

A New Look at Freud's Botanical Monograph Dream

***Vic Comello**

The theory of sleep cycling offered on this website, which attempts to link NREM-REM sleep cycling to procedural learning, contains numerous implications for dream analysis. These implications will be explored in this paper and then applied to an analysis of Freud's botanical monograph dream.

It is often assumed that dream recall accurately reflects the mental activities interrupted by awakening. This assumption is clearly incorrect, since procedural learning contains a behavioral programming component that is entirely absent from what is recalled, which primarily involves motivational content. A more credible assumption is that only those components of sleep time mental activities that are suitable for waking consciousness may be recalled, which is not all-inclusive simply because this state of consciousness differs from that of any sleep stage. What we think of as a dream may be likened to a two-dimensional shadow of a three-dimensional reality. Nevertheless, dream recall should reflect at least some characteristics of sleep time mental activities, particularly when they are examined from a psychoanalytic point of view.

Some support for the honing process I have postulated can be seen in the results of a study of sequential dreaming that was conducted by Offenkrantz and Rechtschaffen (1963), who examined the psychological content of the sequential REM dreams of a subject undergoing psychiatric treatment in terms of T.M. French's psychoanalytic viewpoint (e.g., French, 1952). They found that "the organization of any particular dream depends at least in part on the consequences of the attempted solution to the conflict in the previous dreams. For example, when the solution of a problem in one dream was relatively gratifying, the dreamer usually would attempt an even bolder gratification of a disturbing wish in the next dream. In turn, reactive motives such as fear of retaliation, fear of loss of love, guilt, or shame were stimulated by the bolder gratification. Thus, an alternation of predominantly gratifying and predominantly disturbing dreams in the same night was not unusual." I interpret this data as indicating that the dreamer learned something from each REM dream and attempted to use that information in the next dream in honing his adaptations for use in his subsequent waking interval. A struggle to reconcile opposing forces is also suggested.

The last REM period before awakening from a normal night of sleep can persist for 45 min or more, yet when REM dreams are recalled upon awakening, the corresponding mental activity reports are invariably shorter than what one would imagine the report of a 45-min dream should be. While it may be supposed that much content has simply been forgotten, this does not seem to be the whole story. The dream that we will examine, Freud's botanical monograph dream, is a case in point. This is a very short dream, and is probably derived from a long REM dream, yet when it is analyzed psychoanalytically it seems to be a complete dream that begins at the beginning.

That REM dreams are not continuous entities is suggested by the finding (Dement and Wolpert, 1958) that REM presentation may cease momentarily several times during the course of a long REM dream. It is theorized that a reorganized REM dream starts after each of the stoppages, so that the last REM segment before awakening represents the culmination of a person's adaptive efforts. This last segment therefore should most accurately reflect the adaptations a person exhibits upon awakening. This implies that a careful psychoanalytic analysis of this dream segment should be predictive, or at worst

consonant with, the actions, feelings, emotions, and behavioral tendencies the dreamer exhibits the next day.

Another implication for dream analysis of the sleep theory I have outlined is that REM dream content should reflect the concurrent consideration of several life concerns. This implies that any example of dream analysis that results in an interpretation involving a single life concern is probably inadequate. Either the analyst is being selective in the memories used in interpreting the dream or some of the memories are being misconstrued in arriving at a single interpretive stance.

The sleep theory also implies that dreams should contain only interrelated memories: memories of currently unresolved situations, which indicate the subjects of the dream, and memories of past situations that came to definite outcomes, which should be interpretable as having a bearing on the dream subjects. That is, the situations involved with the past memories should be similar to the current situations, and they should contain lessons that apply rationally to the subjects of the dream. There should be no extraneous memories, no memories, that is, whose life lessons have no logical bearing on the subjects of the dream.

This means that, theoretically at least, dream analysis should be very straightforward. The personal significance of the current events referred to in a dream should come from the dreamer, as should the life lessons learned from each of the past experiences and the ways in which those lessons apply to the current situations the dreamer is facing. In practice, however, not all of that information may be consciously available to the dreamer. Nevertheless, dream analysis should proceed in a more rule-bound fashion than has been true in the past.

