

SYMBOLS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

by Carl Gustav Jung

INSIGHTS BY:

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ABOUT:

This is a comprehensive summary of the book Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams by Carl Gustav Jung. Covering the key ideas and proposing practical ways for achieving what's mentioned in the text. Written by book fanatic and online librarian Ivaylo Durmonski. (Printable available only for supporting members.)

HIGHLIGHTS:

- What we do and what we want to do are both things most commonly influenced by our unconsciousness.
- The general purpose of a dream is compensation. The blurry films we see while sleeping are to show us what we lack in the real world.
- Dreams are hard to decipher for our own protection – to prevent the dreamer from realizing his own shortcomings and thus turn the dream into a nightmare.

ABSTRACT:

Arising from the emotional disturbance of our own psyche, the symbols our dreams represent aim to explain better our unconscious to the conscious. Yet, few people attach importance to the fairy tales we form in our minds while our heads are resting on our pillows. We firmly believe that these vague blurry imaginations have little to tell us about ourselves. Carl Jung argues otherwise. In this book, he explains how our dreams try to display our deep longings while simultaneously uncovering our flaws. All of this, to better understand ourselves and repair our injured psyche.

THE CORE IDEA:

A man's dreams can reveal his true personality and his unconscious motives according to Jung. Yet, most of us, regardless of our background, reject the idea that these vague and unrealistic flashes of fantasy can say more about us than what they seem. The average man approaches dreams with ignorance. But the things we portray while we are asleep and the symbols we manifest arise from inner emotional disturbance. Making these emotions passing through the mind during sleep the chief source of knowledge about the person.

KEY LESSONS FROM SYMBOLS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS:

- LESSON #1: OUR CONSCIOUS ACTIONS ARE MOTIVATED BY OUR UNCONSCIOUS ONES
- LESSON #2: TALK A LOT AND YOU WILL EVENTUALLY BETRAY YOURSELF
- LESSON #3: PAY MORE ATTENTION TO THE DREAM ITSELF
- LESSON #4: WE DENY THE IMPORTANCE OF DREAMS
- LESSON #5: USE CLASSIFICATION TO UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN PREJUDICES
- LESSON #6: DREAMS ARE ABOUT COMPENSATION
- LESSON #7: DREAMS ARE UNRECOGNIZABLE TO PROTECT US

LESSON #1:

OUR CONSCIOUS ACTIONS ARE MOTIVATED BY OUR UNCONSCIOUS ONES

It's common to imagine that what we do, or what we have done in the past, is based solely on the thoughts we have within our reach.

You eat because you're hungry and you drink because you are thirsty.

And while the above are foundational desires every human being has in order to stay alive – meaning that they are ever-present – there are countless other thoughts and drives that seemingly arise from nothing.

At one moment you sit quietly in the company of a book, fully immersed in its contents, and in the next, you're no longer paying attention to the printed words. Other thoughts start circling inside your mind and prompt your body to execute some other tasks.

Where do these motives come from?

Carl Jung explains in the book that most of what we do is based on some unconscious aspect buried deep down in our psyche. We can't sense these motives. At least not initially. He portrays these inner incentives like a sound below audibility that reveals its lyrics through the desires and the actions of the body.

For example, you may have a sudden thought of a friend that is completely irrelevant to your current activity. Then, after careful observation, you may spot a slight resemblance between the task and the person.

Say you are walking down the street talking on the phone with a friend while passing a bakery. The smell from the shop might remind you of another friend – probably someone you haven't seen in a while but with whom you've shared a delicious meal similar to the scent in the past. Your unconscious calls back these long-forgotten memories and puts them front and center.

Similar sudden thoughts strike our consciousness all the time but are often left unnoticed. The real motives rarely reveal themselves because we don't pay much attention to our "insides". They might become visible to us only after deep investigation and reflection.

"The unconscious part is a sort of afterthought, which may become conscious in the course of time by means of intuition or by deeper reflection. But the event can also manifest its unconscious aspect—and this is usually the case—in a dream." Carl Gustav Jung

LESSON #2:

TALK A LOT AND YOU WILL EVENTUALLY BETRAY YOURSELF

Dreams symbolize. They often hold the key to our true desires – what we want and also what we want to avoid.

Carl Jung explains that Freud was the first who found evidence that consciousness has an unconscious background. What is visible originates from the invisible, sort to say.

