The relevance of typical themes for dream interpretation

Alfio Maggiolini

Department of Psychology, University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

Summary. Many studies have demonstrated not only the prevalence of typical dreams but also their frequency in dream content. Therefore, it is not possible to distinguish typical dreams from non-typical dreams, as various typical themes are present in most dreams. These contents are a fundamental component in the construction of dream narratives: typical themes are universal metaphors. Dreams are fictional stories, essentially consisting of a problem and an attempt to solve it, in relation to the dreamer's emotional concerns. In this article, the interpretation of a dream by Dora, a young patient of Freud, is proposed as an example, comparing Freud's method of interpretation, based on associations and symbolism, with a metaphorical interpretation of typical themes.

Keywords: Typical dreams, interpretation, metaphor, symbolism

In this article, I intend to propose a way of interpreting dreams that is based on recognizing the importance of typical themes for dream interpretation:

1) The first assumption is that dreams are simulations, fictional stories and not a reproduction of daytime reality: the experiences and memories of the dreamer are used by the "director" of the dream to create stories.
2) The meaning of the dream should not be sought in reference to reality. What is important in a dream (as in all fictional stories) is that it evokes emotions (that is, its affective meaning).
3) If the dream is a story, we must *first* seek the affective meaning of the story as a whole. *After* understanding the story, we can try to understand how it relates to the dreamer's life.
4) To understand dreams as stories, we must know their language, that is, the typical themes of dreams, which are present in all dreams.
5) The meaning of typical themes is metaphorical and not symbolic: typical themes are universal metaphors.
6) I will show the distinction between interpretation based on associations, symbolic interpretation and metaphorical interpretation.
7) As an example of a narrative interpretation based on the metaphorical meaning of typical themes, I will use a dream of Dora, a young patient of Freud (1905), comparing this interpretation with that proposed by Freud and other authors.

In the history of dream interpretation, from Artemidorus to Freud, the existence of typical dreams has always been recognized, but it is not clear whether and how their understanding can be useful for the interpretation of dreams in general. Even for Freud, their interpretation required a different approach from that valid for dreams in general, which was mainly based on individual free associations.

Typical dreams are given little space in dream manuals (Barrett & McNamara, 2012) and their importance for dream interpretation is generally marginal, mainly because these contents are considered rare (Domhoff, 2018). In fact, the high prevalence of typical dream themes (i.e., how many people have experienced a certain theme at least once) is well documented, while research shows their low frequency in dream texts (Schredl, 2019).

Recent research has been conducted mainly through questionnaires, such as the Typical Dreams Questionnaire (TDQ) (Zadra & Nielsen, 1997) and the Dream Motif Scale (DMS) (Yu, 2012). Over time, the number of typical dreams has progressively increased. Freud indicated about 15 typical dreams, but already in the first research conducted by Gahagan (1936) there were 22 themes. Griffith et al. (1958) used a list of 34 typical dream themes, while the TDQ includes 55 items and the DMS 100 items.

All research, from those dating back almost a hundred years to the most recent ones, confirms the high prevalence of many typical dreams, such as "falling," "school/teacher/studying," "failing an exam," "arriving too late," "being chased," "flying," "sexuality," "trying something again and again" (Zadra & Nielsen, 1999; Nielsen et al., 2003; Schredl, 2019; Yu, 2015). Other items present in the questionnaires, however, such as "being an object," "seeing a UFO," "someone having an abortion," and "being an animal" are rare. Conversely, various contents are not present in these lists, such as different experiences with cars, which are very frequent in dreams.

However, for example, while the prevalence for "being chased" is about 80 percent and for "flying" or "failing an exam" is about 40-50 percent, their frequency in dream texts is about 0.5 percent (Schredl, 2019).

Although individual contents are rare, if all items are considered, typical dream themes are found in about 60 percent of the most recent dreams (Mathes et al., 2014; Maggiolini et al., 2010; Yu, 2015) and in about 70 percent of diary dreams (Mathes & Schredl, 2014). Yu found a typical theme in about 90 percent of dreams (Yu, 2016a). Typical dream themes have also been found in REM awakening dream reports, confirming that we dream typical themes every night

(Yu, 2016b). The more frequent themes are like the typical dreams most remembered by people. Even the contents of recurring dreams and nightmares are often typical themes (Zadra, 1996; Robert & Zadra, 2014).

In summary, the prevalence of typical dreams is high, and even if the frequency of individual themes is low, the fact that typical contents are present in the majority of dreams confirms that they are an important component of all dreams.

It is also possible that the methods of analysis of typical themes underestimate their frequency, either because some contents are not present in the lists or because many contents refer to subjective experiences, which are more difficult for an external judge to assess (Yu, 2019).

Instead of distinguishing *typical dreams* from non-typical dreams, it is more useful to think that *typical contents* can be present in all dreams. Individual *contents* can refer to a *theme* and a general category, of which a certain content is a *prototype*. For example, one can dream of being unable to move or speak or use the phone or brake the car. These different *contents* can be considered as different expressions of a *typical theme*, which is that of impediment, a category that groups several contents. We can consider being unable to move as a particularly representative content of this category, that is, as a *prototype* of the category.

If we do not consider typical contents individually, but as manifestations of a category of contents, it would be possible to find a much higher frequency of these contents. For example, if flying, falling, floating, swimming, going up or down stairs and elevators are considered as contents of a gravity category, it is possible to find this theme in many dreams, even if a single content like flying may be infrequent (Maggiolini et al., 2007).

To date, several problems of defining typical contents remain open, because "typical" on the one hand refers to the universality of contents (their prevalence or frequency), but on the other hand, it refers to the fact that a certain theme is "typical" of dream stories: only in dreams can one fly, while arriving late or taking an exam can be daytime events and not just nighttime ones, while "having an abortion" should not be considered a typical content if it has a low frequency in dreams, because it is the description of a realistic situation.