The method of REM dream interpretation to be illustrated here involves the following steps:

- Consider each REM dream moment to consist of an array of elements (persons, places, things, actions) that are experienced together to evoke a particular set of memories at a particular time.
- Systematically apply Freudian free-association to each element of each dream moment to unearth the memories that presumably gave each element its meaning. This step should be considered as providing the sequence in which memories were brought into play during the dream.
- Next, group the memories according to whether they relate to currently unresolved life situations or situations that have arrived at definite outcomes in the dreamer's past.
- Determine the developmental goals the dreamer hopes to achieve in meeting each of the currently unresolved life situations. These goals are the subjects of the dream, with each subject defining a thematic plane.
- Determine from the dreamer the life lessons learned from each of the concluded past situations alluded to in the dream. Distribute these life lessons among the thematic planes they evidently belong. Do this for each dream moment, to provide an indication of the dreamer's thought processes with respect to each thematic plane as the dream proceeds.
- Interpret the thought corresponding to each thematic plane as representing a "solution" and as having the purpose of helping provide the motivational basis for the person's behavior in the next waking interval. That is, assume that dream

content provides unconscious motivational structure to the dreamer's subsequent waking interval by functioning in a manner similar to a set of post-hypnotic suggestions.

Two comments should be made before we apply this concept of dream interpretation to the analysis of Freud's botanical monograph dream. One is that in conceiving of dividing dream content into several thematic planes, I have made implicit use of the theory of conceptual integration (blending) (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002). Much of so-called blending theory relates to the creation, apprehension, and communication of meaning through creative uses of language, particularly metaphorical expressions. Use of metaphor is depicted as enlisting two or more "mental spaces" in creating a blended mental space, which serves as the basis for the metaphor's meaning. The mental space for the blended expression may also contain content that was not found in any of the input mental spaces. This is called "emergent" content.

In our analysis of Freud's dream, we will resolve the blended mental space of the dream into its component mental spaces, and will arrive at a concept of the meanings of the dream to Freud through the meanings found on each thematic plane. No attempt will be made to discern emergent content. This will be seen as a consequence of the paucity of information available by free-association and not because emergent content is lacking.

The second comment involves the caution that the memories one works with in analyzing a dream represent only the skeletal remains of the thoughts that occupied the dreamer during sleep, and a complete skeleton should not be assumed. Careful application of free-association and the steps I have outlined, however, should allow one to follow dream thoughts in a general way throughout the course of a REM dream segment.

In what follows, we will examine Freud's developmental goals, the lessons he took from related past experiences, and the bearing those lessons had on the achievement of his goals. In attempting to reconstruct Freud's dream thoughts, we will assume that Freud examined remembered realities in a rational fashion. Neither flights of fancy nor appeals to delirious reasoning will be used in analyzing this dream.

An Analysis of Freud's Botanical Monograph Dream

Freud offers two descriptions of the botanical monograph dream that are equivalent for our purposes, so only the first description will be reproduced here (all dream association quotes are from Freud, 1900):

I had written a monograph on a certain plant. The book lay before me and I was at the moment turning over a folded colored plate. Bound up in each copy there was a dried specimen of the plant, as though it had been taken from a herbarium.

One problem with analyzing the dream in the manner I have indicated is that Freud says precious little about his current life situation, and even less about his developmental desires at the time of the dream. Fortunately, we know when Freud dreamed the botanical monograph dream because he mentioned having received a distinctive letter from his close friend, Berlin nose and throat specialist Wilhelm Fliess, in his associations to the dream. That letter has not survived, but Freud obviously referred to the same letter in answering it on March 10, 1898. Since it was Freud's practice to answer Fliess's letters within a day of receiving them, we can suppose that the dream

was dreamt the night of March 9th. As it happens, there is a great deal that is known about Freud's life at this time, which can be used in providing background information for the interpretation of the dream.

