

# Typical dreams: Fulfillment of desire or anxiety relief?

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*Summary.* Freud evaluated typical dreams, such as flying, nudity, and the death of loved ones, within the framework of childhood wish fulfillment. He interpreted exam dreams from different perspectives over time: first as memories of punishments for past misdeeds, then as messages of consolation from past successes, followed by self-criticism regarding childish behaviors persisting in adulthood, and finally as a representation of a sexual trial. Considering typical dreams within Kohut's framework of "self-state dreams" suggests that these dreams reflect not only the fulfillment of repressed wishes but also the regulation of internal anxieties and the maintenance of self-cohesion. This paper aims to examine the content of typical dreams and the emotions experienced in them through the lens of the censorship mechanism. In dreams, not only repressed wishes but also anxieties may be censored, serving functions that help maintain the individual's psychological balance.

*Keywords:* Anxiety, desire, Typical dreams

## 1. Introduction

Freud argued that every individual has the freedom to shape their dream world with unique characteristics, thereby making it incomprehensible to others; at the same time, he maintained that certain dreams, which he called typical dreams, have the same meaning for everyone (Freud, 1900/1991). According to him, in these types of dreams, the dreamer either lacks the associations needed to understand the dream, or these associations are so vague and insufficient that interpretation becomes impossible. Freud noted that, apart from dreams of the death of loved ones, flying dreams, nudity dreams, and exam dreams are among the typical dreams (Freud, 1900/1991).

Freud generally explained flying dreams, nudity dreams, and dreams about the death of loved ones in accordance with his dream theory as the fulfillment of childhood desires. However, it is evident that he continuously revised his interpretations of exam dreams over the years and could not fully align these dreams with the wish-fulfillment model. Evaluating typical dreams within the framework of Kohut's self-state dreams may provide a better understanding of these types of typical dreams.

Kohut defines the effort of dreams to correct problematic internal psychological states through what he calls "self-state dreams" (Kohut, 1977). He emphasized that the concept of self-state dreams adds a new dimension to Freud's theory and can be applied to a specific group of patients; it was developed not to alter Freud's theories but to complement them. Like Freud, Kohut also notes that some

dreams express latent content that can be verbally articulated (instinctual desires, conflicts, and attempts to resolve conflicts) and should be addressed in therapy through traditional free association. On the other hand, in some dreams, emotions that cannot be verbally expressed, such as the fear of self-dissolution, manifest themselves in the form of explicit dream images (Kohut, 1977).

Kohut states that the function of these dreams is to cope with frightening, unnamed processes by covering them with visual images and to restore an integrated self-structure. He notes that examining the associative details of the manifest content of self-state dreams, at best, provides new images that remain on the same plane as the manifest content; in this context, he also suggests that, in some respects, these dreams resemble childhood dreams (Kohut, 1977). Kohut further emphasizes that in some dreams, certain elements represent the archaic self, while others arise from structural conflicts and can be resolved through free associations (Kohut, 1977).

Freud's initial interpretation of exam dreams was that these dreams were not difficult to understand and arose from memories of punishments the dreamer had received in the past due to bad behavior, which had not been fully erased (Freud, 1900/1991). However, following evaluations with his colleague Stekel, he noted that these dreams actually concerned exams that had been successfully passed before and offered consolation to the individual facing an upcoming exam or testing situation with the message, "You succeeded before" (Freud, 1900/1991; Draaisma, 2015; Timms, 2013). In later years, Freud added a critical dimension to this interpretation, suggesting that exam dreams carry not only consolation but also a form of self-criticism, implying that the person still exhibits childish behavior despite being of mature age (Freud, 1900/1991; Draaisma, 2015). In 1925, he supported Stekel's view that these dreams represented a sexual test and that past successes in the dream served a sexual encouragement function (Freud, 1900/1991; Draaisma, 2015).

According to Freud, emotions and thoughts that are repressed because they could provoke anxiety in a conscious

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state do not disappear; they may emerge in dreams or slips of the tongue (Freud, 1901). In this context, exam dreams may sometimes represent the directly repressed anxiety about an upcoming exam, and at other times, they may symbolically convey numerous situations that could similarly provoke anxiety when being tested. Beyond this, these dreams may serve the function of reducing the dreamer's anxiety by staging potentially distressing situations from their life.