Another general problem with lists of typical themes is that single items are very heterogeneous. Some are very specific, such as "insects or spiders," while others are very general, such as "school, teachers, studying," and some describe actions, while others describe individual elements.

In summary, it is desirable to review the tools for analyzing typical dreams so that they are more comprehensive, more theoretically grounded, and therefore more capable of capturing the specific way dreams function.

The Dream Thinks in Affective Categories

One way to arrive at an empirically valid list of typical contents is to add individual items, verify their frequency in dreams, and then eliminate infrequent items. Another approach, however, is to try to identify "typical" categories of dream functioning: typical themes. For example, the categories used in the most used method for content analysis, the Hall and van de Castle method, are not particularly oriented towards identifying typical themes (Domhoff, 1996).

Many theories, not only in the psychoanalytic field, have hypothesized that dream contents are primarily the expression of emotional concerns, which may be continuous with daytime concerns. The neurocognitive theory also proposes that dreaming is a by-product of a neural network oriented towards the internal world, exploring and working through emotional life, both during the day and at night (Domhoff, 2018). We dream about emotional concerns that are important to us, such as attachment, parenting, sex, competition, cooperation, "but not to day-to-day events" (Zadra, Domhoff, 2011, p. 585): the real continuity, therefore, is between the emotional thoughts of the day and the emotional thoughts of the night, not between the events of the day and the events of the night.

Starting from this perspective, it is logical to think of classifications of dream content that primarily consider the expression of concerns. Since perceptions are directed inward rather than outward during the night, it is logical to think of classifications of internal states (emotions, motivations, self-perceptions) rather than the external world (objects, people, places). This means that in describing dream content, it is useful to prioritize emotional, subjective content that describe internal experiences (e.g., "threats") rather than cognitive, objective ones that describe objects or situations in the external world (e.g., "spiders" or "school"). This does not mean proposing a classification of dream emotions, but prioritizing actions and subjective perceptions that refer to an emotional meaning. For example, "school, teachers, studying" is different from "failing an examination," which considers a subjective emotional aspect, even if it does not directly describe an emotion, like shame or sadness. Another example: water is a frequent content in dreams, but if we consider the subjective dimension, there is a significant difference between water that is drunk, water in which one floats or drowns, or water that overwhelms. From this perspective, floating in water is more like floating in the air, and being overwhelmed by a wave can be closer to being struck by an earthquake.

If the dream thinks in affective and subjective terms, the description and classification of its content should take this aspect into account, prioritizing actions and qualities over objects and places, considering verbs and adjectives more than nouns. Every object or situation can be considered in relation to the subject. For example, a house is a building with certain dimensions and physical characteristics, but subjectively it can be a nest or a prison. Being above or below in cognitive symbolization describes a spatial position, while in affective symbolization it represents dominance or submission.

Paying attention to these aspects means considering affective meaning. While cognitive symbolization distinguishes between true and false and between different objects, people, animals, places, or times, affective symbolization distinguishes between qualities like good and bad, failures and triumphs, active and passive. Affective meaning prevails at night, while cognitive meaning prevails during the day (although for a schizophrenic, affective symbolization may prevail in daytime life).

Dreams Are Fictional Stories

In affective symbolization, dreams use objects and events from life to talk about emotions, that is, subjective states. Graveline and Wamsley (2015) think that dreams are not more symbolic than our waking thoughts and there is no evidence that dream content is more symbolic than our

waking cognition. But affective symbolization does not only concern dreams because even during the day we can experience the house as a nest or a refuge. This type of meaning, in fact, does not only characterize dreams, so much so that it also prevails in all fictional stories. When we watch a movie, unlike a documentary, what interests us, its meaning, is not the reproduction of reality, but the construction of a story, which fascinates us for its emotional content more than for its adherence to reality. The characters, facts, and places that appear in the film are used to create fiction, that is, to tell a story. When we watch a movie, we tend to forget that we are witnessing fiction because we put reality in parentheses, just as when we dream, we do not realize we are dreaming.

More than references to real facts, we are interested in the logic of the story, its narrative coherence. In films as in dreams, we can accept men who fly and the dead who come back to life because what matters to us is the meaning of the story. Dreams are simulations (Revonsuo, Tuominen, Valli, 2015), but they are not realistic simulations, as happens, for example, in a flight simulator, which reproduces every detail of physical reality in virtual reality. Dream simulations are creative fictions, for which the question of adherence to external reality is not appropriate.

Erin Wamsley studied the effect of dreams on learning (Wamsley et al., 2010). After playing a video game, the skiing game Alpine Racer, many people dreamt of the game, and those who were worst at the beginning dreamt of it the most. The dreams weren't a simulation, a replay of the maze, but they contained only a few details, like the music of the video game, only vaguely related to the maze. How can these dreams increase learning if they do not reproduce the task? A possible answer is that the dream is not a reproduction of reality, even if partial, but what matters is the subjective experience. In the morning, we don't understand how the world works better than we did when we went to bed, but maybe what we understand better is ourselves and the way we can face our problems in the world. Even when we watch a disaster movie, we learn more about ways to react to a dramatic situation than about the reality of asteroid trajectories.

Motivations

Dreams, in summary, reflect the internal, emotional, and subjective reality, that is, our motivations, rather than the external reality. But what are our motivations? For Freud, the main motivations underlying dreams are sexual and aggressive. Today, however, there are theories of basic interpersonal motivational systems that include various motivations such as attachment, sexuality, competition, caregiving, and collaboration (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, Fosshage, 2011). Other non-interpersonal motivational systems are the relationship with territory, the acquisition of mastery skills, and the relationship with the integrity of one's body. Therefore, dreams, like films and stories, talk about threats, betrayals, romantic and sexual relationships, victories and defeats, illnesses and recoveries, environmental disasters, deaths, and so on.

