

Dream depictions of the 'unperceivable' object of emotional loss

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Summary. After loved ones are dead and buried, wakeful feelings of loss have no perceivable object of loss. Do dreamed feelings of loss also have no object of loss, or is emotional loss in dreams indirectly pictured, perhaps symbolically? Presently, underlying feelings of loss in 100 student artists' dreams were analyzed in relation to third-party ratings of visible contents in the artists' dream depictions and in relation to artist-identified dream symbols. Dreamer-identified feelings of underlying emotional loss were associated with 2 dreamer-identified "symbolic" objects in their dream—a noose and flowers—as well as third-party-rater identifications of 'nothing but sky' in one frame of a dream's depiction. In addition, rater-identified dream depictions of underlying emotional loss overlapped with dream depictions identified by other raters as visually exhibiting either 'some sky' or 'dearth of greenness'. Possible reasons why these visual dream contents either point to or symbolically represent the 'unperceivable' object of loss are discussed.

Keywords: Art, Dreams, Loss, Symbols

1. Introduction

The only percepts that correspond to feelings of loss following people's death are abstract percepts of "universal absence" (Needleman, 1966, p. 232). Thus, when a deceased person's empty chair is perceived, feelings of loss are accompanied by an abstract awareness that the person is not only absent in this particular setting, but unperceivable in all settings.

Presently, we investigated whether 'unperceivable' objects of emotional loss are pictured concretely rather than abstractly in dreams, as predicted by Hartmann's (1998, 2011) theory that dreams' underlying emotions evoke loosely associated images. In addition, we investigated whether 'unperceivable' objects of loss are represented symbolically in dreams, as predicted by Kunzendorf's (2007) theory that a dream symbol's extra level of meaning is conveyed by the meaning of the dream's emotion.

Toward this end, 3 variables measuring whether loss was an emotion underlying each of 100 dream depictions and dream descriptions in Kunzendorf and Veatch's (2013) book were correlated with 6 variables reflecting third-party-rated visual contents in the dream depictions and with 3 variables reflecting dreamer-identified symbols in the dreams. The 100 dream depictions in Kunzendorf and Veatch's book were previously generated by 100 art students, who had been instructed to select a dream that stood out in memory, to re-experience the selected dream from start to finish as if watching the frames of a movie, to remember the 'dream frames' wherein a critical change in dream action occurred and, afterwards, to create a digital image depicting each

critical 'dream frame'. The 100 dream descriptions in the book were previously generated as well by the 100 art students, who had been instructed to create a verbal description of the dream which they digitally imaged—a description of the dream itself, not a description of the dream depiction.

One of the 3 variables measuring whether loss was an emotion underlying each of the 100 dreams was based on the book's "emotion underlying dream" index, pointing to dreams with specific underlying emotions ('loss', etc) which the 100 art students had previously identified as the emotions behind their own dreams. The second variable measuring whether loss was an emotion underlying each dream was based on the book's 100 dream depictions, which 2 independent third-party judges presently rated according to whether they deemed "loss" to be an emotion underlying each depiction. The third variable measuring whether loss was an emotion underlying each dream was based on the book's 100 dream descriptions, which the same 2 independent third-party judges presently rated according to whether they deemed "loss" to be an emotion underlying each description.

The 3 variables reflecting 3 dreamer-identified symbols in the dreams—"flowers," a "mask," a "noose"—were derived from the book's "symbolic element in dream" index, pointing to dreams with these 3 visual elements and other symbolic elements which the 100 art students had previously identified as symbols within their own depicted dreams. The 6 variables reflecting third-party-rated visual contents of the dream depictions—(1) 'nothing but sky' in one dream frame, (2) some sky in an entire dream depiction, (3) more or less blueness in an entire depiction, (4) more or less greenness in an entire depiction, (5) more or less yellowness in an entire depiction, (6) more or less redness in an entire depiction—were derived from 2 different third-party judges' independent ratings of the extent to which each of these 6 visual contents was present in each of the book's 100 dream depictions.