It is generally not anticipated that criticism directed at an individual in an area where they have previously demonstrated success and confidence will elicit a negative emotional response (Vaillant, 1992). Nevertheless, for precisely the same reason, such situations can provide an invaluable domain for the censorship mechanism in dreams (Danisman, 2025). For example, as in the case of an individual with years of driving experience who is unable to control the vehicle in their dream (Schredl, 2020), the typical scenario in exam dreams—"being subjected to an exam that was successfully passed before"—may represent not the consoling aspect Freud suggested, but rather the censored part of the dream. Thus, unless interpreted, the person cannot make sense of re-entering an exam they had previously passed in the dream and fails to recognize that this aspect of the dream serves to gratify the repressed anxiety it elicits.

The surprising paradox in exam dreams lies in the fact that dream work reduces the dreamer's anxiety without their awareness, accomplishing this through another anxiety-provoking scenario. At this point, these dreams can be likened to Kohut's self-state dreams, which respond with anxiety to potentially disturbing changes in the self—such as a decrease in self-esteem—or to threats of self-dissolution, and work to cope with them while restoring an integrated self-structure (Kohut, 1977). In this context, in exam dreams, a situation that could lower self-esteem—such as anxiety about a possible failure in a recent exam or similar challenge—is censored through the depiction of the dreamer re-entering an exam they have previously passed successfully.

On the other hand, the anxiety in these dreams—which I suggest serves the function of reducing repressed anxiety—may actually arise secondarily from another desire that the individual unconsciously represses. In this context, a person who dreams of re-entering an exam they had previously passed, even if they tell themselves during the dream, "I have taken this exam before," may, due to various psychological factors, actually wish to re-enter the same exam and fail. From this perspective, individuals experiencing such dreams may, for various reasons, achieve a form of gratification of their guilt feelings (Freud, 1900/1991). However, the fact that the expected positive emotions from the fulfillment of this desire for failure do not align with the sense of unease experienced in exam dreams reduces the likelihood of this interpretation being accurate.

In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud did not classify all dreams of being naked as typical dreams. Under the heading "Dreams of Embarrassment About Nudity," Freud interpreted dreams in which the dreamer wishes to escape or hide due to feeling ashamed of being naked—but is unable to do so—as typical dreams (Freud, 1900/1991). In nudity dreams, the dreamer almost always finds themselves suddenly naked among unfamiliar people (Draaisma, 2015). Interestingly, in such dreams, despite the dreamer's intense embarrassment about their nudity, no one notices or objects to it (Freud, 1900/1991; Draaisma, 2015). In these

dreams, the reason for the nudity is not due to a preceding erotic context, nor does a nudity dream ever turn into an erotic dream (Freud, 1900/1991).

Regarding nudity dreams, Freud suggested that their meaning is related to a childish exhibitionist desire and interpreted the sense of shame experienced during the dream as a form of censorship. On the other hand, some psychoanalysts argue that the significance of these dreams lies not in the dreamer's feeling of shame—which Freud considered censorship—but in the indifference of the other people in the dream toward the naked individual (Myers, 1989; Draaisma, 2015). According to these authors, in such dreams, the real trauma symbolized by repeatedly exposing the dreamer's most private aspects is that it goes unnoticed by others (Myers, 1989; Draaisma, 2015).

As Garfield (2001) and Schredl (2021) note, such dreams may symbolically express anxieties that individuals repress in their inner world, such as fears of humiliation, vulnerability, censure, or social exclusion. In this context, the feeling of shame in these dreams can be understood as a direct emotional response to such scenes in the dream content, much like the anxiety experienced in exam dreams when facing potential failure. Furthermore, the indifference of others in these dreams—which also drew Freud's attention—can be interpreted as the outcome of a censorship mechanism that prevents the dreamer's anxiety about humiliation from being consciously recognized, analogous to how exam dreams censor and conceal anxiety through the consoling scenario of re-entering a previously passed exam. Thus, it can be argued that both repressed desires and repressed anxieties may be subject to censorship in dreams.