Through a factor analysis, Yu (2019) identified three fundamental areas in typical dream themes: Grandiosity, Threat, Ideal Self, which confirm the importance of subjective contents in dreams. These categories evidently do not describe world situations, but subjective experiences, in which the dreamer feels adequate or inadequate, safe or threatened. In themes related to the Ideal Self, the dreamer confronts how he should be in relation to social expectations, feeling inadequate or poorly judged by others; in Grandiosity dreams, there is a sense of realization of the ideal; in threat dreams, a sense of persecution prevails. These results show that feeling capable/incapable, safe/threatened are central dimensions in dreams.

The theoretical interpretation of this result proposed by Yu is based on the analogy with experiences found in mental disorders, such as mania or persecution. If dreams stage emotional concerns, it can be expected that they are linked to motivations and that dreams talk about problems of attachment and caregiving, competitions and collaborations, sexuality, abilities and disabilities, mastery and loss of control, the relationship with a threatening environment, and concerns for the body (Maggiolini et al., 2010). Grandiosity or persecution, instead of being indices of disorders, can be an effect of the dream language. Even in a film, there are superheroes, incredible chases, and an exaggerated number of murders: these are narrative techniques that represent a story in a realistically unconvincing way, but narratively effective.

Here is a list of typical themes (Maggiolini et al., 2020):
- Themes of fear, situations where the dreamer is chased and threatened. A milder version of the threat is the reproach.
- Another frequent typical theme is repeatedly trying to do something without success, such as moving, breathing, speaking, etc. In many cases, control of a vehicle, such as a car, is lost. In opposite dreams, however, one is particularly good at doing something. The theme of success also appears in dreams through the presence of famous and talented people.
- In dreams, we also experience many situations of competition, with friends, colleagues, and rivals. In many dreams, we are subjected to a test or an exam, in which we often fail.
- Another typical theme is embarrassment: dreams in which we find ourselves naked or dressed inappropriately and feel embarrassed. Shame is also central in dreams concerning sphincter control (so-called toilet dreams), where, for example, one urgently seeks a bathroom without finding it.
- A typical theme concerns body transformations, which often appear sick, damaged, or mutilated, as in dreams where teeth or hair are lost.
- Another typical theme is the possibility of meeting dead people or people not seen for a long time. In other dreams, however, we are worried about someone who is in danger, unwell, or dying, a parent, a child, or a loved one.
- Dreams also concern our resources: being robbed or losing valuable objects or damaging objects.
- Another typical theme is gravity, in dreams where one flies, floats, or falls, climbs with difficulty, or descends.
- The environment appears in dreams in various ways: as disorientation, exploration, and discovery (for example, new rooms in the house) or threat (such as an earthquake or a wave overwhelming you). Travels and movements with various means of transport are also very frequent in dreams.

- A theme is haste, the anxiety of being late and missing an appointment. The prototype of this theme is missing the bus.
- Romantic relationships, jealousy, and sexual relations are other frequent themes.

All dreams are constructed with one or more of these themes, and to interpret dreams, it is necessary to understand their meaning, that is metaphorical.

Associations, Symbolism, and Metaphors

Freud's method of dream interpretation is based on free associations, which are thoughts or memories connected to the details of dream content, and on symbolism, which is mainly used for typical themes, although not exclusively for them. In these two paths for interpretation, symbolic contents, with a hidden meaning to be deciphered, far from everyday reality, and associative contents, more in continuity with thoughts or events of daytime life, are contrasted.

When it is thought that a certain element in a dream refers to the daytime reality of the dreamer, the meaning is recovered through an association. For example, if a storm appears in the dream (a typical theme of a threat coming from the environment), an attempt is made to recover a memory associated with this content, such as a real weather event. Alternatively, especially when an associative memory cannot be recovered (a more frequent situation with typical contents), a symbolic meaning is sought.

The content of symbolic interpretations depends on theories. Each author, from Artemidorus to Freud, has their own list of dream symbols. In Freudian symbolism, for example, characters are often family members, so a king or an important character is the symbol of the father, while certain objects are the symbol of erotic parts of the body, for example, a stick is the symbol of the penis, and certain actions or situations have an erotic meaning, for example, climbing stairs is the symbol of coitus. In practice, in symbolic interpretation, there is the substitution of something with something else. For example, for Artemidorus, teeth can be the symbol of household objects or familiar people, and losing a tooth can foreshadow the loss of a loved one. For Freud, however, losing a tooth can be the symbol of masturbation or castration.

Thinking that dream contents speak of the internal world does not necessarily mean thinking of symbolic contents, but of metaphorical meanings. Normally, a metaphor is defined as something that is used to represent something else or to represent something – an event, a person or an object, an idea or a feeling – by a more concrete and simpler substitute. But this definition is restrictive because the metaphor is primarily a way of representing a subjective experience. In "The lawyer is a shark" or "The discussion is a war," the war or the shark do not represent the discussion or the lawyers in a more concrete way, but are terms used as adjectives, in a sort of affective judgment: for someone, a lawyer is a predator, even if for another they could be a protector, an angel. Even "that surgeon is a butcher" and "that butcher is a surgeon" are metaphors, but "surgeon" is not more concrete than "butcher" or vice versa.

Typical Themes Are Universal Metaphors

According to Lakoff, metaphors structure the content of dreams (Lakoff, 1993) and typical themes are universal metaphors. A metaphorical interpretation, unlike a symbolic

one, does not replace something with something else, but finds an internal subjective state as its meaning: a storm does not represent either a daytime episode to refer to (a real storm) or a symbolic reality (for example, childbirth, because it refers to the breaking of waters), but is the metaphor of a "stormy" situation, an emotional experience represented by the storm.