Our decision to correlate the four primary colors with the feeling of loss was engendered by Kunzendorf and Veatch's finding that yellowish dream content in their book's dream

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depictions—like “yellow bile,” one of the four “humors” in ancient Greek medicine (APA, 2007)—is associated with emotional hostility. Our decision to correlate the presence of sky-related contents, a symbolic noose, symbolic flowers, and a symbolic mask with the feeling of loss was engendered by the second author’s examination of dream depictions for which the indexed “emotion underlying dream” was “loss” (without systematic examination of “non-loss” control depictions).

2. Method

This study was one of several group projects conducted by seminar students using Kunzendorf and Veatch’s (2013) book as a database for research on 100 art students’ dream depictions, dream descriptions, dream emotions, dream symbols, and visual dream contents. Given the public accessibility of this database, the current dream-research project required no IRB review.

2.1. Dreamer-identified feelings of underlying loss

As noted in the introduction to this study, the database in Kunzendorf and Veatch’s book indexes the particular emotions which the 100 art students identified as the emotions underlying their own dreams. Given this index, the researchers created a binary variable indicating whether or not the underlying emotion of each dream in the book included the feeling of loss.

2.2. Third-party ratings of emotional loss

One of this article’s co-authors initially examined the descriptions of dreams 1-50 (with emotion words removed) plus the digitally imaged frames of dreams 51-100 and, for each dream, rated the conveyance or non-conveyance (from 4 to 1) of the 14 emotions which the 100 art students identified as underlying their own dreams—boredom, comfort, confusion, curiosity, excitement, fear, guilt, happiness, helplessness, loneliness, loss, nostalgia, paranoia, and sadness—then subsequently examined the digitally imaged frames of dreams 1-50 plus the verbal descriptions of dreams 51-100 and, for each dream, rated the conveyance or non-conveyance of the 14 emotions. Independently, another co-author initially examined and rated the digitally imaged frames of dreams 1-50 plus the verbal descriptions of dreams 51-100, then subsequently examined and rated the verbal descriptions of dreams 1-50 plus the digitally imaged frames of dreams 51-100. Inter-rater reliabilities for the emotions ranged from .28 to .65, all statistically greater than zero, and although not high, could be meaningfully averaged across raters. Accordingly, the mean of the two ratings of emotional loss conveyed by digital images and the mean of the two ratings of emotional loss conveyed by verbal descriptions were computed for each dream and were employed in statistical analyses.

2.3. Dreamer-identified symbols

As noted in the introduction to this study, the database in Kunzendorf and Veatch’s book indexes the dream elements which the 100 art students identified as symbolic elements within their own dreams. Given this index, the researchers created 3 binary variables indicating whether each dream in the book contained (1) symbolic flowers, (2) a symbolic mask, or (3) a symbolic noose.

2.4. Third-party ratings of visual contents

Two of the remaining co-authors independently rated the 100 digitally imaged dreams on six-point ‘primary color’ scales: (a) “1 = no bluish features” to “6 = many bluish features”; (b) “1 = no greenish features” to “6 = many greenish features”; (c) “1 = no yellowish features” to “6 = many yellowish features”; (d) “1 = no reddish features” to “6 = many reddish features”. The inter-rater reliabilities were .59 for bluish features, .62 for greenish features, .54 for yellowish features, and .60 for reddish features—all statistically significant. The means of the two bluish ratings, the two greenish ratings, the two yellowish ratings, and the two reddish ratings were computed for each dream and were employed in the analyses.

Two more co-authors independently rated whether or not ‘some sky’ was present in each dream depiction (“2” if at least one dream frame contained ‘some sky’, “1” if no dream frame contained ‘some sky’), plus whether or not ‘nothing but sky’ was present in one frame of a dream depiction (“2” if at least one dream frame contained ‘nothing but sky’, “1” if no dream frame contained ‘nothing but sky’). The means of these two sky-related ratings were employed in further analyses as well.

