

Unconscious Narratives: Psychiatry and the Language of Dreams in Fiction



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Abstract: The relationship between psychiatry and literature is profound and multidimensional. Literature has long served as a mirror to psychological struggles, offering insight into the inner lives of characters, reflecting societal views on mental health, and creating empathy for those who suffer from various disorders. Narrative therapy or story telling can be powerful tools for healing and recovery, helping individuals' process trauma and build resilience. Literature can raise awareness about mental health disorders, reducing stigma and promoting understanding. Dreams reflect our fears, desires, memories, and even help us solve problems. From Freud's unconscious wishes to cognitive theories of memory, dreams provide a unique and deeply personal insight into the human mind. Though dreams can appear random or strange, psychologists believe they serve specific cognitive and emotional functions. Dreams serve as literary devices that deepen character psychology, explore philosophical or moral issues, foreshadow events, and connect texts to cultural or collective meanings. Modern psychology views dreams as complex interactions between personal experiences, unconscious processes, cognitive functioning and cultural context.

Key Words: Psychiatry, Psychology, Dreams, Narrative therapy, Literature

Psychiatry generally refers to the branch of medicine focused on the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental, emotional, and behavioural disorders. It involves the study of mental illness and the care provided to individuals experiencing these conditions. The relationship between mental, emotional, and behavioural disorders and literature is profound and multidimensional. Literature has long served as a mirror to psychological struggles, offering insight into the inner lives of characters, reflecting societal views on mental health, and creating empathy for those who suffer from various disorders. Mental, emotional, and behavioural disorders, encompassing conditions like depression, anxiety, and conduct disorders, are prevalent and can significantly impact individuals, families, and society. These disorders, often emerging in childhood and adolescence, can affect learning, relationships, and overall well-being. As Kelsey O'Connell states "... there are differences between the two disciplines. We have different methods, different texts, and different styles of citation. Yet, life rarely hands us two entirely different worlds, and in the Venn diagram of English and Psychiatry, there are similarities. We both utilize qualitative, and, yes, quantitative data". (O'Connell, web)

Literature plays a crucial role in understanding, representing, and addressing these issues, offering insights into lived experiences, treatment approaches, and societal attitudes. Literature often represents nuanced portrayals of individuals experiencing mental, emotional, and behavioural disorders, fostering empathy and challenging stigma. Authors explore the psychological and social dimensions of these conditions, providing insights into the lived experiences of those

affected. In this connection, Literature can critique societal attitudes and policies related to mental health, prompting reflection and potential change. Narrative therapy or story telling can be powerful tools for healing and recovery, helping individuals' process trauma and build resilience. Literature can raise awareness about mental health disorders, reducing stigma and promoting understanding. For example, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath explores themes of depression and mental health struggles in a young woman. *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen is a memoir about a young woman's experience in a psychiatric hospital. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky addresses themes of trauma, anxiety, and depression in a teenage protagonist. *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman is a novel that explores themes of loneliness, social isolation, and mental health. Works by Virginia Woolf often feature characters grappling with mental health challenges. Continued exploration of the intersection between mental health, literature, and society is needed. Collaboration between mental health professionals, writers, and educators can foster a more nuanced and supportive environment. Literature can play a vital role in reducing stigma and promoting empathy for individuals with mental, emotional, and behavioural disorders.

Psychiatry utilizes dreams as a valuable tool for understanding a patient's mental state, emotional well-being, and potential underlying psychological issues. Dreams can offer insights into a patient's unconscious mind, revealing recurring themes, anxieties, or unresolved conflicts. While dream interpretation is not a standalone diagnostic tool, it can be a helpful adjunct to other therapeutic

approaches. Psychiatry uses dreams to gain insight into mental state. First, dreams can provide a window into a patient's emotional state, revealing patterns of thought, feeling, and defence mechanisms. Second, identifying emotional issues through recurring themes in dreams, such as being chased, failing, or experiencing loss, can point to unresolved anxieties or fears. Third, understanding trauma through nightmares and flashbacks are common in conditions like PTSD, and analysing these dreams can help in processing traumatic experiences. Fourth, guiding treatment as dream analysis can inform treatment plans, helping therapists tailor interventions to address specific emotional or psychological needs. Last, assessing treatment effectiveness as changes in dream content or frequency can indicate progress in therapy or the emergence of new issues.

