be coming out to visit us on her birthday. My dream was thus anticipating this occasion." In the dream itself there are no explicit

references to Freud's wife or to Bellevue. The hall calls up this group of ideas by association alone. The disparity between what is meant and what Freud actually sees in his sleep resolves itself easily enough into a formula: the hall is symbolic of the birthday party. This quick formula, however, seems to put a great deal of pressure on the idea of symbolism. The tension arises at first because a birthday party seems to be of so little importance. A symbol must, we tend to feel, designate some great event, a profound fraternity, a deep relationship; a cross, a flag, a lover's lock of hair are the stuff of symbols. But this strict definition is too restrictive for psychoanalysis, which is in part the science of determining what exactly is important. Any page of Freud illustrates the insignificance of the concept of insignificance. Since a birthday party may weigh more heavily on a psyche than the Apocalypse, it is clear that a Freudian model of symbolism cannot reject a possible symbol on the grounds that it does not appear to matter enough to us. Freud himself might contend that the hall does not pass his litmus test for a symbol because it is not sexual in nature (though a hall certainly could be). Summarizing Section E ("Representation by Symbols") of the chapter on the dream-work in the Interpretation of Dreams, he writes in On Dreams that there is only one method by which a dream which expresses erotic wishes can succeed in appearing innocently nonsexual in its manifest content...Unlike other forms of indirect representation, that which is employed in dreams must not be immediately intelligible. The modes of representation which fulfill these conditions are usually described as "symbols" of the things which they represent. This standard is inconsistent with his use of the term. In The Interpretation of Dreams, he points to luggage as symbolic of "a load of sin," and earlier claims that Wilhelm Stekel has elucidated our understanding of

the "symbolism of death." According to Freud's definition, the phrase "symbolism of death" is utterly incomprehensible, as all symbols are supposedly sexual. The other point Freud makes above, namely that symbols must "not be immediately intelligible," is unintelligible itself in the context of his method. Some of the associations Freud makes are terrifically obscure at first glance. The "preparation of propionic acid," does not prima facie suggest itself as symbolic of Freud's "great prudence;" a great chain of associations is required before the dreamer is allowed to make that connection. Freud confesses that such a link may be the result of a "far-fetched and senseless chain of thought." Therefore neither sexuality nor unintelligibility suffices to distinguish a symbol from any meaningful (representative) object in a dream. The last conceivable objection to the notion of the "symbolic hall" as featured in the Dream of Irma's Injection is that this particular representation is not common enough to qualify as a symbol. Everyone knows what the Cross symbolizes, whereas only Freud knows the meaning of the hall. Indeed, the commonality or sheer popularity of a representation is what Freud assumes makes a symbol a symbol - despite his explicit writing to the contrary. There is no other possible explanation for the assertion that "rooms represent women" and "staircases or going upstairs represent sexual intercourse," while the "propionic acid" achieves only the rank of a "substitution," other than the fact that staircases and rooms work their magic on an almost universal scale. Freud, however, tries to make perfectly clear that some "symbols [are] constructed by an individual out of his own ideational material." Still, examples of this sort in the Interpretation of Dreams are nonexistent. If a symbol could emerge from a dreamer's personal "ideational material,"