3. Results

Our first set of analyses focused on whether emotional loss as experienced by 7 of the 100 dreamers corresponds to emotional loss as conveyed to third-party raters of the 100 dream depictions and 100 dream descriptions. As the mean ratings in Table 1 indicate, the first-person experience of loss by dreamers and the third-person experience of loss by raters are not in direct correspondence. Rather, emotional loss as experienced by 7 of the 100 dreamers seems to correspond to emotional sadness as conveyed to third-party raters by the 100 dream depictions, but not to emotional sadness as conveyed to the same raters by the 100 dream descriptions.

In Table 2, our second set of analyses focused on correlations between our 3 measures of emotional loss—dreamers’ identifications of underlying emotional loss in their own dreams, raters’ identifications of emotional loss in the dreamers’ dream depictions, and raters’ identifications of emotional loss in the dreamers’ dream descriptions—and our 9 measures of dream content that might express emotional loss or symbolize an object of emotional loss. Dreamer-identified feelings of underlying loss were statistically associated with dreamer-identified ‘noose’ and ‘flower’ symbols in their own dream and with rater-identified ‘nothing but sky’ content (‘only sky’ content) in at least one frame of a dream depiction. These three dream contents—noose, flowers, and nothing but sky—accounted for 62% of the variance in a stepwise multiple regression with dreamer-identified emotional loss as the dependent variable. In contrast, rater-identified dream depictions of underlying emotional loss were statistically associated with dream depictions identified by other raters as visually exhibiting either ‘some sky’ or ‘dearth of greenness’. Together, the presence of some sky and the dearth of greenness accounted for 33% of the variance in a stepwise multiple regression with rater-identified emotional loss as the dependent variable. Finally, rater-identified dream descriptions of underlying emotional loss were statistically associated with none

Table 1. Mean 3rd-Party Ratings for the Presence (4 = definitely present) or Absence (1 = definitely absent) of 14 Emotions in 7 Dreams wherein Dreamers felt Loss and 93 Dreams wherein Dreamers felt Other Emotion

Emotion	3 rd -party ratings of dream depictions		3 rd -party ratings of dream descriptions	
	Dreamer felt loss (n = 7)	Dreamer felt other emotion	Dreamer felt loss (n = 7)	Dreamer felt other emotion
Boredom	M = 1.6 (S = 0.9)	M = 1.5 (S = 0.6)	M = 1.7 (S = 0.8)	M = 1.4 (S = 0.5)
Comfort	M = 2.1 (S = 0.9)	M = 1.8 (S = 0.9)	M = 1.9 (S = 0.8)	M = 1.7 (S = 0.8)
Confusion	M = 2.1 (S = 0.6)	M = 2.5 (S = 0.8)	M = 2.4 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.8 (S = 0.7)
Curiosity	M = 2.1 (S = 0.7)	M = 2.4 (S = 0.7)	M = 2.2 (S = 0.5)	M = 2.4 (S = 0.7)
Excitement	M = 1.5* (S = 0.6)	M = 2.2* (S = 0.8)	M = 2.0 (S = 0.8)	M = 2.1 (S = 0.7)
Fear	M = 2.9 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.7 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.6 (S = 1.0)	M = 2.7 (S = 0.9)
Guilt	M = 1.9 (S = 0.6)	M = 2.0 (S = 0.6)	M = 2.2 (S = 0.9)	M = 1.9 (S = 0.7)
Happiness	M = 1.8 (S = 0.8)	M = 1.9 (S = 0.9)	M = 1.8 (S = 1.0)	M = 1.7 (S = 0.8)
Helplessness	M = 3.1 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.6 (S = 0.8)	M = 3.2 (S = 1.0)	M = 2.8 (S = 0.8)
Loneliness	M = 2.6 (S = 1.0)	M = 2.3 (S = 0.7)	M = 2.6 (S = 0.4)	M = 2.1 (S = 0.8)
Loss	M = 2.3 (S = 0.6)	M = 2.2 (S = 0.7)	M = 2.4 (S = 0.8)	M = 2.1 (S = 0.8)
Nostalgia	M = 2.2 (S = 0.7)	M = 2.2 (S = 0.7)	M = 2.3 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.3 (S = 1.0)
Paranoia	M = 2.4 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.4 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.4 (S = 0.9)	M = 2.4 (S = 0.8)
Sadness	M = 3.0# (S = 0.5)	M = 2.2# (S = 0.7)	M = 2.7 (S = 0.8)	M = 2.1 (S = 0.7)

*The mean Excitement rating was significantly lower for depictions of dreams during which the dreamer felt loss than for depictions of dreams during which the dreamer did not feel loss, $t(98) = 2.24, p < .05$.