According to Malinowski and Horton (2015), metaphors concretely picture something that is abstract and express emotional aspects of the dreamer's life. Therefore, to understand dream metaphors, it is necessary to have information about the current events of the dreamer's life. But to understand a metaphor, it is not necessary to refer to the dreamer's life, because it is possible to extract the metaphorical content from the text. If a shark appears in a dream, it is not necessary to have information about the dreamer's life to understand its metaphorical meaning, which is a predatory threat experience.

For this reason, it is important to distinguish two levels of dream interpretation: the first type of interpretation concerns the meaning of the dream as a story (narrative interpretation), the second type of interpretation refers to the relationship between the first interpretation and the dreamer's life and daytime thoughts, the way in which the meaning of the dream can be related to life (application of narrative interpretation to daytime life). In this perspective, the direction of interpretation is not from life to the dream, but from the dream to life.

To understand a film, we do not need to know its relationship with reality or the life of the director, and the same applies to dreams. Certainly, the narrative interpretation of a dream is less immediate than that of a film, which is specifically constructed to be understood, while a dream is not directed at any spectator.

Even a film works metaphorically. If in a film we see a couple of lovers meeting during a storm, it is unlikely that we think of childbirth (symbolic interpretation) or the fact that the scene was shot on a rainy day. The effect of the scene is metaphorical, as if the meteorological storm serves to describe something about the couple's relationship ("a stormy relationship").

Which dream contents should be interpreted metaphorically and which refer to reality? If a film takes place in Gotham City or London, these two cities respectively represent an imaginary place and a real place, but what matters is the function that the cities perform in the film. Even London in a film is not London, but is the location of a fictional story, that is, it has a narrative meaning.

All the meaning of dreams, therefore, as fiction, is metaphorical, and typical themes are universal metaphors, a repertoire of contents that the dream uses to construct stories and give affective meaning to situations. Freud thought of typical themes as unconscious contents ready for use in the construction of dream narratives: "the dream makes use of such symbolizations as are to be found ready-made in unconscious thinking, since these, by reason of their case of representation, and for the most part by reason of their being exempt from the censorship, satisfy more effectively the requirements of dream-formation" (1900, p.114). In a perspective of continuity between dream and daytime life, typical themes occur in many persons because they reflect waking-life experiences that are typical for most people (Schredl, 2019). However, even if the fact that, for example, elevators appear in many dreams may depend on the fre-

quent use of elevators in daytime life (a content certainly absent in dreamers of past centuries), but mainly because they well describe a subjective experience, a sensation of gravity, the possibility of going up or down, an experience that in ancient dreams could be depicted by the presence of angels transporting the dreamer to heaven.

In summary, typical themes (for example, gravity) are sets of contents (for example, flying, floating in the air, climbing stairs or an elevator), which have a universal metaphorical meaning: "being up" and "being down" are general metaphors of positive or negative emotional experiences, which everyone can understand and which do not depend on individual experiences (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980).

Identifying the metaphorical meaning of content, therefore, does not mean finding its source. Dreaming of flying in a dream can refer both to experiences of flying in an airplane and to vestibular sensations during sleep, due to muscle atonia, but the meaning of this content depends on how the dream uses it in the story.

It is useful to specify that the concept of a typical theme is different from that of an archetype, proposed by Jung. Archetypes are more general and abstract psychological concepts than typical themes: the Shadow describes a repressed dimension of personality, the Anima or Animus represent feminine and masculine aspects in men and women, the Self represents even the totality of personality; other archetypes are characters like the Hero, the Sage, the Mother, while typical themes rather describe situations like threats, romantic and sexual relationships, exhibition and shame, impediments, and so on.

Typical themes are universal metaphors, but there are also individual metaphors in dreams. Mark Blechner (1998) commented on a dream that Allan Hobson tells in The Dreaming Brain (Hobson, 1988). The dreamer is talking to a colleague about psychoanalysis and laboratory data. The colleague, a psychoanalyst, tosses him a piece of hardware, something like the lock of a door or a pair of paint-frozen hinges, saying "Here, take this as recompense." In Blechner's interpretation, the lock of a door and the pair of hinges are metaphors that describe the discussion: lock is an absolute defense, hinges allow a door to open, but if they are paint-frozen, they work something like a lock. The dream may represent through these images the relationship between Hobson and his colleague and more generally between neurobiology and psychoanalysis. There is empirical evidence of the presence of original metaphors in dreams (Montangero, 2021).

The language of typical themes is universal, that is, common to all, but there are individual differences in the use of different themes. In Freud, for example, situations where the dreamer shows abilities are very frequent, while Jung's dreams contain more references to space (such as the discovery of new rooms) and to flying or falling, as well as to experiences of loss (Maggiolini, Codecà, 2016). The analysis of 600 dreams of a woman, Dorothea, collected from 1912 when she was 25 years old to 1965 when she died, shows that five themes (the loss of an object, being in a messy room, intrusive and threatening strangers, toilet dreams, and being late) are present in 62% of her dreams (Hall, Nordby, 1972).

The Meaning of Typical Themes in Dream Stories

How do typical contents perform their metaphorical function in dream stories? Yu (2016) proposed three levels of significance: 1) direct contextualization, 2) projective-metaphorical expression, and 3) prototypical expression. For example, a typical content like embarrassment in finding or using a toilet could be a) the symptom of a physical condition, such as a full bladder during sleep, b) a metaphor, expressing an emotional content, embarrassment in using the bathroom, c) a prototypical way of representing embarrassment in general (a universal metaphor). Typical themes would therefore be a universal prototypical way of representing a subjective content, such as a sense of threat, sadness for loss, concerns for the body, anxieties of betrayal, sense of ability or inability, and so on.