Freud, along with another well know neurologist for that time, Pierre Janet, explained that these are like split-off areas of the human psyche.

For instance, you can be a rational person – most of the time. Someone who carefully considers all the options and evaluates the possible outcomes while in the next moment, depending on the situation, you can transform into a messy paranoid man focused on short-term gains. Usually, these different personalities are clearly sensible in patients with psychological conditions.

Everything may look fine with a person but even a slight change in the environment can force out the problematic “identity”.

A question that emerges from these observations is this: How can you figure out what is hidden deep inside the unconscious since you are unable to see it?

The secret method used by psychologists to answer the above is suitably simple: you let the person talk about his dreams and about his experiences without interrupting him. Jung writes, “Anyone who talks long enough will inevitably betray himself by what he says and what he purposely refrains from saying.”

Most doctors will prevent patients from long ramblings about their life thinking that these random thoughts are unrelated to their condition. Exactly the opposite is true based on the book.

People, when allowed to speak freely, will lead the other party to the subject they want to avoid most. The irrational monologue will reveal the areas that they usually want to disguise which is commonly the core source of their depression.

If the listener is skilled enough, he can accurately point out what the “patient” is trying to omit from saying. Often times even the person speaking is unable to sense what is the “secret” of his consciousness. But with guidance and more room for the person to express himself, the truth can be revealed.

“He may try very hard to lead the doctor and himself away from the real facts, but after a while it is quite easy to see which

point he is trying to steer away from... Thus, if the doctor is patient enough, he will hear a wealth of symbolic talk, seemingly calculated to hide something, a secret, from conscious realization.” Carl Gustav Jung

LESSON #3:

PAY MORE ATTENTION TO THE DREAM ITSELF

Eager to convince us that dreams matter, Carl Jung shares the following case from his practice: “a patient of mine dreamed of a drunken, dishevelled, vulgar woman called his “wife” (though in reality his wife was totally different).”

He then explains that on the surface, the dream, as shocking as it seemed, had nothing to do with reality. Naturally, such dreams and the proposed statements inside are immediately dismissed and called “nonsense” by the dreamer – and most probably from the listener, too. People who have such extreme imaginations while they sleep will pay little attention to them and will quickly get away as far as possible from thinking that they matter.

However, if you don't pay close attention to the actual dream and if you don't consider the content, you will learn nothing from this particular fantasy. Obviously, in the case above, there was some sort of authenticity in what was presented. Otherwise, the mind

would not bother to create such a strange inner cinematic, right?

So, you must ask, as stated by the author: “What is the unconscious trying to convey by such an obviously untrue statement?”

Guided by his curiosity, Jung questioned the patient and after that explained that the “degenerate female” in the dream was not a projection of the man’s wife, but a projection of the dreamer.

Then he further elaborates by explaining that there is a “She” in every man – Jung calls this anima. The feminine element in every man. In his words: “She’ consists essentially in a certain inferior kind of relatedness to the surroundings and particularly to women, which is kept carefully concealed from others as well as from oneself.”

Or in the case of the patient dreaming about a drunken woman: this meant that the female side of this person was not nice.

And this is just one of the examples shared in the book. The author presents it to explain how important it is to observe dreams from every possible angle. This allows you to spot the actual context and therefore increase the chances of understanding the real hidden message.

“This experience was an eye-opener to me, and, without dismissing the idea of “association” altogether, I thought one should pay more attention to the dream itself, i.e., to its actual form and statement.” Carl Gustav Jung

LESSON #4:

WE DENY THE IMPORTANCE OF DREAMS

The main reason the layman quickly dismisses the importance of his dreams is based on the argument that dreams entail the existence of an extra being inside the person itself.

After all, our dreams are often utterly not related to our physical reality. And no one wants to believe that there is “another” person hiding inside except himself – the identity known to us. It seems absolutely preposterous to even consider this idea.

However, according to Jung, the existence of two subjects, not one, is precisely the case with us.

We are far from understanding the true nature of our psyche. Claiming that there is nothing inside us except the visible implies that we have discovered everything we need to know about humans. But this is not the case as you can imagine.

“Our psyche is part of nature, and its enigma is just as limitless.”
Carl Jung writes.

From antiquity, people have been talking about “the soul” which should be somewhere deep in the physical body and also quite different from the presented public identity of a person. Isn't this an indicator that there is another unit inside us? A clear sign that we are far from being fully in synch?

