



# Sigmund Freud's Theory of Dreams and Literary Analysis: An Applicational study

SUNAKSHI SATSANGI

STUDENT, M. PHIL

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES,

DAYALBAGH EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE (DEEMED UNIVERSITY)

DAYALBAGH, AGRA

## ABSTRACT

Sigmund Freud was one the most famous psychologists who created an entirely new approach for the understanding of human behaviour. He propounded the theory of 'psychoanalysis' which provided a more comprehensible study of human behaviour. His theory of dreams is one of his most valuable contributions to the study of human behaviour. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he gave several assumptions and perspectives of dreams. Dreams are also used in the field of literature where the author shows his character dreaming about certain things. On the surface level they might just look as dreams but they exhibit a deeper meaning. In that process dream analysis and interpretation of Freud comes into play. This paper tries to apply Sigmund Freud's Theory of Dreams on selected works of literature i.e. *Exile for Dreamers* by Kathleen Baldwin and *Lake of Dreams* by Linda Howard. The paper also interprets the dreams of the characters according to Freud's Theory of Dreams as presented in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Key words: dreams, interpretation, literature, unconscious, wish-fulfilment, desires

## Introduction

According to Sigmund Freud *The Interpretation of Dreams* was his favourite book which contained his most valuable of observations. Freud made possible for people to understand that dreams were not a result of some supernatural phenomenon or chaotic neural impulses; rather they have a legitimate place of origin and are fully comprehensible.

*Exile for Dreamers* is a novel by Kathleen Baldwin published in 2016 which tells the story of a girl named Tess Aubreyson living in England in 1814. She lives in Strange House which is a “school for unusual girls” run by Miss Strange. Tess always sees dreams that disturb her and seem to be very confusing. Her dreams are more like nightmares to her and she tries to decipher meaning out of them. Tess is always worried about protecting her school and country and so her dreams consist of the same.

*Lake of Dreams* written by Linda Howard, published in 2016, states the story of Thea Marlow whose nights are disturbed by dreams which bring nothing but misery to her. She is bothered by the kind of dreams or rather nightmares that she is having. She has never had a bad dream before let alone a nightmare. Her dreams are mostly centred near a lake and a man. She is so terrified of her dreams that she dreads sleeping. After a great thought she decides to visit the lake house in North Carolina where she used to go as a child with her family to spend the summers. Her family had spent almost every summer there but Thea hadn't gone to that house since she was eighteen. She did not get the time and had to focus on her college and career to finance her living. She had stumbled into her career as a house painter accidentally when she was so desperate for money that she was ready to do anything that came her way.

As a result, she was disturbed by this sudden aversion of water and especially that lake. She thinks that the only way to conquer her fear and rid herself of those frightening dreams is to face the very thing that has been troubling her i.e. the lake. When she reaches the lake house, she sat frozen in her car with fear due to the proximity of the lake. After she had set the house in order, she goes to her room to sleep but heard a knock on the door. Thea was terrified of the thought of someone being at her door at this hour. She took quite a few minutes before opening the

door and was shocked to see the man standing in front of her. It was the same man whom she had been dreaming about. She closed the door even before he could say something.

Despite the fact that dreams and sleeping have mostly been termed as strange and peculiar, they have been the objects of boundless curiosity among neurologists, psychologists and scientists. Generally, it is considered that dreams are a result of a mental activity that occurs during sleep. Many psychologists believe that we fall asleep because the brain is exhausted by using the energy continuously and because it needs rest, we start to feel weak and drowsy. Freud the pioneer of modern psychoanalysis believed that dreams are very extraordinary phenomenon and when traced back to their origin they reveal the actual psyche and personality of an individual.

Freud says that material of all dreams is derived out of experience and memories. The dreams seem too real to be called a dream. Sometimes when one is particularly engaged in day dreaming or fantasy making Freud quotes the old physiologist Burdach to know about the phenomenon of dreams. He says-

The waking life, with its trials and joys, its pleasures and pains, is never repeated; on the contrary the dream aims at relieving us of these. Even when our whole mind is filled with one subject, when our hearts are rent by bitter grief, or when some task has been taxing our mental capacity to the utmost, the dream either gives us something entirely alien, or it selects for its combinations only a few elements of reality; or it merely enters into the key of our mood, and symbolizes reality. (Freud 14)

There have been contrasting views of different psychologists and philosophers regarding the dream phenomenon. Freud believed that every dream has two aspects i.e. manifest content which is the literal meaning of the dreams and latent content which is the hidden or deeper meaning of the dream. Just by observing the manifest content it is impossible to interpret the dream and penetrate into the psyche and unconscious of an individual. From the process of dream interpretation one can dive deep into the history and wishes of a person which have been lying in the deepest corner of the mind.