To produce narrative sense, however, typical themes combine with other contents. For example, a sense of physical impediment can be the basis of a sense of psychological impediment, which in turn gives meaning to a certain dream situation. In most cases, it is in the dream itself that we have indications to understand what this sense of impediment refers to: if in the dream I am with my wife and I feel blocked or paralyzed, the typical theme serves to metaphorically describe an emotional aspect of this relationship.

Therefore, in interpretation, we should not dismantle dreams into single elements to be interpreted in relation to reality or in a symbolic sense, but we should first focus on the dream as a story, as if we were trying to understand what film it is.

But are dreams stories or are they fragmented episodes combined randomly? Jung thought of dreams as well-structured stories, with a beginning, a development, a climax, and a conclusion. It is difficult to trace this structure in all dreams. Jung described a narrative structure of dreams composed of four successive phases (Jung et al., 1964): the exposition phase which introduces the setting and the protagonists, the development of the plot, the culmination of the plot, when an important change occurs, and finally, the solution (this phase is sometimes lacking in dreams).

Montangero (2012) thinks that dreams are narrative simulations of autobiographical episodes, not stories or scripts and for Hobson if different dreams are broken into pieces and then recombined, it is difficult to distinguish a dream from a text that is the result of a collage of pieces of different dreams.

A well-structured story consists of an initial situation, a problem or event that disturbs it, an attempt by the protagonist to solve the problem, an outcome of the attempt, and a conclusion. But the central narrative core of the story is the problem and the attempt to solve it, and it is easy to recognize in dreams a problem and one or more attempts, even if the outcome and even more the conclusions are often missing. When this dynamic is absent, it is possible that we are facing a fragment of a dream or even a hypnagogic image, which is more often static.

An Example of Interpretation

Let's now look at an example of interpretation based on recognizing the metaphorical function of typical themes within dream narratives.

Dora is a young patient of Freud, whose treatment is recounted in *Fragment of an Analysis of Hysteria* (1905), an essay published by Freud five years after the release of the book on dream interpretation, even though Dora had been analyzed by Freud just after the publication of the book. This is her second dream, analyzed by Freud:

"I was walking about in a town which I did not know. I saw streets and squares which were strange to me. Then I came into a house where I lived, went to my room, and found a letter from Mother lying there. She wrote saying that as I had left home without my parents' knowledge, she had not wished to write to me to say Father was ill. "Now he is dead, and if you like you can come." I then went to the station and asked about a hundred times: "Where is the station?" I always got the answer: "Five minutes." I then saw a thick wood before me which I went into, and there I asked a man whom I met. He said to me: "Two and a half hours more." He offered to accompany me. But I refused and went alone. I saw the station in front of me and could not reach it. At the same time, I had the unusual feeling of anxiety that one has in dreams when one cannot move forward. Then I was at home. I must have been travelling in the meantime, but I knew nothing about that. I walked into the porter's lodge, and enquired for our flat. The maidservant opened the door to me and replied that Mother and the others were already at the cemetery (Freud, 1905, p. 226)."

In this dream, we can find many typical contents. There is the death of a loved one, the attempt to reach something without succeeding, the sense of inhibition in movement, the idea of not arriving in time. Even the initial disorientation is easily recognizable as typical of dreams. Another content that is absent in TDQ is reproach, which is just as frequent as threats and can therefore be considered a typical theme (Hall, Nordby, 1972). Other very frequent contents in dreams are journeys, departures or arrivals, with stations, airports, and means of transport. In this dream, therefore, there are many typical themes that are an integral part of the story, which is made up of a problem and attempted solutions.

Before understanding how to metaphorically interpret the dream, let's look at Freud's interpretation, which uses both associations and symbolic interpretations.

Freud first asks Dora to associate each element of the dream with memories and daytime experiences. Indeed, the patient recovers many memories, dating back to the previous day or even months before, such as the memory of a trip, family episodes, and so on. Freud complements this reconstruction with symbolic interpretations. For example, according to Freud, the question "Where is the station?" is associated with other questions that Dora associatively remembers asking her parents ("Where is the key?" and "Where is the box?"), which are interpreted as questions related to the genitals, male and female. Even the station and the cemetery, through various associations including linguistic similarities in German, are interpreted as symbols of the genitals. Based on these and other references, Freud believes that the dream hides a fantasy of defloration and childbirth, which is the expression of a feeling of love for an adult man, Mr. K., who had courted and molested her some time before, and whom Dora had explicitly rejected, but whom Freud believed she unconsciously desired.

If we read the dream, however, we do not evidently find in the manifest text either the sexual contents, the pregnancy fantasy, or the desire for revenge towards the father, which are all themes derived from associative work and symbolic interpretation.

Let's now try to interpret the dream as a story, as if it were a film, using the metaphorical sense of typical themes.

The story tells of Dora's disorientation ("I was walking about in a town which I did not know, I saw streets and squares which were strange to me"), followed by the communication of the father's serious condition (a typical theme of the death of a loved one), and a reproach from the mother, because Dora was out of the house without the parents' knowledge. The next content is a repeated attempt (typical theme) and the anxiety of not arriving in time ("I then went to the station and asked about a hundred times: 'Where is the station?' I always got the answer: 'Five minutes'"; "I saw the station in front of me and could not reach it"). After the attempt to help, refused, the typical theme of impediment and inhibition appears ("At the same time, I had the unusual feeling of anxiety that one has in dreams when one cannot move forward"). Until the conclusion of the dream that confirms the father's death ("Mother and the others were already at the cemetery").