If we think about it, really think about it, we will quickly dismiss the idea that we are a singular self operating autonomously.

We often behave as if we are possessed by another being. A simple situation can quickly alter our mood and force us to do things we otherwise wouldn't do.

An emotion or an event can trigger actions totally different from what others think is normal for us. That's why expressions like, “What the devil has got into you?” are quite common in our language.

Another reinforcing argument about the existence of “another” person inside ourselves is the existence of the need for self-control. If we were to be fully autonomous, why we then have to constantly control ourselves?

We are vulnerable, fragile, and need to constantly calm our emotions. This is so because deep inside there is someone else trying to reveal himself, but we do all in our power to keep this identity caged.

For these reasons, among others, we can say that thinking about the symbols presented in dreams – often things that trouble you – is an important aspect of understanding the psyche.

“If you ask your friends or relatives they may be able to tell you things about yourself of which you have no knowledge. One almost always forgets or omits to apply to oneself the criticism that one hands out so freely to others, fascinated by the mote in one’s brother’s eye.” Carl Gustav Jung

LESSON #5:

USE CLASSIFICATION TO UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN PREJUDICES

Different people interact with the outside world differently. People who actively use their minds use active thinking to cope with the surrounding people and circumstances. Conversely, people who don't actively involve thinking patterns in their experiences navigate by feeling.

In other words, you let your emotions guide you.

But let's unpack this based on the text.

The base act of feeling is still something rational – although you rely mainly on your emotions. You use your senses to understand a situation and decide how to act. However, there are two irrational characteristics that originate from feeling: sensation and intuition.

A person approaching might appear friendly, but your senses –

without a logical explanation – might tell you otherwise.

This leads to the following conclusion: With your *senses*, you can tell what's around; *Thinking* allows you to understand what the things around you are; *Feeling* tells you whether the objects (or the people) are friendly or not; And *intuition* helps you understand where these things are coming from and where they are headed.

For example, you can sense the trees around you. Your mind tells you that the trees are actually trees. Feeling creates some sort of emotion related to the scenery (probably calmness). Finally, intuition can help you avoid a potential threat – running away if a tree falls.

Why are these important to understand?

Carl Jung explains that the four above (senses, thinking, feeling, intuition) are the basics for navigating in a given situation. He used them in his practice when dealing with patients and trying to understand their inner desires.

And although these four factors are important to interpret the incoming sensations. They can also fail you if rely solely on them when you want to understand yourself and at the same time others.

Jung argues that if you want to truly understand why something is, you need to suppress your own prejudices and approach situations with an open mind. You need to make the effort to criticize your default position and realize that it might be faulty.

Throughout the book, he continuously warns that the way we view our lives and more importantly the lives of the people around us, is likely to be wrong because we try to project our own thoughts on them. Meaning that we assume that what we think is also what's in the mind of the other person.

“In our efforts to interpret the dream symbols of another person, we are particularly hampered by an almost invincible tendency to fill the gaps in our understanding by projection —that is, by the assumption that what I think is also my partner’s thought.”

Carl Gustav Jung

LESSON #6:

DREAMS ARE ABOUT COMPENSATION

Compensation – the general purpose of our dream.

One of the most interesting findings in the book is what the author considers to be the general purpose of our dreams. According to Carl Jung, our dreams are vivid blurry films that explain what we lack in the real world.

They are heavily encrypted though.

One of the cases presented in the book to explain this is about an intelligent woman who kept dreaming about another woman – a person she disliked in the real world. However, in the dream, both of them were friends, like sisters. The dreamer was baffled why she was so intimate with a person so unlike herself. After analysis, it turned out that the dream wanted to show that, as said in the text, “that she was “shadowed” by an unconscious character resembling that woman.” Her belief that she was

superior to others prevented her from seeing how this affected her relationships with others around her. In the real-life, certain accomplishments were attributed to others because of her exaggerated opinion of herself.

Another great example of how our dreams try to compensate for our shortcomings is of a person meeting great men such as Napoleon and Alexander the Great while he was sleeping.

Jung characterizes this person as an “apparently modest, self-effacing man with winning, apologetic or deprecatory manners, who always takes a back seat though with seeming politeness he never misses an opportunity to be present.”

His inferiority complex was offset by these exciting visitors and created the illusion that he was far better than what he really was in life.

