Revealing the Unconscious through Dreams in Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis

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Abstract: In this text we aim to present the way Sigmund Freud discovered the universe of the unconscious and the significance of dream interpretation. For „the Father of psychoanalysis”, the unconscious is not just a depository of some mental contents that belong to a sub-conscious, but a genuine reservoir of autonomous energies that have their own determinism, different from that of conscious. The Viennese psychoanalyst is the supporter of a determinism at the unconscious level, which is revealed by the mechanisms of the dream. For Freud, dreams are the royal path through which the unconscious emerges. Only in the dream conscious can look strictly passively at the way in which unconscious contents emerge in symbolic forms through all sorts of condensations and transfers of repressed drives. In the dream, the Ego becomes free and ready for the real meeting with the Self, that only he can recognize and understand in its most intimate sense. However, dreams, though ephemeral, represent extremely effective successes for everyday psychic life. In the end, I concluded that the dream contents can be properly comprehended only by the dreamer, and the psychoanalyst can help the dreamer only to recognize these subtle understandings of his own unconscious.

Keywords: *Freud; psychoanalysis; unconscious; dream; Super-ego.*

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1. Introduction

The universe of the unconscious, which was Freud's great discovery, consists of drives, defined by Freud as *Trieb*_{German}, precisely because they govern the human being. Such drives generally reflect the narcissistic and sexually aggressive tendencies of the subject.

The unconscious is revealed in several ways, which Freud deals with separately.

First and foremost is the parapraxis (*Fehlleistung*_{German}), reserved for the usual waking state and which appear spontaneously during the speech;

Second, there is wit that need a certain context - such as a joke or a special situation of relaxation - in which it find the framework to come to light without disturbing the demands of the day-world, accepted by the conscience;

Third, certain contents become manifest through their sublimated form in the creations of artists, produced in special states of inspiration;

Finally, dreams are reserved for sleep - that special state when the subject withdraws from the daytime universe, opening widely the gates of the inner world, patronized by the unconscious.

Of all these ways, however, the royal path remains, for Freud, that of dreams. Only in the dream does the consciousness be "asleep" and can look strictly passive to the unconscious contents of the repressed drives appearing in symbolized forms.

2. The Freudian Theory of Dreams opens the the gates of the unconscious

2.1. *Die Traumdeutung imposes the theory of the unconscious*

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, in his little praxis in Vienna, Doctor Sigmund Freud sets the dreams in the light of the reflectors of scientific analysis after finding that they played an important role in the investigation and treatment of hysterical and neurotic patients. He found that patients with psychological disorders camouflaged certain actions or thoughts that conflicted with the moral codes of society. Freud tried to remove the conflict residing in the subconscious of these patients and managed to identify a method by which he could treat them.

Initially under hypnosis, then during free associations, Freud found that his patients referred to their dreams. He also noted that hallucinations encountered in psychotic patients were very similar to dreams. Freud then began to analyze the dreams of his patients to find a way to understand

certain aspects of their personality, especially those aspects that led to psychological problems and disorders. On the other hand, Freud has always been an active dreamer and he realized much of the dreams psychoanalysis on his own dreams, which he began to interpret from his childhood, writing them down in a notebook. His conclusion was that dreams are the expression of the unconscious. Dreams appearing during sleep, as well as daytime dreams, express, almost always, in symbolic form, fulfillments of desires that society disapproves of. Freud interpreted many of the analyzed dreams as being related to the sexual instinct because he believed that sex was the desire that society most disapproved of and that was why it was the most repressed desire. It is possible that he was right if we were to think about the bourgeois morality that governed life in the cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, before the First World War, which had the role of changing all the data of the problem, especially by emancipating women and allowing them to escape their condition of minority.

Within a few months of starting dream analysis, he decided to write a book about dreams. It took about two years to write *Die Traumdeutung* (*Interpretation of Dreams*), considered by the author to be a true *Magna Opera* of the twentieth century, which he completed in September 1897, and in which he sees dreaming as an internally generated phenomenon, related to the dreamer's personal past.