What is the meaning of this story? It seems that for Dora, or for her mother, if she goes away, the father may die. This worries her, but her attempts to avoid this consequence are ineffective. This interpretation, which does not use symbolism or associations, remains adherent to the text in which an emotionally important theme of an adolescent daughter's life is metaphorically represented. It is a reflection on separation and loss and on the possible guilt for the pain caused to the father. Conclusions very different from those reached by Freud and to reach this conclusion we did not use any reference to Dora's life or symbolic interpretation.

Comparison with other interpretations

After Freud, there have been many reinterpretations of this dream and Dora's first dream, but none refer to typical themes (for a summary of Dora's case, see Jennings, 2022a). Jennings proposes an interpretation of Dora's dreams very different from Freud's: rejecting Freud's theory that the dream is a disguised realization of a desire, he proposes a client-centered and dream-centered analysis method, based not only on Dora's associations but also on information about her recent and past life (Jennings, 2022b). The conclusion he reaches is that Dora's dreams, in a perspective of continuity with daytime life, are a representation of her reaction to Mr. K's harassment.

To reach this conclusion, Jennings still has to resort to interpretations that translate dream contents into other contents. For example, the stranger in Dora's dream is translated into Mr. K. (as also proposed by Benvenuto, 2005).

I share the assumption that the interpretation must be centered on the dream, but not that the narrative meaning of the dream must be based on the dreamer's associations or on the interpreter's associations with the dreamer's life events, just as I do not share the idea that only the dreamer is able to know the meaning of their dream.

It is true that there are individual metaphors, but many dream metaphors, as I have tried to demonstrate, are typical. Also, for this reason, various dream-sharing methods are based on shared interpretations, in which the participants of a group interpret the dream starting from the statement "If this were my dream…", before asking the dreamer for information about episodes of his life (Ulman, 1996). Also in other methods, such as the Existential-Phenomenological Analysis, there is no need to invoke the waking experience of the dreamer (Montenegro, 2018).

Many interpreters no longer share Freud's idea of the dream as disguised but continue not to consider the dream as a story, seeking the meaning in the analysis of individual

fragments. Freud explicitly asked the dreamer to divert his attention from the dream as a whole onto the separate portions of its content (Freud, 1933). But Wittgenstein had already contested this method, stating that "in Freudian analysis a dream is dismantled, as it were. It loses its original sense completely" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 68).

New different ways in which people work with their dreams have been developed, recognizing that connections between the dream and waking life can be metaphorical and that each dream element can be considered as a projection of aspects of the self (Pesant, Zadra, 2004; Ellis, 2019). In the "Listening to the Dreamer" method (Schredl, 2015), dreamers are often encouraged to find underlying patterns in the dream, extracting the actions and the emotions from dream narratives. If typical themes are universal metaphors that contribute to the construction of dream narratives, their metaphorical meaning should not be found so much in relation to aspects of the dreamer's waking life, but first in the story itself.

There are different ways in which the functioning of metaphors can be described. One way is to directly connect the metaphorical meaning to daytime life: losing control of the car might relate to losing control in waking life (Garfield, 2001). Another way is to understand the relationship between the typical theme and the current situation represented in the dream, as if it were the combination of past and present memories. The day before the wedding, a woman dreams of an exam situation. It is possible to think that the anxiety of the wedding made her dreams associate back to the stress of exams, and so the typical content became a metaphorical representation of her present-day stress: anxiety creates a bridge between the two unrelated experiences (Malinowski, 2021). But the choice of the typical theme is important: anxiety can be expressed with an overwhelming wave, the embarrassment of not being well dressed, a sense of hindrance, arriving late and so on. If the dream chooses the exam, it is because marriage is symbolized affectively as a test, an initiatory passage in which one is judged.

Dora's dream is an emotional concern that her father might metaphorically "die" also because of her distance and that her mother would not be able to cope with this pain, ready to transfer the blame to the daughter. After this first narrative interpretation, which makes no reference to Dora's waking life for understanding the story, it would be possible to apply this interpretation not so much to the reality of her life, but to her thoughts: do you really think it is so? How worried are you? Is it what you think or your mother? What could you do?

This interpretation, adhering to the dream text, emphasizes that Dora's dream thoughts revolve mainly around her family relationships (a theme also present in her first dream). It is an interpretation in line with some analyses of Dora's case that, beyond the trauma of sexual harassment, have emphasized the "sickness" of family dynamics (Akavia, 2005).

Why Dreams Don't End Well

Dora's dream does not have a happy ending, as it concludes with the death of her father and the failure of her attempt to return in time. This conclusion is not strange, because in fact, the narrative structure of dreams often consists of a problem and an attempt that fails. This incompleteness could be attributed to a poor ability of dreams to construct a complete and coherent narrative structure. Another hypothesis, however, is that such a narrative structure is indicative of the function of the dream: not only to express a concern but to activate the dreamer in the face of a problem. If, as Freud argues, dreams are a masked realization of a desire, why don't they end more positively, even if in a masked way (Garma, 1946)? Freud's explanation is that, for example, in this case, the death of the father is precisely Dora's desire, which is realized in the dream. The incompleteness, however, could have another explanation, based on the function of the dream. It could be a message from the dream to the dreamer, a sort of warning about the future. In Dora's case: "Be careful that if you move away from your father, he might suffer." The dream would then have a warning function, not a prophetic message, but a prodromal one, as Aristotle thought, preparing us to act in the world.

Conclusions

The type of interpretation I have presented agrees with various contemporary psychoanalytic theories, which emphasize the importance of the manifest text and the metaphorical function of the dream and seek to find its meaning before referring to the patient's life. According to Fosshage (2007), for example, the interpretation has to be as closely as possible to the patient's experience *within* the dream and dream imagery is not to be translated or seen as standing for something else but is to be understood in terms of the *metaphorical* meaning: once the dream's story has been identified, the analytic task shifts to find (when unclear) how these themes are connected to waking experience.