The botanical monograph dream is ideal from the point of view of an introductory discussion of dream interpretation because it is short and fairly well documented. Shortcomings relate mainly to the circumstance that Freud did not offer this dream for the purposes of extensive dream analysis. Even though he did refer to it continually in different contexts throughout his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, most of these passages merely rehash old information. Freud also abruptly terminated the analysis of the dream and eliminated some associations while preparing the final version of the book, as is evident from a typo concerning "thoughts about Italy" that has survived to this day. Freud also did not adhere to the practice of systematically associating to each element of each dream moment, as he did with the dream of Irma's injection. Additionally, he failed to provide a clear sequence of dream moments. For example, did he notice the dried specimen before he began turning over the colored plate? The bit later in his associations he indicates that he did more than merely turn over the folded colored plate in the dream; he unfolded it to look at it better. By doing so, did he cover up the dried specimen? Also, what were his feelings when perusing the book? Was there a sense of pride? These questions remain impossible to answer definitively. Finally, Freud's associations do not lend themselves to an in-depth psychoanalytic treatment of the dream, again in contrast to the Irma dream.

Let us begin by attempting to define a timeline for the events in the dream. The dream begins with the book lying before Freud and Freud having the sense of it being written by him and of it being about an unspecified plant. A fraction of a second later, he notices a dried plant specimen bound into the book and a colored plate. Which, however, did he notice first? In his associations, Freud mentions the dried plant specimen before he turns to consider the colored plate, which may indicate the time sequence in the dream, but is not conclusive evidence of it. Considering the dream to be real-life experience, however, does support that position. For Freud to notice the dried plant, the book must have been open initially to the page containing the bound-in specimen, which then would have become covered over as Freud unfolded the page containing the colored plate to examine it better.

Let us now turn to the more difficult problem of assigning memories to each dream element, using Freud's stated free-associations, such as they are. We will consider his associations in turn as they evidently apply to each thematic plane.

Remembering Martha's Flowers

Freud's analysis of the dream opens with the memory of seeing a book in a bookshop the previous day, bearing the title *The Genus Cyclamen*. Cyclamens were his wife's favorite flowers, and at some point he reproached himself for rarely remembering to buy them for her, even though doing so would please her greatly. It is unclear whether these thoughts came to Freud's mind upon seeing the book or later in the day, or the next day when associating to the dream. Freud repeatedly points to seeing the book as an example of an indifferent experience, which would imply that its connection with his wife became revealed to him at some later time. Yet Freud also indicates that he didn't have much of the interest in botany, which would cause one to wonder why he noticed the book in the first place. Actually Freud had more of an interest in flowers than he admits to in his associations. So it would seem that the word "cyclamen" might have attracted his attention, with its connection to his wife, Martha, perhaps not reaching

consciousness at that moment. In the blended mental space that gave rise to the dream, then, the dreamed book may be considered to refer to the book on cyclamens, and thus the issue Freud created between himself and his wife by “forgetting” to buy her flowers, even though he regularly remembered to buy his mother flowers at this time (Grinstein, 1961).

The situation involving Freud and his wife’s flowers defines a thematic plane relating to a currently unresolved situation. It is unresolved in the sense that Freud is continuing to not buy his wife flowers, with the question being whether he should change his behavior. Over the course of his night of sleep, Freud reached a conclusion in this matter. On this thematic plane, Freud builds emotional support for acting on the decision upon awakening.

Freud does not explicitly relate the dried specimen to any of the associations that pertain to this thematic plane, but it seems logical to assume that the specimen refers to a type of flower and that associations to flowers became activated upon experiencing this element. In this regard, Freud recounts the memory of an incident he had learned of probably from his former patient Frau L. Other memories that were apparently associated with the dreamed botanical specimen include the remembrance that Frau L. had recently talked to Martha and that Martha continues buying Freud his “favorite flowers,” artichokes, despite his continuing forgetfulness. During the next moment, when the colored plate is experienced, a memory of an artichoke being torn apart becomes activated. This is the seeming grab bag of memories we have to work with.