symbolism would no longer be an expedient for the interpretation of dreams or “ popular myths, legends, linguistic idioms, proverbial wisdom [or] current jokes.” And above all, symbolism is an expedient, a trick, a ready-made explication. In the opening passages of “ Representation by Symbols,” Freud offers us an explanation of our own dreams without demanding that we sit ourselves down on his couch to fight against resistant associations. Symbols “ fill the gap,” as it were, when “ the dreamer’s free associations leave us in the lurch.” This presents a problem. For if Freud would have us believe that a symbol can transcend the associations of the dreamer, then does he not therefore suggest that the formation of a symbol is fundamentally different from the formation of a non-symbolic dream object, such as the propionic acid? Freud’s recommendation of a “ combined technique” which attacks the latent content by relying on both the “ dreamer’s associations” and the “ interpreter’s knowledge of symbols” begs this question. Inasmuch as he assumes that one can analyze a given portion of a dream without reference to the dreamer’s associations, he posits the difficult idea that a dream’s content can in part be determined by something other than the dreamer’s experience. In short, does the existence of symbols (in the sense that Freud actually uses the term) require that there be some kind of “ collective unconscious” floating about in some transcendental psychic realm? The first time Freud addresses the question of the formation of symbols, in his “ Project for a Scientific Psychology,” he makes reference to such an odd and seemingly unscientific abstraction: “[T]here has been an occurrence which consisted of B+A. A was an incidental circumstance; B was appropriate for producing the lasting effect. The reproduction of this event in memory has now taken a form of such a kind that it as though A had stepped into B’s

place. A has become a substitute, a symbol for B." The mechanism is as individual as digestion. A is associated in the mind with the more important B by " incidental circumstance," and therefore A represents B. This simple, almost Pavlovian model anticipates Freud's later explanation of our need to mask erotic/traumatic content specifically: it is certainly of a more " lasting effect," as he puts it. But if we follow the model to the letter, we find ourselves once again having to label personal dream images like propionic acid as symbols. Hence this early attempt to explain the mechanism of symbol-formation, though to some degree prophetic, is not particularly useful. There is no hint of the uniformity across personal boundaries that comes to define symbolism. Is it possible, however, to expand this model such that it can account for uniformity? If A were to occur to everyone who experiences B, then we might easily dispense with the discomfoting idea of a " collective unconscious" or an " inherent meaning." Freud indeed suggests something along these lines in explaining why it is a staircase - one example out of a hundred - comes to denote intercourse. He writes in his essay " Future Prospects of Psycho-analysis" that " the rhythmical pattern of copulation," i. e. B in the model, " is reproduced in going upstairs," i. e. A. The linguistic explanation for staircase symbolism fits the model in the same way. All Germans " incidentally" associate climbing stairs, or mounting (" steigen") with the sexual mounter (" Steiger"), so to speak. In English, the relationship is roughly analogous: in slang, we do " mount," or climb aboard. Common experience seen in this light is neither profound nor confusing. It is merely the sum of personal experiences, linguistic or physical. Symbolism-formation is therefore restored to the individual. This easy explanation, however, does not jive with one striking claim that Freud makes, alluded to <https://assignbuster.com/freuds-dream-symbols-and-jungs-viewpoint/>

earlier by the phrase "combined technique," namely that the symbols the dream-work makes use of are entirely unknown to the dreamer. Such meaning must be unknown or else there is no reason for the dreamer's associations, or lack thereof, to leave an interpretation "in the lurch." The B+A model necessarily implies that the dreamer could come to understand the meaning of any symbol by a basic associative chain: A staircase - rhythm of footsteps - rhythm of the body - up, up, up - intercourse. Resistance is not blocking the revelation here, because one can only resist unconscious knowledge. Here there is no knowledge, in the conventional sense of the term. The dreamer does not know in any way that staircases are sex. And yet they are. Thus there is a basic contradiction. It is impossible that the dreamer is completely unaware of the equation that he is in fact using. He must know it somehow. We are stuck. The road out of this quagmire is, indeed, that otherworldly demon, the questionable prehistory of the psyche, the collective unconscious, as Jung would later term it. Now utterly impersonal knowledge is possible. For here, as Freud writes in his essay "An Outline of Psychoanalysis," published posthumously, certain "material" is accessible which cannot have originated either from the dreamer's adult life or from his forgotten childhood. We are obliged to regard it as part of the archaic heritage which a child brings with him into the world, before any experience of his own, influenced by the experiences of his ancestors... Thus dreams constitute a source of human prehistory which is not to be despised. It is no coincidence that Freud wrote this stunning, and perhaps anti-Freudian, passage at the very end of his career. He had only hinted at this bizarre idea in the Interpretation of Dreams, writing that those "things that are symbolically connected today were probably united in prehistoric times