In this framework, I have mainly emphasized the importance of typical themes as universal metaphors. Also, according to other theories, such as the Embodied Cognition Theory of Dreaming (ECTD), the function of dreaming is to organize schemas of self-in-context through "embodied metaphors" (Wagener, 2023). Typical themes are metaphors through which dreams organize and transform recent waking life experience and cognitions, but in my perspective, these schemas aren't learned through experience but are the language of affective symbolization: metaphors aren't created because dreams cannot perform abstract conceptual thinking, but to create affective meaning.

Attention to typical themes reduces the importance of both symbolic translations and the use of associations. This does not mean, however, that the contribution of the dreamers is not important, but not so much because they provide associations to daytime life to find the meaning of certain dream details, but to be able to disambiguate certain metaphors.

It is also important to consider the length of dreams: a dream that is too short will need to be supplemented with information from the dreamer, while a longer dream often provides enough details on its own to understand the story and find its metaphorical meaning.

Some dreams that are too short do not have a narrative structure, also because they are static images. A well-known example is the dream of the botanical monograph, in which Freud dreams of having written a monograph on a certain plant, of which he is turning a coloured page, and that each specimen is accompanied by a dry sample of the plant. In this dream, there is no narrative structure and there are no typical themes.

Attention to the narrative structure of the dream implies recognizing the function of the dream as an attempt to address a problem, an emotional concern, arising from an imbalance in the regulation of motivations (attachment, sexuality, competition, etc.). It is certainly a different perspective from Freud's, who always maintained the idea that the function of the dream is the fulfilment of a wish. Contemporary psychoanalysis, however, recognizes that the function of dreams is the regulation and restoration of psychological organization and regulation of affect (Fosshage, 2007).

A revision of the concept of "wish-fulfilment" understands it as the work of the Ego to satisfy a demand of the id, in which possible dream instigators can be preconscious concerns or conflicts that remained poorly recognized and unresolved during waking life (Binswanger & Wittmann, 2019).

On the other hand, even Freud, in a revision of his dream theory, which considered anxiety, traumatic and punishment dreams, stated that a dream is not a fulfilment of a wish, but is an *attempt* at the fulfilment of a wish (1933), that is, a way of addressing needs and emotional concerns.

References

Akavia, N. (2005). Hysteria, Identification, and the Family: A Rereading of Freud's Dora Case. American Imago, 62, 193-216. https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2005.0021.

Barrett, D. L., & McNamara, P. (2012). The Encyclopedia of Sleep and Dreams (2 vols.). Praeger/Greenwood, New York, NY.

Barrett, D., & McNamara, P. (2012). The New Science of Dreaming. Praeger, Westport.

Benvenuto, S. (2005). Dora Flees. Is There Anything Left to Say about Hysterics? European Journal of Psychoanalysis, 20, 3-31.

Binswanger R., & Wittmann L. (2019). Reconsidering Freud's dream theory, International Journal of Dream Research, 12 (1), 103-109.

Blechner, M. J. (1998). The analysis and creation of dream meaning: Interpersonal, intrapsychic, and neurobiological perspectives. Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 34, 181-194.

Domhoff, G. W. (1996). Finding Meaning in Dreams: A Quantitative Approach. Plenum, New York.

Domhoff, G. W. (2018). The Emergence of Dreaming. Oxford University Press, New York.

Fosshage J. L. (2007) The organizing functions of dreaming: Pivotal issues in understanding and working with dreams. International Forum of Psychoanalysis, 16, 213-221.

Freud S. (1933). New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXII (1932-1936): New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works, 1-182.

Freud, S. (1900). The Interpretation of Dreams. Standard Edition, 4 & 5.

Freud, S. (1905). Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria. Standard Edition, 7.

Gahagan, L. (1936). Sex differences in recall of stereotyped dreams, sleep-talking and sleep-walking. Pedagogical Seminary and Journal of Genetic Psychology, 48, 227–236.

Garfield, P. L. (2001). The Universal Dream Key: The Twelve Most Common Dream Themes Around the World. Cliff Street Books, New York.

Garma A. (1946). The Traumatic Situation in the Genesis of Dreams, International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 27, 134–139.

Graveline, Y. M., & Wamsley, E. J. (2015). Dreaming and waking cognition. Transitional Issues in Psychological Science, 1, 97-105.

Griffith, R., Miyago, O., & Tago, A. (1958). The universality of typical dreams: Japanese vs Americans. American Anthropologist, 60, 1173-1179.

Hall, C. S., & Nordby, V. J. (1972). The Individual and His Dreams. New American Library, New York, NY.

Hartmann, E. (1998). Dreams and Nightmares: The New Theory on the Origin and Meaning of Dreams. Plenum, New York, NY.

Hobson, J. A. (1988). The Dreaming Brain. Basic Books, New York.

Hoss, R., Valli, K., & Gongloff, R. (Eds.). (2019). Dreams: Understanding Biology, Psychology, and Culture. Greenwood, Santa Barbara, California.

Jennings J.L. (2022a) Freud's Case of Dora: Wellspring of Discovery and Discourse, Open Journal of Social Sciences, 10, 290-314.

Jennings, J. (2022b). Dreams without disguise: Using Freud's case of Dora to demonstrate a radically client-centered approach to dreams. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 63(0), 1-23. 10.1177/00221678221137032.

Jung, C. G., von Franz, M. L., Henderson, J. L., Jacobi, J., & Jaffe, A. (1964). Man and His Symbols. Doubleday, Garden City, NY.