The book was published towards the end of the year, but it was only released on the market in 1900, at the dawn of a new century. Although later considered an epochal book, in the first years after its appearance it was not noticed and hardly 600 copies were sold (Cordon, 2012). However, towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Freud's overall activity became better known and in 1910 the second edition was printed. Six other new editions followed during Freud's life, the last in 1929. The book soon became what we now call a bestseller, being translated into many other languages even during the author's lifetime.

Although Freud was a prolific writer, *Die Traumdeutung* (*Interpretation of Dreams*) remained his original work. Despite the initial cold reception, Freud himself knew he had made a great discovery. On the first cover of the first edition of the book, the author wanted to add a motto: "*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*" (If I do not convince the gods of heaven, I will move the hell), taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* (Virgil, 1980), to preface the content of the work, because *Acheron* symbolizes the psychological hell, the unconscious. This work outlines the specific features of the unconscious theory. Freud called the interpretation of dreams the "*via regia* (the royal road) of the discovery and understanding of the unconscious elements of our psychic life" (Freud,

1900), a path along which anyone can travel to discover the truth of these processes.

2.2. Freudian theory about the mental process of dream elaboration

In *Die Traumdeutung*, Freud presents the stages of dream development and tries to explain the structure of the psychic apparatus. He interpreted dreams as symbolic formations that appear in the conscious mind as an imaginative attempt to fulfill a repressed desire. This work is considered to be the largest treatise in which the human unconscious is studied in detail, because it contains the basic components of psychoanalytic theory and practice: the erotic nature of dreams, the Oedipus complex, the libido, etc. Freud realized that this great work is really quite large and this fact can be an impediment for readers, and so he prepared a small volume, more accessible to the general public. In 1901, he published the book *Über den Traum (On Dreams)*, which represents an introduction, much easier for the reader, on the theory of the interpretation of dreams, thus becoming a very popular book. We will also use this work. As in the previous treatise, Freud also discusses here about the significance of dreams, their mechanisms and symbolism, dreams as achievements of unfulfilled desires, etc. Analyzing the opinions of his forerunners, be they philosophers or physicians, the psychoanalyst builds his own opinion, which proves to be revolutionary: the origin of dreams lies in the “depths of the unconscious”, representing “veiled realizations of repressed desires” (Freud, 1955). Approaching this subject in a full puritan era, Freud states that in order to live in a civilized society, people tend to suppress their drives. But these drives must be released in some ways and then they find their path to the surface of the consciousness by disguising themselves. One of these disguises through which drives are released is the dream. However, for the dream to occur, it is necessary to have “an insignificant circumstance of the previous evening” (Freud, 1955). According to Freud, dreams have both latent and manifest contents, thus the dream mechanism consists of “the process of transforming the latent dream into a manifest dream.” The *manifest* content is what the dream seems to say, it is “the dream, as I find it in my memory”. It is often bizarre and meaningless. The *latent* content is what the dream is really trying to say, it is “the material that will be provided to me later by the dream analysis” (Freud, 1955). Freud believes that the unconscious is expressed through a symbolic language that originates from the “unusual ability to disguise” of the latent ideas of the dream. The psychoanalyst compares the dream with a poetic work, stating that the images that appear to us during sleep represent, most often, “a means of symbolic expression,

like that of a poet who accumulates comparisons and metaphors in his work". This symbolic language is "a disguise that will make them usable for representation" because by dream there are manifest "ideas that my conscience disapproves of" and for this reason they can be repressed by the dreamer if they are presented "unmasked" (Freud, 1955).

The mechanism of the dream is complex because it involves several phenomena, of which Freud mentions: the *condensation* (the process by which the dreamer hides his feelings by contracting them in an image or event from a short dream and therefore the meaning of the image of this dream may not be either apparent or obvious), the *moving* or *transferring* (which occurs when the desire for a thing or a person is symbolized by something or someone else), which often acts in conjunction, the *remodeling through disguise or symbolization* (the phenomenon by which the repressed drives of the dreamer are metaphorically expressed), the *union*, followed by the *ordering*, *rationalization* or *secondary revision* (representing the organization of an incoherent dream into one that is more comprehensible and logical) (Freud, 1955).

