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## The Interpretation of Dreams: Psychoanalysis Is Born

(1900)

Sigmund Freud

### Introduction

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was a Viennese doctor who revolutionized the treatment of mental disorder. A medical doctor and scientist, who had researched and published on the regeneration of annelids earlier in his career, Freud became interested in the psychological pathologies of his female patients. Believing that the resolution of these problems lay locked away in repressed memories, he developed psychoanalysis, one of the techniques of which was the interpretation of dreams, which Freud claimed unlocked the secrets of the subconscious mind and allowed the patient to achieve mental health. His theories have recently come under sustained attack by the psychiatric profession and the feminist movement, but his work did indeed invigorate the study of psychology. Perhaps more significantly, Freud's work was among those discoveries that helped to destroy the certainties of nineteenth-century bourgeois European civilization. The new physics of Marie Curie (1867-1934), Max Planck (1858-1947), and Albert Einstein (1879-1955) had destroyed the certainties of the Newtonian universe. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had challenged Enlightenment rationality and bourgeois values, while radical extremist political movements on both the left and the right challenged liberal parliamentarianism. Freud theorized that human behavior results from the conflict that arises when the unconscious, primitive desires buried in the subconscious are forced to conform to societal norms by the conscious mind. These two elements of the mind are in constant conflict, which often results in psychopathological behavior. Thus Freud challenged the Enlightenment belief that human beings were rational creatures. All of these new challenges to the accepted world-view emerged in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth century, but it was not until after the devastating, and apparently irrational, savagery of the Great War (World War I, 1914-1918) that these epoch-shattering trends had their greatest impact. In this selection from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud analyzes a female patient's dreams.

### Questions to Consider

- What was the dream about, literally? How does Freud interpret it?
- What is the implication of such an analytical technique?
- Why might Freud's theories be attacked by today's feminists?

### Source

An intelligent and refined young woman, who in real life is distinctly reserved, one of those people of whom one says that "still waters run deep," relates the following dream: "*I dreamt that I arrived at the market too late, and could get nothing from either the butcher or the greengrocer woman.*" Surely a guileless dream, but as it has not the appearance of a real dream I induce her to relate it in detail. Her report then runs as follows: She goes to the market with her cook, who carries the basket. The butcher tells her, after she has asked him for something: "*That is no longer to be obtained,*" and wants to give her something else, with the remark: "*That is good, too.*" She refuses, and goes to the greengrocer woman. The latter tries to sell her a peculiar vegetable, which is bound up in bundles, and is black in colour. She says: "*I don't know that, I won't take it.*"

The connection of the dream with the preceding day is simple enough. She had really gone to the market too late, and had been unable to buy anything. *The meatshop was already closed*, comes into one's mind as a description of the experience. But wait, is not that a very vulgar phrase which--or rather, the opposite of which--denotes a certain neglect with regard to a man's clothing?<sup>1</sup> The dreamer has not used these words; she has perhaps avoided them; but let us look for the interpretation of the details contained in the dream.

When in a dream something has the character of a spoken utterance--that is, when it is said or heard, not merely thought--and the distinction can usually be made with certainty--then it originates in the utterances of waking life, which have, of course, been treated as raw material, dismembered, and slightly altered, and above all removed from their context. In the work of interpretation we may take such utterances as our starting-point. Where, then, does the butcher's statement, *That is no longer to be obtained*, come from? From myself; I had explained to her some days previously "that the oldest experiences of childhood are *no longer to be obtained* as such, but will be replaced in the analysis by 'transferences' and dreams." Thus, I am the butcher; and she refuses to accept these transferences to the present of old ways of thinking and feeling. Where does her dream utterance, *I don't know that, I won't take it*, come from? For the purposes of the analysis this has to be dissected. "I don't know that" she herself had said to her cook, with whom she had a dispute the previous day, but she had then added: *Behave yourself decently*. Here a displacement is palpable; of the two sentences which she spoke to her cook, she included the insignificant one in her dream; but the suppressed sentence, "Behave yourself decently!" alone fits in with the rest of the dream-content. One might use the words to a man who was making indecent overtures, and had neglected "to close his meat-shop." That we have really hit upon the trail of the interpretation is proved by its agreement with the allusions made by the incident with the greengrocer woman. A vegetable which is sold tied up in bundles (a longish vegetable, as she subsequently adds), and is also black: what can this be but a dream-combination of asparagus and black radish? I need not interpret asparagus to the initiated; and the other vegetable, too (think of the exclamation: "Blacky, save yourself!"), seems to me to point to the sexual theme at which we guessed in the beginning, when we wanted to replace the story of the dream by

"the meat-shop is closed." We are not here concerned with the full meaning of the dream; so much is certain, that it is full of meaning and by no means guileless.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Its meaning is: "Your fly is undone." (Trans.)

<sup>2</sup> For the curious, I may remark that behind the dream there is hidden a phantasy of indecent, sexually provoking conduct on my part, and of repulsion on the part of the lady. If this interpretation should seem preposterous, I would remind the reader of the numerous cases in which physicians have been made the object of such charges by hysterical women, with whom the same phantasy has not appeared in a distorted form as a dream, but has become undisguisedly conscious and delusional.-- With this dream the patient began her psychoanalytical treatment. It was only later that I learned that with this dream she repeated the initial trauma in which her neurosis originated, and since then I have noticed the same behaviour in other persons who in their childhood were victims of sexual attacks, and now, as it were, wish in their dreams for them to be repeated.  
[Freud's footnote]

**Source:** Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretations of Dreams," in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, E. J. Brill, ed. and trans. (New York: Modern Library, 1938), 251-252.