#The mean Sadness rating was significantly higher for depictions of dreams during which the dreamer felt loss than for depictions of dreams during which the dreamer did not feel loss, $t(98) = 2.24, p < .01$.

of the dreamer-identified dream symbols and none of the rater-identified dream contents in Table 2.

4. Discussion

Our current study found that dreamer-identified feelings of underlying emotional loss were associated with 2 dreamer-identified “symbolic” objects in their dream—a noose and flowers—as well as third-party identifications of ‘nothing but sky’ in one frame of a dream’s depiction. In addition, our study found that rater-identified dream depictions of underlying emotional loss overlapped with dream depictions identified by other raters as visually exhibiting either ‘some sky’ or ‘dearth of greenness’.

Prior to further consideration of these findings, it must be emphasized that that they involve an underlying feeling of loss rather than an explicit depiction or description of the object of loss and, thus, they are not comparable to other findings concerning an explicit depiction or description of that object. Interestingly, based on examination of Domhoff and Schneider’s (2008) database of 29,700 dream descriptions, one of our reviewers noted that less than one-half of 1% of Domhoff and Schneider’s dream descriptions concerned an object of loss, whereas 7% of our dream depictions were accompanied by an underlying emotion of loss. And indeed, according to Hartmann (1998, 2011) and Kunzendorf (2007), it is the underlying emotion that is visually expressed or visually pictured by a dream’s ‘central image’—an image which sometimes symbolizes the object of the underlying emotion. Thus, Hartmann’s feeling of loss following the death of his stalwart mother was visually expressed in his dreams by a ‘central image’ symbolizing his

motherly ‘object of loss’—an image of a “mountain [that] has split” (Hartmann, 2011, p. 110). So, let us consider how some of the visual dream contents in the current study can be interpreted as picturing the underlying feeling of loss and, sometimes, as symbolizing the ‘unperceivable’ object of loss.

The one dream content associated with dreamer-felt loss, as well as third-party perceptions of emotional loss in the dream depictions, was sky. A possible reason for identifying dreamed sky with the emotionally missed but unperceivable object of loss is suggested by Malcom (2010-2011). She reports that “a place high in the sky” is associated with “a spiritual afterlife” (p. 51). As such, sky appears to be the perceivable location of the “unperceivable” object of emotional loss, at least for religious dreamers. Notably, this stands in contrast to Kunzendorf, Watson, Monroe, Tassone, Papoutsakis, McArdle, and Gauthier’s (2007-2008) finding that deceased but ‘perceivable’ loved ones often ‘visit’ religious people in their dreams—but the emotion underlying such dream visitations is a satisfying one, not one of loss, and thus the visiting object is a ‘perceivable’ object of satisfaction, not an ‘unperceivable’ object of emotional loss.

One of the two dreamer-identified symbols associated with dreamer-felt loss was the flower symbol. Possible reasons for identifying dreamed flowers with the emotionally missed but unperceivable object of loss are suggested by Harlow (2005) and Hallam and Hockey (2001). Harlow posits that “ritual objects” like flowers are “a creative expression of grief...of loss” (p. 34); Hallam and Hockey posit that flowers ritually and creatively provide “the deceased with a powerful presence within the here and now” (book cover).