Then Jung asks the following question: “What sort of man must I be to have such illustrious callers?”

The explanation? That the dreamer was secretly holding megalomania (someone who believes that he is very important and superior, or a tendency to do very extravagant things). This condition provided the patient with an antidote for his apologetic behavior. Additionally, these scenes feed his ego and gave him the strength to go on with his life thinking that he is great without actually doing great things.

“Hobnobbing with Napoleon or being on speaking terms with

Alexander the Great is just the thing a man with an inferiority complex could wish for—a wholesale confirmation of the greatness behind the scenes. It is true wish-fulfilment, which anticipates an achievement without the merits that should lead to it.” Carl Gustav Jung

LESSON #7:

DREAMS ARE UNRECOGNIZABLE TO PROTECT US

If dreams are so important, why are they so difficult to understand? Why do we imagine unrealistic worlds that hardly mean anything when we think about them?

The short answer is for our protection.

Freud assumed that what is visible in our dreams is intentionally weird to protect the person from the real context of the dream. The so-called “censor” Freud talked about exists to make the reality of the dream intentionally unrecognizable. This way, when the meaning of the dream is not directly mentioned, we can't see what we are lacking (based on the above argument that dreams exist to compensate for our flaws). Thus, our sleep won't be disturbed.

This makes a lot of sense.

After all, if the dreamer is to understand what he's lacking, his dream will quickly turn into a nightmare, and thus sleep deprivation will follow. The sci-fi element is therefore protecting the dreamer from the real meaning of the dream. The context is encrypted for our own good.

The second argument explaining why dreams are so “dreamy” is the inability of the dream to create a well-defined thought in our heads. Jung explains in the book that when something is obvious in a dream, the dream stops being a dream and becomes conscious – you understand what is happening and you most probably wake up.

You can probably remember a dream that suddenly became a conscious fully understandable moment – a dream about falling off a cliff and waking up when you hit the ground. Hitting the ground is not imaginary, you know what happens and therefore you wake up. It's something rational, not a fantasy.

But in most cases, dreams are *indeed* fantasies based on our unconscious.

The more desires you repress inside yourself, ideas, thoughts, that want to be “outside”, the more these neglected desires will influence your unconscious psyche and as Jung writes, “distort its natural symbol-producing function.”

“As a plant produces its flower, so the psyche creates its symbols. Every dream is evidence of this process. Thus, through dreams, intuitions, impulses, and other spontaneous happenings,

instinctive forces influence the activity of consciousness. Whether that influence is for better or worse depends on the actual contents of the unconscious.” Carl Gustav Jung

ACTIONABLE NOTES:

- **What are you lacking?** As concluded by Carl Jung, the general purpose of a dream is to showcase what we are lacking by imagining scenarios that are compensating for our shortcomings. It's worth asking then, what are our real downsides? But don't list the qualities that we present in a job interview where we bend our "bad" traits and make them look noble. We must look at our real defects, the ones we so diligently try to mask from the public view. This self-analysis will not only help you decipher your seemingly unrealistic dreams. But also, allow you to spot flaws in your daily activities. You may think that your abilities and achievements surpass those of others. Or, you might think that your personality is unworthy of exploration because you are too average. Regardless of the first thought that your mind will morph, there is always a need for self-exploration and analyses because we are far from perfect, even if we do not want to admit it.
- **To master yourself, master your emotions:** The theory of tabula rasa (blank slate) states that we are born "empty-minded" and everything our brain contains is only based on the individual experience. But Carl Jung argues otherwise. We do adopt most of what we know about the world by experiencing the world, but there are certain presets that are present in our psyche before we emerge in the real world. Namely, our instincts. Jung explains that our consciousness is fully separated from our instincts but this doesn't mean that the instincts are not there. Our instincts still influence our movements indirectly, making them even

harder to control and predict. The fact is that we do things without knowing why we do them. Thus, if you want to become the true master of your own house, you need to figure out how to better handle your gloomy moods and sometimes out-of-control emotions.