The characters of Tess and Thea illustrate the Freudian view that dreams are manifestations of fears and thoughts. Tess is always worried about her friends, school and country. When the novel *Exile for Dreamers* opens, Tess is shown escaping the people who were sent to kidnap her friend Georgie by Lady Daneska who was once a

student of her school but later on joined Napoleon. She escapes the killers but because she had just experienced the episode she dreams about the same event. She sees a something white in the black backdrop of darkness. Her dog was tearing the leg of a man and there was a gunshot. Her dreams mostly derive their content from the experiences that she just had or the thoughts that are troubling her mind. She dreams:

In that instant, images flashed through my mind. Blinding splotches of color tumbled and spun in my head. I could no longer see the field or woods. Instead, I was overcome by a burst of black and then an explosion of white. Georgie's dress? It shimmered away, and in its place, I saw Tromos tearing a man's leg. Blood. Knives slashing. Lord Ravencross's face. A searing pain struck my chest. The blast of a gunshot startled me out of my vision. (Baldwin 18)

The dream in this case is absolutely derived from the experience of the waking state. The view that dream has no relation with the reality and it comes from its own world is completely negated. Much of the content in the dream is derived out of experience and is remembered in the dream. But it cannot be assumed that the relation between this dream and reality is easily visible. In the above described dream, the content is easily remembered by the character and the latent content i.e. deeper meaning of the dream can easily be deciphered.

Thea from *Lake of Dreams* too sees the dreams based on her recent or past experiences of the waking state. The dreams that she saw were the result of her past experiences when she was a child. In her case as well, the dreams attach themselves with experiences and memories that happened in reality long back. It does not have to be the immediate experience for it to be a part of the dream. Thea saw herself standing near a lake and then suddenly being drowned after being pushed by someone. The man that appeared in her dreams whom she did not recognise in first instant was actually the one whom she already knew as a child. Her dreams derive their material from experiences but they are not the immediate ones. The fact according to many other psychologists which states that dreams and reality have no connection can be easily challenged by the example stated above.

Another feature that Freud mentions is that dreams draw their material from the childhood memories or experiences. The material of such dreams is not easily recalled or utilized in the waking thoughts and the origin of such dreams can be traced back to the childhood period of the time. Freud says "it has already been expressly admitted that a dream sometimes brings back to the mind, with a wonderful power of reproduction, remote and even

forgotten experience from the earliest periods of one's life" (22). This is the phenomenon which takes place in the case of Thea Marlow in the *Lake of Dreams*. She usually dreams of herself or a man standing near a lake and suddenly she feels as if she is being pushed into water by someone and as a result she had developed a fear of water.

In her case the material of the dream is drawn from her childhood memory and experience. The dreams sometimes drag out the deepest or densest psychic memory which has been buried deep due to the recent memories. Some earliest experiences of childhood, the pictures of certain places or people and favourite objects all remain intact in the mind and are remembered when something triggers the memory. Most of the people try to fight their fear by eventually facing it and that is exactly what Thea tries to do. Freud says that the having an unpleasant dream may also be the manifestation of one's fear. The unpleasant thoughts that trouble the mind generally find their way in the dreams of an individual. As written in the novel:

She had to stop letting these dreams upset her so much. No matter how disturbing their content, they were still just dreams. When she looked at this rationally, the only thing about the dreams that had really affected her life was the unreasoning fear of water they had caused. She had come to the lake to work through that fear, to force herself to face it, and if she could overcome that she would be satisfied. (Howard 25)

The unpleasant dreams in case of Thea in the novel *Lake of Dreams* are not derived from the near experiences or the experience that she had had in the last few days but it is the manifestation of her fear from the childhood. Freud says "The behaviour of memory in dreams is surely most significant for any theory of memory whatsoever. It teaches us that nothing which we have once physically or psychically possessed is ever entirely lost" (27).