Freud believes that when a man is awake, his drives and desires are suppressed by a censor whom he will later call *Super-ego* (*Über-Ich*_{German}). Through dreams, man is able to cast a glance at the unconscious. Because these guardians are defeated in the dream state, the unconscious has the opportunity to act and express hidden desires. In the psychic layers that feed these ideas, there are frequently memories of lived, impressive things, whose origin may even go back as far as childhood. As a result, all the situations that are offered to us by dreams are nothing but copies, considerably revised and added, of some such impressive memories (Freud, 1955). Freud explains in his book how the censorship, which acts in the awakening state, leaves only what seems convenient to it and rejects anything else. The products rejected by the censorship are then "in a state of suppression", but, under certain conditions, that is during sleep, a weakening of the censorship appears and then the copies of the impressions of the day manage to slip to the conscience, but only if they are disguised "so as to lose their character as a waste" (Freud, 1955). Due to the content of the unconscious, the dream can sometimes be disturbing, annoying, thus the "censor" enters the scene and translates the disturbing content into a more acceptable symbolic form. In this way, sleep is protected, but the so-called *cryptic dreams* which are difficult to decipher appear.

2.3. “Topographic” theory of mind leads to the structural theory of personality

Based on the detailed analyzes performed on the dreams of his patients and especially on his own dreams, the psychoanalyst confesses that almost all the dreams of adults are reduced to the erotic desires of the dreamer. He further explains that although at first glance all the images and representations during sleep seem to represent ideas of conscious thinking that pass into the night dream as “remnants of the day”, in fact they play only figurative roles in satisfying repressed erotic desires (Freud, 1955). However, Freud believes that the dream “offers no trace of sexuality in its manifest content” because the ideas of sexual images are replaced in the content of the dream by signs, allusions or any other form of indirect expression (Freud, 1955). Trying to bring a valuable tool in the interpretation of dreams, which is in fact the culmination of the interest of his many readers, Freud identifies the dream symbols through which the genital organs are translated. According to the Viennese psychoanalyst, every sharp, elongated and rigid object (knife, rifle, tree trunk, sticks, etc.) represents the phallus, while any cavity or receptacle (cave, tunnel, cabinet, box, bowl, machine, stove, etc.) replace in the content of the dream the female genital organ (Freud, 1955).

Freud believes that the motivational force of the dream is the fulfillment of desires. Issues such as power, lack of control or unfulfilled love can manifest in dreams as a way to meet these needs. The repressed thoughts during the day can find a way to achieve fulfillment in one's dreams.

Dreams are divided into three main genres:

First of all, there are dreams that reflect an unfulfilled and, therefore, undisguised desire; it is the *infantile dream* that appears in the childhood; for example: child's dream about eaten the whole basket of cherries;

Secondly, there are the dreams that represent a disguised desire and are beneficial to psychism and sleep. Most dreams are of this type and need psychoanalysis to be understood;

Thirdly, there is the dream that expresses a wish that has been rejected, but which do not disguises or disguises very little. This type of dream is sometimes more stressful than daytime exposure to certain illicit contents and brings distress, disrupting sleep. These are the dreams that Goethe was passing through, which inhibit the creative momentum of the individual.

Freud will consider that true psychoanalysis, namely the correct interpretation of the dream, can only be done by the dreamer. The psychoanalyst can only help him to recognize certain outdated contents, which most of them will be forget a few moments after awakening. Dreams, though ephemeral, are actually great successes for the moment, extremely effective for everyday psychic life.

In *Die Traumdeutung*, along with the brilliant idea that dreams are heavily masked expressions of deep-seated desires and fears, the psychoanalyst also emphasizes that they can also provide an impressive perspective on the personality of the dreamer. He elaborates on the idea that mental events are different from one another based on their accessibility to consciousness. Thus, Freud elaborates the “topographic” theory of the mind in which there are three levels:

a. The conscious (*das Bewusste*_{German}) it is the actual content of consciousness, that is, it represents everything that becomes conscious for someone at a certain moment.

b. The preconscious (*das Vorbewusste*_{German}) represents the mental content, which is accessible to the conscience, but which is unconscious at one point, although it is not repressed.

c. The unconscious (*das Unbewusste*_{German}) is represented by the mental processes that are not accessible to our consciousness by direct means, but their existence must be deduced by examining the breaches that may occur in the consciousness, such as dreams. The unconscious is dynamic because its content is blocked by consciousness through repression.

