

Stories, Culture, and The Freudian Interpretation of Dreams

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Dreams have always been a common phenomenon in societies. Throughout history, various cultural groups have interpreted dreams as being divination tools or inspirations from spiritual forces. Although rarely have actual dream interpretations been documented by ancient societies, stories containing dreams from different cultures give some insight into how people of the past interpreted dreams. Interestingly, regardless of which culture the dreams come from, many of them can be interpreted using Sigmund Freud's theories. Of the variety of literature available, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* provide some of the most notable examples.

Translated by Robert Van Gulik, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* describes the adventures of a Chinese detective, Dee, who attempts to solve three cases almost simultaneously. This classic Chinese detective novel written in the eighteenth century includes a dream. Not only does the dream hint at the solution to the murder case of Bee Hsun, but it also allows readers to glimpse into Dee's personality. In this dream, Dee begins by being invited to drink tea with an old gentleman at an elegant teahouse. Soon, this lovely place with lines of poetry on its roofbeams dissolves into an acrobatic performance in which a young lady kicks a jar to a man. Oddly, a child emerges from the pottery. Finally, in the end, while still being led on by the old gentleman from the tea house, Dee encounters a horrific corpse with a snake writhing in its eye sockets (Van Gulik 82-84).

While this dream may seem to readers the result of an overworked mind and imagination, the same dream, full of complex symbolism, would appear to Sigmund Freud as a dream of wish-fulfillment. In fact, Freud asserts in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that "when the work of interpretation has been completed, we perceive that a dream is a fulfillment of a wish" (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of*

Sigmund Freud 121). In Dee's scenario, Dee subconsciously wants the facts of the case to present themselves, so that he would not need to work so hard to solve it. Along with the wish for the facts to be discovered easily, the smoothness and relative simplicity of the dream also hint at Dee's desire for the case to end as quickly as possible. Finally, the fact that he enjoys most of the dream as a generally inactive participant, as a tea drinker in one case and as a member of the audience in a show in another, expresses his desire to be able to solve the case from the comfort of his own office.

In addition to these wishes concerning the case, Dee also wants to take a break from his tiring work. According to the novel, an old, mysterious man tantalizes Dee by saying, "Your Honor has had a trying day, why should you remain here in this lonely place? Come with me to the teahouse, and let us, sipping the fragrant brew, listen for a while to the talk of the people there" (Van Gulik 82). Besides this invitation, the beautiful teahouse with "walls consisted of intricate lattice work, and roofbeams and pillars...decorated with boards of black lacquer (and) with...lines of poetry in golden letters" likewise hints at Dee's desire to indulge in luxury and paradise in order to escape from the drudgery of the case. With the possibility of being expelled from his prestigious rank for performing a possibly unnecessary autopsy, Dee no wonder wants to escape from the burden of his work. Interestingly, even while at the teahouse enjoying the drink, Dee still cannot entirely relax since he contemplates with mild intensity a few lines of obscure poetry on the beams. Perhaps this inability to relax represents how the case bothers Dee to the extent that he cannot really enjoy any pleasure until he solves the case. Whether or not Dee realizes it, this occurrence may hint at his workaholic behavior. According to *Freud, His Dream and Sex Theories*, "he may reveal in dreams phases of his personality . . . which he is unwilling, or unable to discover by conscious intention" (Jastrow 57). Though Dee sees himself as a hard-working, dedicated judge, he might not be aware of his workaholic disposition. Through this dream, readers, though unfortunately not Dee, become aware of

Dee's almost obsessive attitude in his search for justice. In fact, readers actually become aware of Dee's obsession earlier in the novel when Dee vigorously looks into the year-old death of Bee Hsun, though no suspicions have been reported by any individuals (Van Gulik 32).