Lakoff, G. (1993). How metaphors structure dreams: The theory of conceptual metaphor applied to dream analysis. Dreaming, 3(2), 77-98.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). Metaphors We Live By. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Lichtenberg, J. D., Lachmann, F. M., & Fosshage, J. L. (2011). Psychoanalysis and Motivational Systems: A New Look. Routledge, New York.

Maggiolini A., Di Lorenzo M., Falotico E., Gargioni D., Morelli M (2020) Typical dreams across the life cycle, IJODR, 13 (1), 17-28.

Maggiolini, A., Cagnin, C., Crippa, F., Persico, A., & Rizzi, P. (2010). Content analysis of dreams and waking narratives. Dreaming, 20(1), 60–76. doi:10.1037/a0018824.

Maggiolini, A., Codecà, L. (2016). The typical contents of Freud's and Jung's dreams. International Journal of Dream Research, 9, 1-6.

Maggiolini, A., Morelli, M., Falotico, E., & Montali, L. (2016). Dream contents of early adolescents, adolescents, and young adults: A cluster analysis with T-LAB. Dreaming, 26(3), 221–237. doi: 10.1037/drm0000027.

Maggiolini, A., Persico, A., & Crippa, F. (2007). Gravity content in dreams. Dreaming, 17(2), 87–97. doi:10.1037/1053-0797.17.2.87.

Malinowski, J. (2021). Dreaming. Routledge, New York.

Mathes, J., & Schredl, M. (2014). Analysis of a large sample of diary dreams - how typical are these typical dreams? Somnologie, 18, 107–112. doi:10.1007/s11818-013-0653-6.

Mathes, J., Schredl, M., & Göritz, A. S. (2014). Frequency of typical dream themes in most recent dreams: An online study. Dreaming, 24(1), 57–66. doi:10.1037/a0035857.

Montangero, J. (2012). Dreams are narrative simulations of autobiographical episodes, not stories or scripts: A review. Dreaming, 22(3), 157-172.

Montangero, J. (2021). Empirical evidence of original metaphors in dreams: Five examples, description of the method used and theoretical conclusions about the meaningful and complex nature of dreaming. International Journal of Dream Research, 14(2), 272-281.

Montenegro M. (2018) Dora's Dreams Revised: An Existential-Phenomenological Analysis, Existential Analysis 29(2), 231-244.

Nielsen, T. A., Zadra, A. L., Simard, V., Saucier, S., Stenstrom, P., Smith, C., & Kuiken, D. (2003). The typical dreams of Canadian university students. Dreaming, 13(4), 211–235.

Revonsuo, A., Tuominen, J., & Valli, K. (2016). The simulation theories of dreaming: How to make theoretical progress in dream science: A reply to Martin Dresler. In T. Metzinger & J. M. Windt (Eds.), Open MIND (pp. 1341–1348). MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Robert, G., & Zadra, A. (2014). Thematic and content analysis of idiopathic nightmares and bad dreams. Sleep, 37, 409-417. doi: 10.5665/sleep.3426.

Schredl, M. (2015). The continuity between waking and dreaming: Empirical research and clinical implications. In M. Kramer & M. Glucksman (Eds.), Dream Research: Contributions to Clinical Practice (pp. 27–37). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, New York.

Schredl, M., & Piel, E. (2007). Prevalence of flying dreams. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 105, 657–660.

Schredl, M., Ciric, P., Götz, S., & Wittmann, L. (2004). Typical dreams: Stability and gender differences. The Journal of Psychology, 138(6), 485–494. doi: 10.3200/JRLP.138.6.485-494.

Ulman M. (1996) Appreciating dreams: a group approach. Thousand oaks, CA: Sage.

Valli, K., & Revonsuo, A. (2009). The threat simulation theory in light of recent empirical evidence: A review. American Journal of Psychology, 122(1), 17–38.

Wagener, A. (2023). The Embodied Cognition Theory of Dreaming: A proposal for how dreams prepare individuals for waking life. International Journal of Dream Research, 16(1), 35-39. 10.11588/ijodr.2023.1.90586.

Wamsley, E. J., Tucker, M. A., Payne, J. D., Benavides, J. A., & Stickgold, R. (2010). Dreaming of a learning task is associated with enhanced sleep-dependent memory consolidation. Current Biology, 20, 850–855.

Wittgenstein, L. (1980). Philosophical Grammar. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yu, C. K.-C. (2009). Delusion and the factor structure of typical dreams. Dreaming, 19(1), 42–54. doi:10.1037/a0014789.

Yu, C. K.-C. (2012). Dream Motif Scale. Dreaming, 1(22), 18–52. doi: 10.1037/a0026171.

Yu, C. K.-C. (2015). One hundred typical themes in most recent dreams, diary dreams, and dreams spontaneously recollected from last night. Dreaming, 25(3), 206–219. doi: 10.1037/a0039225.

Yu, C. K.-C. (2016a). Classification of typical dream themes and implications for dream interpretation. Neuropsychoanalysis, 18, 133-146.

Yu, C. K.-C. (2016b). We dream typical themes every single night. Dreaming, 26, 319-329.

Yu, C. K.-C. (2019). A skeleton key to dream interpretation. International Journal of Dream Research, 12(1), 1-26.

Zadra, A. (1996). Recurrent dreams: Their relation to life events. In D. Barrett (Ed.), Trauma and Dreams (pp. 231–247). Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Zadra, A., & Domhoff, G. (2011). Dream content: Quantitative findings. Principles and Practice of Sleep Medicine, 5, 585-594. 10.1016/B978-1-4160-6645-3.00050-5.

Zadra, A., & Nielsen, T. A. (1997). Typical dreams: A comparison of 1958 versus 1996 student samples. Sleep Research, 26, 280–281.

Zadra, A., & Nielsen, T. A. (1999). The 55 typical dreams questionnaire: Consistencies across student samples. Sleep, 22 (Suppl 1), S175.