Starting from this “topographic” theory of personalities, developed in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud later outlines the structural theory of personality, also consisting of three levels:

a). *The unconscious* or the *Self* (*Selbst*_{German}), centered around unconscious, uncontrolled biological impulses, especially the sexual ones;

b). The *Super-ego* or the *Supra-Self* (*Über-Ich*_{German}), the censor of the Self, the conscious, guided by the moral principles;

c). *Ego* or *I* (*Ich*_{German}), the mediator between the Unconscious and the Super-ego.

When Freud introduced the structural model of the psychic universe, he attributed to the Super-ego limited influence on dreams. Unlike the Ego, which is at rest during sleep, the consciousness is active in dreams and becomes their censor. To assess the Super-ego's contribution to dreams, Freud postulated a separate type of dreams, which he called “high end dreams.” In 1923, the Viennese psychoanalyst published *Remarks on the theory and practice of dream interpretation*, in which he distinguished, though not too

clearly, between “*dreams from above*” and “*dreams from below*”: “The *dreams from below* are those that are caused by the power of an unconscious (repressed) desire that has found a way to be represented in some residues of the day. They must be seen as an invasion in the waking state of what is suppressed. The *dreams from above* occur when the thoughts or intentions of the previous day have succeeded during the night to obtain reinforcement, a force from the repressed material that is rid of the Ego. When this happens, the analysis usually disregards this unconscious ally and continues to insert the thoughts of latent dreams into the texture of the thoughts in the waking state” (Freud, 2012).

3. Conclusions

Beginning with this book, the Self seen as a philosophical principle representing the consciousness, as Descartes saw it, loses all its power in front of uncontrollable forces of the unconscious drives, which, in turn, create a world that it is the opposite of the consciousness it dominates.

Thus Freud, taking over an idea of Nietzsche, will say that, in fact, the dream, this great reservoir of repressed ideas, produces a reversal of all the values of the everyday world. The unconscious, revealed by dreams, is no longer a mere repository of psychic contents that would belong to sub-consciousness, but a true reservoir of autonomous energies that have their own determinism, different from that of consciousness. Freud is the adept of the idea of determinism at the level of the unconscious, which is revealed by the mechanisms of the dream and which overturns the values of the daily world patronized by Super-Ego (*Über-Ich*_{German}). In the dream, the Ego becomes free and prepared for the real meeting with his unconscious Self, which only he can recognize and understand in its most intimate sense.

Various elements, apparently unrelated to each other, make sense at the end of the dream, which can thus be interpreted by both the dreamer and the analyst. This convinces Freud that the dream, as a scenario, was realized on the unconscious level before being revealed through the dream to the dreamer. The dream scenario, which has the role of unloading the repressed drives, is the result of the complex process of condensation, symbolization and transfer operations, which involves a determinism of a different type than the diurnal one and which takes place on the unconscious level of human psyche.

Psychoanalysis, Freud believes, will produce a great awakening for the man entering the twentieth century, comparable to the Plague, who woke up the Renaissance man from the Middle Ages sleep with those wonderful Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which were meant to

wake up scientists and philosophers of the seventeenth century from their dogmatic sleep.

Beyond dreams, which represent the most subjective forms of human existence, but less effective as achievements of the psychic life, the *wit of words* and especially the *artistic sublimations* or *religious rituals* offer a deep and long-term compensation not only to the individual, but of the whole human genus, paving the way for another type of interpretation of the human psychic, as we find, for example, in the work of Carl Gustav Jung, which does not exclude the possibility of the existence of a collective unconscious, which Freud did not accepted. In this Freudian acceptance of the collective unconscious and of the theory of archetypes, lies the end of psychoanalysis as understood by its founder, but opening the way of a cultural movement whose amplitude not even Freud himself had anticipated.

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