

Jung and Dreams

“Dreams are impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche, outside the control of the will. They are pure nature; they show us the unvarnished, natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed too far from its foundations and run into an impasse.”

[Collected Works Volume 10, paragraph 317]

Jung saw the mind/body/feelings (or what he called ‘the psyche’) as all working together. Even negative symptoms could be potentially helpful in drawing attention to an imbalance; for example, depression could result from an individual suppressing particular feelings or not following a path that is natural and true to their particular personality. In this way he saw the psyche as a self-regulating system with all psychic contents - thoughts, feelings, dreams, intuitions etc. – having a purpose; he thought the psyche was ‘purposive’.

The value of dreams

Jung saw dreams as the psyche’s attempt to communicate important things to the individual, and he valued them highly, perhaps above all else, as a way of knowing what was really going on. Dreams are also an important part of the development of the personality – a process that he called **individuation**.

Disguise

Whilst Freud thought that dreams expressed forbidden wishes that had to be disguised (he differentiated the *manifest content* of a dream – what was on the surface, from the *latent content* – what was hidden), Jung saw dreams as expressing things openly; he wrote:

“They do not deceive, they do not lie, they do not distort or disguise ... They are invariably seeking to express something that the ego does not know and does not understand.” [CW 17, para. 189]

Symbols

If dreams are sometimes difficult to comprehend it is because we need to understand that dreams express themselves through the use of *symbols*. Of symbols Jung wrote:

“A symbol is the best possible formulation of a relatively unknown psychic content”.

He also wrote, the dream is “a spontaneous self-portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious” [CW 8, para. 505].

A symbol doesn’t just tell us about what the dream may *appear* to be about on the surface, but has meaning and resonance above and beyond the particular situation. As Marie Louise von Franz said:

“The unconscious doesn’t waste much spit telling you what you already know”

In expressing what is not known, particularly related to an imbalance, Jung thought that dreams were a form of compensation.

Compensation

One of Jung’s own dreams gives a good example of compensation; the dream

concerned one of his patients. She was an intelligent woman but Jung noticed that increasingly in their sessions there was a shallowness entering into their dialogue. He determined to speak to her about this, but the night before the session he had the following dream:

He was walking down a highway through a valley in late-afternoon sunlight. To his right was a steep hill. At its top stood a castle, and on the highest tower was a woman sitting on a kind of balustrade. In order to see her properly he had to bend his head far back. He awoke with a crick in his neck. Even in the dream he had recognised the woman as his patient. [*Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, p. 155]

Jung said that the interpretation was immediately apparent to him. If, in the dream, he had had to look *up* to the patient in this fashion, in reality he had probably been *looking down on her* – the dream had been a compensation for his attitude toward her.

Jung's example

If we look at a dream that Jung used to describe his particular approach to dreams this may become clearer. A woman patient dreamt as follows:

She is about to cross a wide river. There is no bridge, but she finds a ford where she can cross. She is on the point of doing so, when a large crab that lay hidden in the water seizes her by the foot and will not let her go. (She wakes up in terror). [CW 7, para. 123]

It is worth pausing to remember what Jung says about dream interpretation at this point:

“So difficult is it to understand a dream that for a long time I have made it a rule, when someone tells me a dream and asks for my opinion, to say first of all to myself: ‘I have no idea what this dream means’. After that I can begin to examine the dream”.

There are a number of symbols in his patient's dream: the river, crossing a river, a ford, a crab, and the foot. To begin to understand the meaning of these symbols Jung asked his patient for her *associations* to the dream.

She said she thought the **river** formed a boundary that was difficult to get across, something she had to overcome, probably something to do with the treatment. She thought the **ford** offered a way of overcoming the difficulty, probably in the treatment. She associated the **crab** with cancer which she thought was a terrible disease, of which she was afraid and which had killed an acquaintance, Mrs X. She said the crab obviously wanted to drag her into the river, and she was terribly frightened.

“What keeps stopping me getting across?” she mused, “Oh yes, I had another row with my friend [a woman]”.

Jung describes his patient's relationship with her friend as “a sentimental attachment, bordering on the homosexual, which has lasted for years”.