Along with the wishes and the glimpse into Dee's personality, his dream also contains an array of symbolism unique to his own experiences. Elaborating on this idea about symbolism, Freud states that "this symbolism varies with the individual, but in part is of a typical nature, and seems to be identical with the symbolism . . . (of) our myths and legends" (Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* 24-25). For example, after helping Dee solve the murder of Bee Hsun, the sergeant points out the symbolism in the acrobatic scene in the dream. According to the sergeant, "the woman acrobat and the young man . . . must have represented Mrs. Djou (Hsun's wife and murderer) and Hsu Deh-tai (Mrs. Djou's lover)" (Van Gulik 205). Clearly, the way the acrobat looks lovingly at the young man represents Mrs. Djou's love for Hsu Deh-tai. Interestingly, just as how an acrobat can perform some of the most amazing feats, the acrobat alludes to Mrs. Djou's ability to concoct such clever plans to continue her clandestine relationship with Hsu Deh-tai. These symbols also come from Dee's Chinese heritage as he probably has witnessed such performances before. Through the intricate details of the dream, the anonymous author of *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* displays his or her ability to intertwine complex symbolism of the dream world with actual happenings.

Besides the *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an adventure story composed in Mesopotamia almost five thousand years ago, also contains dreams which allow readers a glimpse into the personalities of the two main characters, King Gilgamesh of Uruk and Enkidu, his loyal, "barbaric" friend. Prior to befriending Enkidu, Gilgamesh dreams about a meteor which falls from the sky. Gilgamesh mentions that he feels as attracted to it as he would to a woman (Sandars 66). Later, his mother inter-

prets his dream and says that the rock represents Enkidu, the forest man whom he will love dearly. While to many readers this type of affection seems much like the love shared between brothers, Freud might argue otherwise. According to Freud's *Delusion and Dream and Other Essays*, "In the interpretation of dreams, one must, therefore, substitute sexual excitement for fear" (*Freud, Delusion and Dream and Other Essays* 84). Instead of simply viewing the inexplicable love for the meteor as Gilgamesh's true feelings, Freud would point out that, contrary to popular thought, Gilgamesh actually fears Enkidu for his strength and awesome power that seem to have been given to him from the gods. Gilgamesh's fear may have stemmed from the fact that up to that time no other man has been able to challenge his strength. As a matter of fact, Aruru, the goddess of creation, creates Enkidu in order to keep Gilgamesh in check. In the beginning of the epic, the gods cry out to her to "create (Gilgamesh's) equal; let it be like him as his own reflection, his second self, stormy heart for stormy heart. Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet" (Sandars 62). To augment Enkidu's power, the trapper who approaches Gilgamesh about Enkidu states that "he is as strong as a star from heaven and I am afraid to approach him" (Sandars 64). Though seemingly to brush aside the description as an exaggeration, such an illustration probably unconsciously strikes some anxiety in Gilgamesh as he realizes that he might no longer be the strongest man alive.

In addition to the dream about Enkidu, Gilgamesh also dreams about wrestling a wild bull right before the battle with Humbaba, the protector of the cedar wood. No matter how hard he tries, the bull constantly throws him to the ground. In the end, a mysterious person refreshes Gilgamesh from the fight with water (Sandars 73, 78). While Enkidu interprets this dream as how the gods will assist Gilgamesh in his encounter, Freud, once again, would argue for a different translation. In *Freud, His Dream and Sex Theories*, Jastrow states that "Freud does not wholly disregard the bodily component as an excitant but prefers the symbolic interpretation, usually pointing it to a sexual implication" (71). To

Freud, Gilgamesh's inability to tame the bull may represent his sexual frustrations and vigor. Regardless of how hard he tries, Gilgamesh may never be satisfied with his sex life. Like the dream about the meteor, the dream of the bull illustrates out how events in Gilgamesh's everyday life color his dreams. People previously have complained about Gilgamesh's sexual immorality saying that "his lust leaves no virgin to her lover" (Sandars 62). This insatiable desire for sex perhaps displays itself in Gilgamesh's failure to calm the bull down.

Along with this Freudian interpretation of Gilgamesh's dream of the bull, Freud would also add that the dream alludes to Gilgamesh's desire to end the battle with Humbaba. Once again, this interpretation contrasts that of Enkidu's. Elaborating on the concept of wish-fulfillment in dreams, Freud writes that "dreaming has taken the place of action, as it often does elsewhere in life" (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 311). Since Gilgamesh fights the bull in his dream, this match could possibly symbolize Gilgamesh's future battle with Humbaba. Like other dreams, this dream engages the individual in a task that he or she must do. In Gilgamesh's case, he must defeat Humbaba in order to make his name famous throughout the land. Unfortunately, as in Freud's dream of drinking water to quench his thirst, the dream cannot complete the task for Gilgamesh (Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams" 311). Instead, he must face Humbaba in reality.