Few examples to reflect are the individuals with schizophrenia may experience dreams that are flatter, less detailed, and less emotionally charged compared to healthy individuals. Dreams in depression may feature themes of sadness, hopelessness, and lack of vibrancy. Nightmares and flashbacks are common in PTSD, often reliving traumatic events. Dreams may reflect anxiety through themes of being chased, losing control, or facing overwhelming situations. While some themes are common, dream symbols are highly personal, and what matters most is the individual's interpretation of their own dreams. Dream analysis should be used in conjunction with other clinical assessments and diagnostic tools. Research suggests a correlation between vivid dreams and certain psychiatric conditions like PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders. Dream analysis can be a valuable tool in therapy, but it's important to remember that it's just one aspect of a broader treatment approach. To sum up, dreams can offer valuable insights into a patient's mental health and emotional state, providing clinicians with a unique perspective to inform diagnosis and treatment.

The psychology of dreams reveals that they are more than just night-time entertainment. Dreams reflect our fears, desires, memories, and even help us solve problems. From Freud's unconscious wishes to cognitive theories of memory, dreams provide a unique and deeply personal insight into the human mind. For example, recurring nightmares may be linked to trauma, anxiety, or PTSD, vivid or lucid dreams can occur during emotional or transitional periods and therapeutic techniques like dream journaling or dream analysis are used in psychotherapy.

The interpretation of dreams has been a fascinating and recurring theme in English literature for centuries. Dreams often serve as symbolic devices that reveal hidden truths, foreshadow events, or

explore the unconscious mind of characters. Here's a brief overview of how dreams have been interpreted and used in English literature through several written texts. In the Medieval and Renaissance Literature, the early English texts like *The Dream of the Rood* or Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, dreams were often seen as divine or supernatural messages, spiritual visions or prophetic revelations. Another example is In *The Dream of the Rood* (8th century), the dreamer has a vision of the Cross speaking to him, reflecting Christian symbolism and divine intervention. In Shakespearean Drama, dreams reflect Psychological Insight and Foreshadowing. Shakespeare used dreams as windows into the soul. He uses dreams to reveal characters' guilt, desires, and inner turmoil. For example in *Macbeth*, dreams and visions (like the floating dagger and Banquo's ghost) illustrate Macbeth's guilt and descent into madness. In *Julius Caesar*, Calpurnia's dream warns Caesar of his assassination, showing dreams as ominous and symbolic.

In Romantic Literature dreams are used as a means of expressions of imagination. Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Blake saw dreams as reflections of the imagination and the soul. For example, Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is famously said to have been composed from an opium-induced dream, celebrating the creative power of the subconscious. In Victorian Literature dreams are expressions of the repression and the unconscious. They play a pivotal role in emerging influence of psychology. In the 19th century, dreams began to reflect internal conflict, repression, and subconscious thought foreshadowing Freudian ideas. For instance, In *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, Catherine's dreams reveal her spiritual and emotional unrest. In Dickens' works, such as *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's dream-like visions serve as moral lessons and personal revelations. In Modern and Postmodern Literature, the psychology of dreams is refined by Freudian and Surrealist Influence. Freud's theory of dreams influenced many 20th-century writers to explore the unconscious and repressed desires. James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* use stream-of-consciousness and dream-like narrative styles to delve into the minds of characters. In postmodern literature, dreams are sometimes fragmented or absurd, reflecting the complexities of identity, reality, and perception.

Throughout literature the themes and functions of dreams are varied. They represent symbolism as dreams often symbolize hidden desires, fears, or truths. They foreshadow and may predict future events or hint at a character's fate. They provide insight into the psychology of characters and contribute for character development. They carry forward the narrative structure as they can create

suspense, shift the plot, or alter the perspective. The interpretation of dreams in English literature has evolved from divine messages and moral lessons to complex explorations of the human psyche. Whether prophetic or psychological, dreams continue to be a powerful literary tool that bridges the conscious and unconscious worlds, enriching character and theme.

There are many theories on the interpretation of dreams in English literature, integrating literary criticism, psychology, and cultural analysis. These theories help explain how dreams function within texts and how they can be interpreted by readers. The Psychoanalytic Theory is based on Freudian and Jungian Approaches primarily discussed in Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). The key idea is that dreams are expressions of repressed desires and unresolved conflicts. It is applied through the characters' dreams and reveal their unconscious fears, guilt, or forbidden desires. For example, In *Hamlet*, the dreamlike hallucinations and soliloquies can be seen as Freudian manifestations of repressed oedipal conflict. In Gothic novels like *Frankenstein*, dream sequences reflect inner torment and guilt. Additionally Carl Jung's contribution that dreams express universal archetypes and collective unconscious is pivotal. Jungian analysis looks at symbolic and mythic patterns in dreams. For example, William Blake's dream imagery often reflects archetypes of transformation, innocence, and redemption.