<https://assignbuster.com/freuds-dream-symbols-and-jungs-viewpoint/>

by conceptual and linguistic identity." But this confusing sentence does not demand that we accept the borderline mystical idea of knowledge before experience. Our ancestors might have simply walked up the same staircases that we do today. In 1900, a Freudian could still hold fast to the lovely A+B model. By 1940, the astonishing frequency with which the same symbol had visited unrelated dreamers, often " extend[ing] further than a use of a common language," suggested to Freud something deeper than a mere pattern of experience. If Vienna's Dora and Genesis' Jacob can dream up such a similar picture, then there must be a " human prehistory." All of a sudden, Freud looks like a Jungian. Indeed, the similarities between the late Freud and his greatest dissenter Jung are striking. Jung defines the collective unconscious as the " store of latent memory traces inherited from man's ancestral past, a past that includes not only the racial history of man as a separate species but his pre-human or animal ancestry as well." Freud's " archaic history" and Jung's " ancestral past" differ in diction, not essence. Both presuppose that a child can somehow inherit memories and experiences. The unbeliever might try to reconcile such a notion to conventional scientific (or Freudian) thinking by arguing that we have inherited only the predisposition to represent ideas the way our ancestors did, much in the same way that we probably tend to like similar types of foods. This reply sidesteps the problem only because it does not address it; unconscious " material" and " memory traces" are hardly predispositions. Yet the two thinkers differed dramatically on dream theory. Jung had the advantage of basing his most innovative work on the " personal unconscious" on what he knew of the collective unconscious, whereas Freud focused his energies on common, perhaps universal, childhood stories. Thus

<https://assignbuster.com/freuds-dream-symbols-and-jungs-viewpoint/>

Jung can see a dream of ladders or staircases as symbolic of a drama that is rooted in a land far more fertile than the narrow swamp of our unfulfilled sexual longings. In his essay, "Individual Dream Symbolism in Relation to Alchemy," wherein he attempts to locate a particular individual's unconscious in relation to the collective, Jung analyses the following dream: "A dangerous walk with Father and Mother, up and down many ladders." We know immediately what Freud would make of it. A ladder is "analogous" to a staircase and hence serves the same symbolic function - copulation. He would see the "danger" as a manifestation of the fear of incest, the "up and down" as the fulfillment of the infantile wish. As to the supposedly bisexual element of the dream ("Father and Mother"), Freud certainly would posit volumes of conjecture. Jung is a hair more poetic: "Regression [in this case, to the mother and father] spells disintegration into our historical and hereditary determinants, and it is only with the greatest effort that we can free ourselves from their embrace. Our psychic prehistory is in truth the spirit of gravity, which needs steps and ladders because, unlike the disembodied airy intellect, it cannot fly at will." If we accept the collective unconscious, there is absolutely no reason not to follow Jung in seeing "regression" as potentially a regression back into our primordial roots, as "every man, in a sense, represents the whole of humanity and its history." Why stop at childhood, when before childhood there lurks another important developmental stage? The Freud who wrote the Interpretation of Dreams would undoubtedly see this Jungian analysis as mystical fluff, not as regression to a psychic prehistory but instead "to the technique of interpretation used by the ancients, to whom dream interpretation was identical with interpretation by means of symbols." One can follow Freud a