Another most important feature of dreams that Freud talks about is that they all are a result of our unconscious mind and thought. The concept of unconscious existed even before Freud talked about, but it was presented in a concrete form by Freud himself through his studies and observations. The concept of unconscious plays an important role in the theoretical part of his findings. Freud's conviction can be seen in the following lines:

Dreams are not to be likened to the unregulated sounds that rise from a musical instrument struck by the blow of some external force instead: of by a player's hand; they are not meaningless. They are not absurd; they do not 'imply that one: portion is: beginning to wake. On the contrary, they are psychical phenomena of complete

validity—: fulfilment of wishes; they can be inserted into the chain of intelligible waking mental acts; they are constructed by a highly complicated activity of the mind. (Freud 3)

The thoughts which are present in the deep corner of the unconscious mind are awakened during a certain stage of sleep i.e. Rapid Eye Movement (REM) which is the stage during which dreams occur. The unconscious is the most important part of human mind as it is the place where all the hidden wishes, desires and wishes are stored. It is the reservoir of all the thoughts, feelings, urges and memories which are outside our conscious awareness. Most of the content of the unconscious mind is unpleasant or unacceptable such as feeling of pain, grief, anxiety and conflict. He writes:

Properly speaking, the unconscious is the real psychic; its inner nature is just as unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is just as imperfectly reported to us through the data of consciousness as is the external world through the indications of our sensory organs. The things that represent our conscious awareness are simply "the tip of the iceberg." The rest of the information that is outside of conscious awareness lies below the surface. While this information might not be accessible consciously, it still exerts an influence over current behaviour. (Freud 247)

The reason that these wishes are hidden is either because they are unpleasant or unacceptable by the society. Such feelings find their way of being fulfilled in the dreams of a person. Sometimes the person is not even aware that such thoughts or desires are present in his unconscious part of the mind and as a result it confuses them. Tess from *Exile for Dreamers* says "most of the time my dreams are inscrutable- a rolling mess of sadness and pain. Of what use is that? ... I cannot try to have a dream. I don't control them. They fly me without warning. It's like being shoved off a cliff into the pit of hell. Into madness. Each dream, each vision carries me closer to that abyss that devoured my mother." (92)

In the novel *Exile for Dreamers*, Tess sees a dream in which she sees a dungeon with echoing voices of someone crying. This dream is the result of her unconscious worries and concern about her friend and lover. She is unconsciously thinking about Lord Ravencross and how he had to fight his brother because of her. She sees Lucien, the brother of Lord Ravencross pointing a gun at her. Tess unconsciously had the thought that the reason that Lord Ravencross had to fight his brother and almost kill him was because she had told him about Lucien joining Napoleon.

She blames herself for coming in between two brothers and thinks that Lucien will never leave a chance to take revenge from her. It might be by kidnaping her friend Georgie or harming Lord Ravencross. It is possible that it is her unconscious guilt and worries emerging in her dreams. She dreams:

The dungeons of Strange House. I recognized the dampness that pervades that place. Thick darkness nearly suffocated me. I heard someone crying. It struck me that Lady Daneska might have captured Georgie. The sound of weeping echoed through the dark corridors of my dreamworld, but no matter how hard I tried to find her, she eluded me. I ran as fast as I could in the tangled underbelly of the house and yet her sobbing only got weaker and more desperate. Chasing the sound through the murky fog, I raced around a corner and collided with Lucien, Lord Ravencross's older brother. He looked as shocked to me as I was to see him. His expression flashed alarm to violence. He aimed a pistol at me. In a blink, he vanished into the darkness. (Baldwin 107)

Freud believed that dreams act as the fulfillers of repressed or unconscious wishes. The desires that are hidden in the deepest corner of the mind are presented in the dream. This desire may not be clearly visible in the dreams and may be disguised in any form. The desire could be represented by an event, object, person or symbol. It is necessary to decipher the meaning of the symbol or the object that contains the hidden wish or desire. In the case of Thea in the *Lake of Dreams*, she often dreams of a man who is standing next to her near a lake. They seem to have a close bond and in love. She does not recognise the man but the same man appears in every dream of hers. She says:

In the dreams, his name varied. He was Marcus, and dressed as a Roman centurion. He was Luc, a Norman invader. He was Neill, he was Duncan . . . he was so many different men she should never have been able to remember the names, and yet she did. He called her different names in the dreams, too: Judith, Willa, Moira, Anice. She was all of those women, and all of those women were the same. And he was always the same, no matter his name. (Howard 8)

This kind of dream arises out of Thea's unconscious desire to find love. The man whom she saw and did not recognise was the man who was her neighbour when she lived near the lake a long time back. It was later that she realises this when she actually saw him. She had completely forgotten about him and as a result she could not

recognise him in the dream. She always dreamt of them being around the lake because that is where she lived and saw him. The lake became a symbol or source of her peace and calm. As she could not recognise the man she was always confused, curious and terrified of her dreams. She could not decipher its meaning. Howard writes:

In the last three dreams, they had been at the lake. Her lake, where she had spent the wonderful summers of her childhood. He had invaded her home turf, and she was suddenly more frightened than she could ever remember being before. It was as if he had been stalking her in her dreams, inexorably moving closer and closer to a conclusion that she already knew. (10)

Thea saw the same dream every day. Her unfulfilled desire was fulfilled in her dream. She could not understand why she dreamt of the same thing every day. The desires which are left unsatiated in the real or waking life are satisfied in the dream as the unconscious becomes active during a certain stage of sleep. Freud also goes back to tracing the wishes to libido as he believes that some of the dreams are the result of sub-conscious or unconscious desires as prompted by libido or sexual instinct. Howard states in the novel:

She thought of it as a single dream, and yet the individual episodes were different. They—it—had begun almost a month before. At first, she had simply thought of it as a weird dream, singularly vivid and frightening, but still only a dream. Then it had come again the next night. And the next. And every night since, until she dreaded going to sleep. She had tried setting her alarm to go off early, to head the dream off at the pass, so to speak, but it hadn't worked. She had felt awareness fade, had felt herself slipping beneath the surface of consciousness into that dark world where the vivid images held sway. She'd tried to fight, to stay awake, but it simply hadn't been possible. (Howard 4)

Freud says that sometimes the wish-fulfilment in dreams is often undisguised and easy to recognise, so that one may wonder why the language of dreams has not long since been understood. Just by remembering or deciphering the dream a little bit it could be made out what kind of wish has been accomplished. Often some dreams occur just to satiate a wish so that an individual could be made free of that particular desire or guilt that has been sitting in some corner of his unconscious mind. One of the dreams of Tess Aubreyson in *Exile for Dreamers* can be understood just by reading it. She has always been worried about her friends and country and her future with Lord Ravencross. At the end of the novel she dreams that she is with a little girl and at the top of the cliffs. Tess always



wanted a calm and peaceful life because her childhood had been harsh. When the novel ends it is shown that she is dreaming once again and this time her dream is not a nightmare. Her wish of having a family is completed through her dream. She dreams:

I felt the most glorious sensation in my palm. I looked down and saw the achingly beautiful face of a little girl. I knew immediately that she was my daughter because I recognised some of my distinctive features reflected back in her face. She had Gabriel's soft brown eyes. One day my daughter would have dreams. even so, I wasn't afraid. Because I would be there to guide her. ...we stood on the cliffs of Strange House. On the other side of my little daughter stood her father, his face free of anger and pain. I soaked in the wonder of that moment and joy whirled through my chest and flew all the way through my fingertips. For once I loved dreaming. (Baldwin 360)

Thus, Freud has rightly remarked that "the dream is predominantly the gracious fulfiller of wishes." (137) Dreams do not disturb the person who is sleeping. They only bring pleasure to the dreamer. Freud calls dreams as the guardian of the sleep. He states:

The dream is thus the guardian of sleep. This attempt can be more or less completely successful; it can also fail—in which case the sleeper wakes up, apparently aroused by the dream itself. So, too, there are occasions when that excellent fellow the night watchman, whose business it is to guard the little township's sleep, has no alternative but to sound the alarm and rouse the sleeping towns people. (Freud 14)

A reference of such phenomenon can be traced in the novel *Exile for Dreamers* as well. Dreams cannot be termed as mere imaginations of an individual. Tess says "My dreams are many things. Frustrating. Horrifying most of the time. Wretchedly inscrutable usually. But they are not wild imaginings." (144)

A remarkable feature of a dream is that sometimes it seems so real that it becomes impossible to distinguish it from reality as it also brings with it the physical repercussions. This phenomenon generally occurs when people experience a nightmare or a bad dream. It is often characterised as an emotional and disagreeable imagery with emotional or physical response. Nightmares however can lead to the feelings of anxiety, fear, depression, or trauma. The individual wakes up disturbed and confused. The person may wake up palpitating or breathing heavily or even

crying. It is due to the fact that the dream seemed so real that it became difficult for the brain to distinguish dream from reality. The physical body never loses contact with the brain and as a result during nightmare the body becomes directly involved. The characters in the novels experience both, nightmares and its physical consequences. Thea wakes up from one of her nightmares feeling breathless and sweating. Howard describes:

Thea jerked awake, her body quivering with the echo of passion . . . and completion. Her skin was dewed with sweat, and she could hear her own breathing, coming hard and fast at first, then gradually slowing as her heartbeat settled into its normal pace. The dream always drained her of strength, left her wrung out and boneless from exhaustion. (5)