While the first two dreams seem fairly enduring, Gilgamesh's final dream before attacking Humbaba seems almost ominous and disastrous. In this dream, Gilgamesh recalls a terrible storm where the sky intermittently lightens and darkens. At the end, darkness fills the area like a void while ashes surround him (Sandars 79). This gloomy dream would appear to Freud as Gilgamesh's hope for victory and fear of defeat. To Freud, "If, in danger at sea, one man dreams of a rescue and another of a wreck, they both express the same hope and fear" for Freud "recognizes the common emotional sources of hope and fear" (Jastrow 57). In Gilgamesh's case, Freud would state that this particular dream stems from Gilgamesh's anxiety of an unpredictable battle. If Gilgamesh dreams about winning a battle instead of the one he has where "the clouds...rained down death" (Sandars 79), Freud would still

insist that Gilgamesh has a bit of dread of defeat within him. Likewise, the terrible one Gilgamesh dreams of expresses the hope for victory.

While a few of Gilgamesh's dreams reveal his anxiety towards the upcoming battle with Humbaba, Enkidu's dreams illustrate his terror of death. For example, just before his death, Enkidu has a dream about the underworld where people who look like birds reside in darkness for eternity. When he awakes, Enkidu becomes stricken with a sinking fear that he may die (Sandars 92-93). To Enkidu, this dream comes as a warning from the gods that his end approaches. Freud, on the other hand, would argue that this dream presents one of the hidden portions of Enkidu's personality. According to Freud, "In dreams and in neuroses what is thus excluded knocks for admission at the gates, guarded though they are by resistances" (Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" 232). Like Dee, whose almost workaholic behavior not apparent to himself appears in a dream, Enkidu's partially hidden characteristic, his extreme dread of death, presents itself in his dream. Unlike Dee who might simply not realize his tendency, Enkidu, on the other hand, appears to have tried to suppress such thoughts for he has had a previous dream dealing with the gods proposing to end his life (Sandars 89). While most brave individuals would have accepted this fate and make the most of the rest of their lives, Enkidu becomes extremely agitated and distraught, indicating his terror of death. Though he has reason to be fearful of the images he believes to be from the gods, Enkidu obviously has a paranoia of death according to Freudian principles.

Along with showing the latent part of Enkidu's personality, Freud would also claim that Enkidu's dream refers to sex for Enkidu's dream of the underworld causes him profound distress and anxiety. In fact, Freud writes that "the erotic desire stirs at night . . . bring(s) his memory of the beloved into his consciousness and thus snatch him from the delusion, experiences another rejection and transformation into fear" (*Delusion and Dream and Other Essays* 84). Consequently, in Enkidu's case, this fear derives possibly from his sexual desires for the harlot who has helped "civilize" him by having sex with him early in the epic (Sandars 65). Enkidu, not indulging in sex for such a long

period of time, wishes to have that opportunity once again. Following Freud's theory, the remembrance of the harlot nevertheless causes Enkidu to regret that he has not seen her for such a long time, resulting in a fear that she may reject him. This fear of rejection hides itself in Enkidu's dream of the afterlife.

Even with dreams in literature, readers can apply Freudian concepts to get a deeper look into the personalities of the characters. In *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, Dee's dream, which moves from one scene to another, represents both his wish to rest and his almost workaholic personality. On the other hand, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* contains the dreams of Enkidu and Gilgamesh. While Enkidu's dream involves two separate ideas, his fear of death and his desire for the harlot, Gilgamesh's one about the bull displays his unquenchable thirst for sex and his wish for the battle with Humbaba to conclude. Though these complex combinations of meanings seem almost far-fetched for the everyday multicultural enthusiast, they appear not to be so unusual in accordance with Freud's theories. In fact, Freud writes that "a dream is rarely the representation...of a single thought, but generally of a number of them" (*Delusion and Dream and Other Essays* 82). As a result, dreams may hold a variety of meanings due to the complex nature of the human mind. Clearly, from these examples from two vastly different works of literature of almost two thousand years apart, the intricacies of the human mind have not changed much over time. Human nature remains as complicated and enigmatic as before.

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