The dreamer adds that Mrs X had “an artistic and impulsive nature which the dreamer felt was punished by the cancer – in particular, Mrs X had an affair with an artist after her husband died”.

The objective vs. the subjective level

This dream could therefore be taken on an objective level, which would treat the dream images as corresponding to objects in the real world. On this level the dream could be about a fear of cancer and of following in Mrs X's footsteps – being impulsive, having an affair, and experiencing terrifying consequences – being pulled under the 'water' by the cancer. This could also be described as an interpretation on the personal level.

Jung, however, made his interpretation on the *subjective* level. Here, he says – and this is a characteristically Jungian position – that **every object in the dream corresponds to an element within the individual's own psyche**. Thus the river, the crab and all the associated elements refer to the dreamer's own psyche.

Jung's interpretation was, therefore, that the crab in the dream was pulling the dreamer back into the unconscious - the river - to confront the unacknowledged, not lived-out, and unhumanised part of her *own* personality – her own artistic and impulsive nature, as well as her own 'masculine' nature. The dream was trying to compensate for the absence of these qualities in her waking life.

Amplification

Jung interpreted that this was the *masculine* aspect of the dreamer's nature as the crab has seized the dreamer by the foot. Jung amplified the dream symbol of the foot with reference to his own understanding of the symbolic meaning feet. Such amplifications could be with reference to any kind of mythical, religious, fairytale, archetypal association.

Jung linked the foot with the myth of Osiris and Isis (he would not necessarily tell the patient this link), and concluded that "the foot, as the organ nearest the earth, represents in dreams the relation to earthly reality and often has a phallic significance." He also made a link to Oedipus [which literally means 'swell-foot'] which he understood as 'suspicious', in other words, someone who was *not* well related to reality. [CW 5 para. 356] This relates the dream to the archetypal level, in other words those elements of the psyche that are common to all of us, like the masculine nature.

The Transference Level

When Jung said to his patient that he thought she had a powerful masculine nature, she did not recognise it, seeing herself as 'fragile, sensitive, and feminine'. Jung wondered why she did not acknowledge her own masculine traits, so evident to him in relation to her friend. This brought him to another aspect of the dream - the transference level (the relationship to the analyst).

Whilst the dream images can correspond to different parts of the dreamer's own psyche, they can also correspond to people in the objective world, as well as to the analyst in so far as the analyst may embody what the dream image is symbolising. This is the essence of a symbol – that it can apply in a number of different situations. This is what Jung found in this case.

His patient told him that when she was not with him, Jung appeared to her as "rather dangerous and sinister, like an evil magician or demon". Jung therefore interpreted that he, Jung, was acting as the dangerous, masculine, foot-gripping crab (bearing the

projection of his patient's masculinity) and it was this dependent relationship with Jung, like that with her friend, which prevented her from crossing the river.

When he suggested all this to his patient she had "an unexpected feeling of hatefulness and despising toward her friend". Jung suggests that "the repression of the hateful, masculine qualities was broken and, at that moment, the patient entered a new phase of life without even knowing it".

Jung's work on the inner, *subjective* level had incarnated, humanised and personalised these archetypal qualities – the impetuous, dangerous, hateful, despising, 'masculine' qualities – and thereby, instead of being *possessed* by these qualities unknowingly, she would be able to *use* those qualities in the service of her fuller life.

We can see that by treating the dream images as symbols, with the images all representing elements within the dreamer's own psyche, and by asking for the dreamer's personal associations to the dream, as well as amplifying other images with relation to archetypal themes, we are able to understand a dream and what it may be trying to communicate to the dreamer – usually by way of compensating for the dreamer's current, conscious attitude, which is in some way one-sided or incomplete.

A final thought on dreams

Jung wrote:

"I have noticed that dreams are as simple or as complicated as the dreamer is himself, only they are always a little bit ahead of the dreamer's consciousness. I do not understand my own dreams any better than any of you, for they are always somewhat beyond my grasp and I have the same trouble with them as anyone who knows nothing about dream interpretation. Knowledge is no advantage when it is a matter of one's own dreams." [CW 18, para. 244]