The physical consequence of the nightmare is quite evident in her case as she woke up with a jerk, feeling weak. As she was not able to understand the cause of her dreams, it only made her feel confused and worried. Howard describes her anxiety:

Thea got out of bed and walked to the window, restlessly rubbing her hands up and down her arms as she stared out at the quiet courtyard of her apartment building and waited for dawn to truly arrive, for the cheerful light to banish the lingering, eerie sense of unreality. Was she losing her mind? Was this how insanity began, this gradual erosion of reality until one was unable to tell what was real and what wasn't? Because the here and now was what didn't feel real to her anymore, not as real as the dreams that ushered in the dawn. (14)

It was because of her nightmare where she saw herself being pushed into the water until the point of death, that she developed an intense fear of water. She could not go near the lake without feeling insecure or anxiety. She could only think about drowning in the lake every time she saw the water and lake. It all became a source of anxiety to her. She thought:

But she had to do something. The dreams were becoming more intense, more frightening. She had developed such a fear of water that, yesterday, she had almost panicked when driving over a bridge. She, who had always loved water sports of any kind, and who swam like a fish! But now she had to steel herself to even look at a river or lake, and the fear was growing worse. (Howard 10)

The same phenomenon of having a surreal dream occurs with Tess in the novel *Exile for Dreamers* as well. She is disturbed by her dreams and nightmares. The opening sentence of the novel signifies her condition of dreaming. She says “I run to escape my dreams. Dreams are my curse. Every night they haunt me, every morning I outrun them, and every evening they catch me again. I fine day they will devour my soul. Every night I face carnage and suffering alone.” (11) Tess was never able to understand the cause of her nightmares. They only made her anxious and frightened. There came a point where she refused to sleep because of her fear of having a nightmare again. She says: “I sprang up and paced, searching for an escape from this fate, terrified of what I might see or not see. Finally, I settled on the idea that it was morning already; I would not sleep at all today. That way, I was neither dreaming nor refusing to dream” (97).

Nightmares can sometimes increase anxiety and make the person restless. Tess was never comfortable in her dreams and wanted to stop dreaming as she could not take burden of her nightmares. The repercussions of having a bad dream may be felt severely. It may also start causing hindrance in the daily activities of an individual. Tess was so perturbed by her dreams that if she could, she would have stopped dreaming. She says:

More than anything else in the world, I wanted to stop dreaming. To stop living with the nightmares. To outrun the approaching madness. I wanted to clutch with both fists the few slender threads that tethered me to the normal world. But weighed in the balance, against the lives of men who were trying to do some good in the world I realized my small, insignificant life didn't matter. ... could a dream change the course of war? If I might spare the lives of the dozen, or hundreds or maybe countless others, how could I in good conscience, resist the visions?. ( Baldwin 96)

Tess can very clearly be seen affected by her dreams as she cannot stop thinking about anything else. Her dreams are always at the back of her mind even when she is doing something else. Tess is one of those people who puts the needs of other people first and then thinks about herself. She is constantly worried about her friends and thinking of ways to save her country. The cause of her nightmares can be anxiety as well or her constant thought process. Constantly having bad dreams may lead a person to develop a fear or difficulty in sleeping. When once she was injured and needed rest, then also she was adamant on not going to sleep. She says “I suppose I might close my eyes. Not sleep, mind you. Not that. Only to rest for a moment. I would not sleep. Nor would I dream. Yet even as my

eyelids drooped, the world shifted. I knew, as it spun and whirled me into a void, that this would be one of those dreams- not so very unpleasant at first, but dangerous later”(106).

Tess also faces the physical consequences of having a bad dream. At times she would wake up palpitating or sweating profusely. She would also feel breathless sometimes after waking up from a nightmare. When she saw in her dream that she was in the dungeon of the Strange House and heard the scream that seemed to be of her friend Georgie she woke up feeling the exact same thing. She says, “Often in dreams, a scream is a wispy desperate cry that no one hears. I awoke in panic, gasping, a hoarse shriek trapped in my throat as if there had been many screams proceeding it. My heart thumped like a terrified rabbit, and Georgie’s cries still rang in my ears” (108).

## Conclusion

Freud was always of the belief that dreams are not just the wild imaginations of an individual but when deciphered, they reveal a lot about the psyche and personality of the person. His aim can be observed in the following words which beautifully summarise his thought:

If we avail ourselves for a moment longer of the right to elaborate from the dream interpretation such far reaching psychological speculations, we are in duty bound to demonstrate that we are thereby bringing the dream into a relationship which may also comprise other psychic structures. [...] Dreams then, are the most profound when they seem the most crazy. (Freud 38)

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