<https://assignbuster.com/freuds-dream-symbols-and-jungs-viewpoint/>

few steps in this hypothetical criticism. The question of proof certainly does loom over Jung's complicated analysis. How does he know that a ladder stands for the vicissitudes of the individual unconscious as it struggles to escape its "hereditary determinants"? At least Freud can substantiate his formulas by pointing to, say, an experiment by Betlheim and Hartmann (1924), in which Korsakoff patients who were told "grossly sexual" stories substituted staircases (or shootings or stabbings) for intercourse when they reproduced those stories. Jung instead relies completely on context - the widest conceivable context. "Scientific knowledge," he rightly argues, "only satisfies the little tip of personality that is contemporaneous with ourselves, not the collective psyche." He must always convince us on the preponderance of the evidence, while Freud may cite scientific papers. Jung, however, can claim consistency. He integrates the collective unconscious and even telepathy into his theory of dreams. Freud's last minute revision condemns him to incongruity, as he never refers to pre-life experience in analyzing any dream in the Interpretation of Dreams. The fact that in Korsakoff patients staircases emerge as a symbol of fornication does not necessarily mean that a staircase is only a fornication symbol. In the same way that the dream-work constructs a double story, reflective both of the present organization of events and the remnants of childhood, the dream-work might very well construct a triple story in which the "archaic heritage" finds its expression. One could detect that third story in a dream only if one assumes beforehand that it does, in fact, exist. Literary analysis works much the same way, insofar as a critic assumes a framework. Here, then, is a staircase dream from Pushkin's play Boris Godunov. The speaker is the protagonist, Grigory, a monk who is wondering if he should give free reign to

his ambition to become the Czar. I dreamed that a steep staircase led me up a tower; from the top all of Moscow appeared to me like an anthill; below, people were swarming in the square and pointing up at me, laughing; and I became ashamed and frightened - and, falling headlong I awoke... Michael Katz, in his book *Dreams and the Unconscious in Nineteenth Century Russian Fiction*, makes the obvious suggestion that the dream is a "subconscious warning." Grigory will indeed make his way up the "steep staircase" of politics to the castle: he will become the Czar. Katz sees the beginnings of the "downfall" foreshadowed in the last scene of the play.* This is one possible story. A Freudian analysis might equate the "steep staircase" with "falling headlong." By climbing up alone, the celibate Grigory effectively masturbates, releasing his long built-up excitation. For a monk, such a pleasure would indeed imply a Fall (and hence "shame"), a tenuous connection that Freud readily makes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. That he awakes immediately after falling stamps this as an anxiety dream, one that "represent[s] a repressed wish, but do[es] so with insufficient or no disguise." Grigory's perspective allows him the superiority he craves, while the ridiculing crowd offers him the pleasure of punishment. All in all, Freud could make a great deal of sense out of this trifling passage, but only because he sees it already within a certain symbolical framework. An ambitious Jungian approach might throw light on Grigory's universalistic desire to be closer to heaven. As a monk, Grigory may be more likely than the rest of us to reflect this particular aspect of the "gray mists of antiquity," the collective unconscious. The ancient Egyptians, for example, had a notion - symbolized by a ladder - of an "ascent through the seven spheres of the planets," which dramatizes the "return of the soul to the sun-god from

whom it originated." The fall in the dream leads us to the daunting question of whether the "standpoint of morality, handed down through the ages, is itself meaningful or meaningless." That "standpoint" might be reflected in Grigory's superior perspective. The "swarming," ant-like people at the foot of the tower can stand for our "animal ancestry," from which the monk is trying to separate himself. This framework, though more obscure, is not without its appeal. Furthermore, the interpretation is not hindered by Grigory's personal predicament, since it admits from the first that a dream's material may outstrip its dreamer. Once one assumes this towering perspective, this supra-personal viewpoint, one can convincingly imbue a dream with all kinds of insights. Jung cracks open that primordial safe. He speculates beautifully. Freud's chronology saves him from such artful conjecture. He never works out the implications of the collective unconscious on his dream theory. He does not say anywhere in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that there must in fact be a collective unconscious to explain how it is that the dreamer's associations sometimes fail. A guess as to why Freud himself failed us in the regard is that the collective unconscious smacks of fantasy, not science. Jung, however, was wise enough to admit he was plunging into a new realm "somewhere between earth and heaven," as Hamlet puts it. From there, Freudians must look like ants "swarming in the square."