- **We rely heavily on our unconscious:** Every time you talk, you rely on your unconsciousness for the words that are about to “appear” next. If you’re giving a speech, you can prepare for the presentation – and basically recite what you have prepared in advance. Still, the words that were prepared were still handed to you by your subconscious. On the day of the presentation, if your unconscious is not collaborative, you’ll get stuck the moment you open your mouth. Or as Carl Jung explains, “Any time the unconscious chooses, it can defeat your otherwise good memory, or put something into your mouth that you did not intend at all.” How this can be improved? Choose carefully what your mind absorbs. What we think and what our mind creates as thoughts are both things laid down long before we think about them.
- **What are you holding inside?** Dreams are a manifestation of the things that are inside our unconsciousness. As plants produce their colors based on the components inside them, so man creates his dreams based on the attributes inside him. If the subconscious holds a lot of things that need to be outside (neglected or repressed desires), the dreams will be heavily influenced based on these unexplored hidden motives. The hard task is making sense of the usually twisted dreams. As mentioned above, there is a degree of censorship in the dream itself that is present for our own protection. The meaning of our dreams is encrypted to prevent us from realizing our defects while we dream – so we can sleep peacefully. Usually, though, we know

what are our weaknesses. Sadly, we are too weak, mentally, to admit these things. That's why we need support from others.

- **Move away from your own prejudices:** When trying to interpret a dream you will always steer towards what you know – the knowledge you hold in your consciousness. But this approach makes you completely unaware of the existence of the other possible scenarios that can be closer to the truth. You basically self-sabotage yourself which is often something you don't realize. To fix this pattern of making conclusions based on what you only know (something limiting, no matter how many books you've read), you need to divorce your prejudice. To stop thinking that what you know about something is what other people know about the same thing. Open-mindedness and your ability to look at things from outside of your own perspective will give you the tools to aid others as well as yourself.

COMMENTARY

I can't imagine reading Jung in one sitting. Yes, the word count inside this small booklet is probably exactly the amount of words a skilled reader can devour in just a couple of hours. Yet, you can't, nor should, speed read or scroll through the text.

Every single chapter bombards the reader with a plethora of information that needs to be carefully digested. It's like you just had brain surgery and the new set of ideas placed inside your just-sealed skull want to blow up – your mind is trying hard to synergize with the new lofty insights.

Very few authors can condense elephant-size ideas in just a few sentences. But very few people are precisely Carl Jung.

This text deconstructs the meaning behind our dreams and provides practical theories that can help us explain to ourselves the strange images and scenes we create while we are dreaming.

Warning: the text should be approached with patience and most probably a piece of paper.

Library champions report online that the text is “easily” accessible and “simple” to grasp. But my view is that their written simplification of the book is a way for them to present themselves as somehow superior to the average internet user. I can’t really get how someone can “surf” through such highly enlightening text. The information just prompts you to stop reading and start thinking.

Key takeaway:

The core function of our dreams is to show to our consciousness the hidden side of our psyche. The hard-to-understand images our mind creates while we are asleep are a representation of our suppressed desires and feelings. It is crucial to sit and think about these strange scenes. The better we understand them, the better we’ll understand ourselves.

NOTABLE QUOTES:

“Dream symbols are for the most part manifestations of a psyche that is beyond the control of consciousness... Whether that influence is for better or worse depends on the actual contents of the unconscious. If it contains too many things that normally ought to be conscious, then its function becomes twisted and prejudiced; motives appear that are not based on true instincts, but owe their activity to the fact that they have been consigned to the unconscious by repression or neglect.” Carl Gustav Jung

“We are so used to the rational surface of our world that we cannot imagine anything untoward happening within the confines of common sense. If our mind once in a while does something thoroughly unexpected, we are terrified and immediately think of a pathological disturbance, whereas primitive man would think of fetishes, spirits, or gods but would never doubt his sanity.” Carl Gustav Jung

“Although our civilized consciousness has separated itself from the instincts, the instincts have not disappeared; they have merely lost their contact with consciousness. They are thus forced to assert themselves in an indirect way, through what Janet called automatisms. These take the form of symptoms in the case of a neurosis or, in normal cases, of incidents of various kinds, like unaccountable moods, unexpected forgetfulness, mistakes in speech, and so on.” Carl Gustav Jung

WORKSHEET

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below to plan your next steps:

1/ Explore your true desires (and weaknesses) to find meaning in your dreams:

2/ What do you do (consume) instinctively that hurts your body and mind?

3/ Dig deep, what do you think is inside your unconscious?

4/ What are you not sharing with others - even with yourself?

5/ What are your biases? What is your default reaction to something unexpected?

THANKS FOR READING!

Ivaylo Durmonski