Dreams are mental experiences that occur during sleep and often involve imagery, emotions, memories, and even problem-solving. Though dreams can appear random or strange, psychologists believe they serve specific cognitive and emotional functions. Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory suggests that "dreams are the royal road to the unconscious." (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1899). He believed that dreams reveal repressed desires, often rooted in childhood experiences. He says "in every dream, the dreamer is the chief actor" and suggests that dreams always reflect the dreamer's inner world, even when they seem to be about others. According to him dreams have two parts: Manifest content – the actual storyline of the dream and Latent content – the hidden, symbolic meaning. For example, dreaming of flying might symbolically reflect a desire for freedom from responsibilities. Freud argued that the true purpose of dreams is to satisfy unconscious desires in a safe, symbolic form as "Dreams are disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes."

Dreams communicate with the collective unconscious, using archetypes and symbols common to all humanity. According to Carl Jung

dreams serve as a guide for personal growth (individuation) and "Dreams are the guiding words of the soul." Jung saw dreams as messages from the unconscious, guiding personal growth and self-understanding. He emphasizes that dreams project on inner reflection and self-realization through dream interpretation and introspection. He quotes "who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes." Dreams are symbolic doorways to the unconscious, holding valuable truths about the psyche as "dream is the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul." Jung believed dreams help balance the conscious and unconscious mind. Dreaming of a shadowy figure might represent your "shadow self" – parts of yourself you deny or avoid.

The Structuralistic and Semiotic Approaches carry the key idea that dreams in literature function like language; they have structures, symbols, and codes that can be 'read.' Structuralists analyze the symbols in dreams based on binary oppositions (e.g., light/dark, life/death). In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, dreamlike visions use coded imagery (the albatross, the ghost ship) to represent guilt, punishment, and redemption. The Symbolist and Archetypal Theory propose that dreams are filled with symbols that recur across literature and culture. Interpreting dreams involves decoding metaphors and symbols, like water stands for unconscious and flight stands for freedom. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's dreams about children and fire foreshadow personal transformation and romantic struggle.

In Feminist Literary Criticism, dreams often reflect gendered experiences, especially in women's writing. Feminist critics explore how dreams reflect repression, trauma, or identity in female characters. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, dreamlike hallucinations represent a woman's psychological breakdown under patriarchal control. In Marxist Criticism, dreams may represent class struggles, economic anxieties, or ideological conflict. They are analysed for their socio-political symbolism. In Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's ghostly visions are dreamlike encounters that critique capitalist greed and promote social reform. In Postmodern and Poststructuralist Approaches, dreams are unstable, fragmented, and often question reality itself. Postmodern literature uses dreams to blur boundaries between reality and fiction. In Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, dream sequences challenge traditional narratives and gender roles using surreal imagery.

In Romantic and Imaginative theories, dreams are creative, visionary, and tied to the poet's imagination. Romantic writers like Coleridge and Blake saw dreams as divine or mystical revelations.

In Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is a dream-induced vision that celebrates poetic creation and imagination. In Existential and Psychological Realism, dreams reveal existential anxieties, identity crises, or inner conflicts. Especially in modernist literature, dreams explore the fragmented self. In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, dreamlike inner monologues explore the meaning of time, memory, and personal identity. Therefore, interpretation of dreams in literature is a multidisciplinary field, drawing from psychoanalysis, symbolism, structuralism, feminism, and more. Dreams serve as literary devices that deepen character psychology, explore philosophical or moral issues, foreshadow events, and connect texts to cultural or collective meanings. Dreams are the brain's attempt to make sense of random neural activity during REM sleep. The dream has no inherent meaning but is created by the brain trying to "make a story" from internal signals. Activation-Synthesis Theory by Hobson and McCarley defines that dreaming is more biological and neurological than psychological. Dreaming is a reflection of waking thoughts, problems, and mental processes. It is a way to process information, store memories, and practice problem-solving. Students often dream about exams: these are natural extensions of waking concerns. Threat Simulation Theory (Antti Revonsuo) has roots in evolutionary psychology. Dreams allow practicing dealing with threats or challenges in a safe mental space. Dreaming about running from danger helps simulate survival instincts.

Dreams are no longer seen only as symbols of repressed desire (Freud) or random brain activity (Hobson), but as meaningful psychological events. Modern psychology views dreams as complex interactions between personal experiences, unconscious processes, cognitive functioning and cultural context. The functions of Dreams in Human Psychology are as follows: Emotional regulation as dreams help process strong emotions like fear, sadness, and desire; Memory consolidation as sleep and dreams support the transfer of information into long-term memory; Problem-solving as dreams can offer creative solutions and Identity and self-reflection as dreams explore themes of who we are, our relationships, and our future. The psychology of dreams reveals that they are more than just night-time entertainment. Dreams reflect our fears, desires, memories, and even help us solve problems. From Freud's unconscious wishes to cognitive theories of memory, dreams provide a unique and deeply personal insight into the human mind.

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