Freud provides another example of a group of dreams in which censorship operates on emotions rather than the content of the dream: dreams of the death of loved ones (Freud, 1900/1991). He argues that the meaning of these dreams, accompanied by feelings of sorrow and grief, lies in a past wish regarding the death of the person in question (Freud, 1900/1991). According to him, in such dreams, dream work accomplishes distortion not through the manifest content of the dream but through the emotions within the dream. That is, because the person whose death is wished for is also someone loved, the conflict experienced—and the consequently repressed wish for the loved one's death—is gratified in the dream through censorship, expressed via accompanying feelings of sorrow and grief (Freud, 1900/1991).

A similar interpretation to the one I have proposed for exam dreams and nudity dreams can perhaps be applied to dreams about the death of loved ones. It is quite common for children or adults to experience intense anxiety about the potential loss of their parents. In this context, such dreams can often be seen as staging this fundamental anxiety concerning the loss of a loved one. Interestingly, in these dreams, a clear censorship mechanism—like the consoling elements observed in exam or nudity dreams (the thought of having previously passed the exam or the indifference of others)—is sometimes not apparent. This may be because death represents a unique experience that cannot be mediated or alleviated through indirect means similar to those that help one cope with a previously passed exam or a situation in which others do not react to one's embarrassment.

## 2. Conclusion and Recommendations

Exam dreams, regarding the desires and anxieties they represent, can be interpreted—by Jung and some other psy-

choanalysts (Jung, 1967; Lansky, 1992; Draaisma, 2015)—as anticipatory or alerting dreams that provide visions of the future and aim to keep the dreamer vigilant, based on the understanding that past achievements do not guarantee similar future successes. In this context, for instance, an exam dream occurring before a real-life exam that may end in failure could even be interpreted as a type of prophetic dream through the alerting function attributed to such dreams. However, since the dream work that addresses the desires and anxieties represented in these dreams is already inherently present, these dreams should not be considered as conveying specific messages to the dreamer. Moreover, given that not every exam dream is followed by an actual exam in real life, any interpretation regarding the alerting function of these dreams should rely on the analyst's perspective rather than on the thought function or purpose of the dream itself.

In the general context of nudity dreams, besides the feeling of shame experienced, it is also observed that other people in the dream remain indifferent to situations where the dreamer appears naked or inappropriately dressed. On the other hand, Schredl (2021) reports that in a subset of nudity dreams recorded by a participant keeping a dream diary, the other people in the dream did react to the dreamer's nudity and were not indifferent. Moreover, the same study highlights that feelings of shame or embarrassment were present in only about one-third of these dreams. This may be related to the fact that the study was based on the dreams of a single participant, as well as the participant's motivation for keeping a dream diary and their awareness of previous dreams with similar content. Another possible explanation is the variation in the latent thoughts underlying these dreams and the different ways in which censorship operates on emotions or characters within the dream.

In dreams about the death of loved ones, rather than reflecting anxiety about the loss of a parent, desires concerning the death of parents—consistent with Freud's Oedipal theory—may reach gratification through censorship, expressed via the sorrow and grief experienced during the dream. Moreover, in these dreams, information about a parent's death is not depicted directly through scenes such as funerals or coffins; instead, it may appear indirectly through images evoking lack, absence, or helplessness in daily life, or the parents may appear later in the dream in a healthy and alternative context. In this regard, a detailed examination of dreams about the death of loved ones, alongside information about illnesses or deaths of parents or people of similar age in the dreamer's environment at the time, can provide important insights into whether such dreams arise from a direct Freudian wish model or from anxieties related to parental loss.

Both Freud's continuously evolving interpretations of exam dreams over the years and nudity dreams—which are not limited to the experience of being naked but sometimes involve wearing inappropriate clothing or being exposed in an excessive or disproportionate manner—demonstrate that these dreams cannot be fully explained within the framework of the gratification of childish desires; they also convey repressed anxieties and the dreamer's emotions related to self-states.

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