Table 2. Three Measures of Emotional Loss Correlated with, and Regressed on, Nine Dream Contents

Dream content	Dreamer report of feeling emotional loss during dream		Mean 3rd-party rating of emotional loss in dream depiction		Mean 3rd-party rating of emotional loss in dream description	
	Corr. coeff.	Stepwise regr. coeff (R ² = .62)	Corr. coeff.	Stepwise regr. coeff (R ² = .33)	Corr. coeff.	Stepwise regr. coeff (R ² = 0)
Noose interpreted as symbolic content by dreamer	r = .52***	β = .54***	r = .11		r = .12	
Flowers interpreted as symbolic content by dreamer	r = .24*	β = .26***	r = -.10		r = -.02	
Human mask interpreted as symbolic content by dreamer	r = .14		r = .15		r = .11	
Mean 3rd-party rating of only sky in 1 dream frame	r = .52***	β = .54***	r = -.05		r = -.02	
Mean 3rd-party rating of some sky in dream depiction	r = -.01		r = .27**	β = .24**	r = .04	
Mean 3rd-party rating of blueness in dream depiction	r = .14		r = -.17		r = -.05	
Mean 3rd-party rating of greenness in dream depiction	r = .07		r = -.23*	β = -.20*	r = -.19	
Mean 3rd-party rating of yellowness in dream depiction	r = -.12		r = .04		r = -.18	
Mean 3rd-party rating of redness in dream depiction	r = -.12		r = .09		r = .00	

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

The other dreamer-identified symbol associated with dreamer-felt loss was the noose. Possible reasons for identifying a dreamed noose with the emotionally missed but unperceivable object of loss are suggested by Das (2014) and Churchward (1913). Das notes that, in Hinduism, the noose symbolizes the “force or fetter by which God (Pati, envisioned as a cowherd) brings souls [spiritualized objects

of loss] along the path to Truth” (p. 1). Churchward (1913) observes that, in the case of Horus the ancient Egyptian man-god, the noose symbolizes “a ‘power’ which has led him from earthly [loss of life] to Spiritual life” (p. 206). Thus, while the noose is culturally associated with racial hatred, it also is mythologically, perhaps archetypally, identified with a force that guides life-to-death transmigrations.

Figure 1. Dream #44 from Kunzendorf and Veatch’s (2013) book, as digitally imaged by the student artist. Reproduced with permission from Baywood Publishing Company, Amityville, New York, USA.



The final visual feature associated with emotional loss, as perceived by third-party raters, was lack of greenness. A probable reason for identifying less dream greenness with the emotionally missed but unperceivable object of loss is suggested by Allan (2009). According to Allan, green is the color of life. Thus, the statistical association between lack of greenness in dreams and feelings of loss in dreams is probably mediated by the loss of a life—of an object no longer green or alive, no longer perceivable.

An exemplary dream with dreamer-reported loss, with symbolic flowers, with 'nothing but sky' in one digitized dream frame, and with idiosyncratic 'game of chess' imagery—Dream #44 in Kunzendorf and Veatch's book—was digitally imaged by the dreamer, as depicted in Figure 1, and was described by the dreamer as follows:

When I was about 12 years old I had this dream where I was walking in an enormous field of flowers. I kept seeing this light coming down from the sky and then roses started falling down from the clouds. Suddenly it started raining and I found myself crying in my dancing outfit, sitting on a chess board. (p. 142)

After writing down this description, the dreamer wrote the following interpretation of her dream:

That was about the time my father died, and I don't exactly know why but I used to dream about flowers and rain all the time. But I don't really know how to interpret it. I assume that the matter of crying reflected my sadness at the time. (p. 142)

Subsequently, after identifying her dream's underlying feelings of loss and sadness, intensifying those feelings, and thinking about their meaning in the past and in the dream, she wrote the following reinterpretation:

The chess board probably relates to my dad, as that was his favorite game. Maybe the dream was about me wanting my dad back. (p. 142)

The underlying feeling of loss is concretely pictured by 'nothing but sky' and by flowers, as interpreted above, but an "unperceivable" fatherly object of loss is closest to being pictured by the idiosyncratic image of her father's chess game—just as an "unperceivable" motherly object of loss is pictured by Hartmann's (2011) dream image of a "mountain [that] has split" following the death of his mother (p. 110).

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