Actually there is one more element. The incident with Frau L. involved her expecting a bouquet of flowers from her husband on her birthday. One year, this token of his affection failed to appear, causing Frau L. to burst into tears because she took her husband’s forgetfulness as meaning that she no longer held the same place in his thoughts. It was irrelevant whether Frau L. was right or wrong in her supposition, as far as the rest of Freud’s analysis of the dream is concerned, so it is quite odd that he went out of his way to indicate that Frau L. was indeed correct, and do so in such a way as to indict himself in the process. Freud does this by mentioning a theory he was developing at the time, according to which “forgetting is very often determined by an unconscious purpose and that it [the theory] always enables one to deduce the secret intentions of the person who forgets.” By saying that the Frau L. incident provided evidence for his theory, Freud suggests that there was more to his own forgetfulness than meets the eye, that he, like Frau L.’s husband, continues to “forget” to buy flowers because of hard feelings he had toward his wife.

The reason for these hard feelings is perhaps alluded to in Freud’s associations. Freud indicates that all lines of thought in the dream, including those pertaining to his wife, were prompted by a conversation he had the previous evening with his friend Dr. Leopold Königstein, an ophthalmic surgeon Freud had known since his medical school days. The most important aspect of this apparently wide-ranging discussion concerned “a matter which never fails to excite my feelings whenever it is raised,” which apparently involved Freud being “blamed for being too much absorbed in my favorite hobbies.”

There is some disagreement about what Königstein meant by Freud’s hobbies. Spence (1981) speculates that Königstein was critical of Freud’s new method of interpreting dreams, while Cole (1998) sees Freud as being rebuked for the extravagance of his book purchases. In another place in his article, however, Cole hits closer to the mark: “Behind

the dream of the botanical monograph is the story of an ambitious young man who wanted, perhaps too desperately, to make a name for himself.”

Freud’s longstanding approach to fame and fortune consisted of get-rich-and-famous-quick schemes, the first of which he devised in early 1884 when he pinned his professional hopes on a new method of staining samples of brain tissue for microscopic examination. When that led nowhere, and after a mentor advised him to turn his attention to subjects of interest to physicians, Freud sought fame and fortune through research on cocaine, which was then a relatively unknown drug. Again, however, fame passed him by. Then Freud focused on gaining a fundamental understanding of neuroses, particularly hysteria, his aim in this case apparently being to mount the pedestal vacated by the deceased “Napoleon of Neurosis,” Jean Martin Charcot. This effort culminated with the development of the seduction theory of hysteria in 1896, which Freud denounced as wrongheaded in his September 21, 1897, letter to Fliess (all quotes from Freud’s letters to Fliess are from Masson, 1985). In voicing his disappointment, Freud says, “The expectation of eternal fame was so beautiful, as was that of certain wealth, complete independence, travels, and lifting the children above the severe worries that robbed me of my youth. Everything depended upon whether or not hysteria would come out right. Now I can once again remain quiet and modest, go on worrying and saving.” Farther down in the letter, he says, “In this collapse of everything valuable, ... the dream [book] stands entirely secure and my beginnings of the metapsychological work have only grown in my estimation. It is a pity that one cannot make a living, for instance, on dream interpretation!” At the time of the botanical monograph dream, even the promise of his latest bid for fame, the dream book, seemed in jeopardy. The dream book in question would of course become the most famous book ever written on dreams, Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

In criticizing Freud’s hobbies, Königstein was criticizing Freud’s mode of achieving success, and he apparently suggested that Freud boost his medical practice by extending his medical knowledge rather than continuing to follow frivolous pursuits like the dream book.

It would be quite understandable if Martha had in some way echoed Königstein’s criticism of Freud on this point. She never took an interest in any of Freud’s theories even after he became famous, so it is difficult to see how she could be sympathetic to Freud’s theoretical efforts at this point when Freud’s devotion to them was making it difficult for her to put food on the table. Criticism from her in this matter would be doubly hurtful to Freud because it would echo his mother’s criticism of his father, implying that Freud was just like his father, who was faulted as being a poor wage earner precisely because he couldn’t keep his mind on his profession, being lured continually by the siren call of fanciful schemes that never brought in a penny. Her disparaging remarks or attitude would contain the prophecy that Freud would end up just as his father did, a penniless old man who went to his grave relying on charity from relatives and friends to meet his obligations as a husband and father.

A lack of support by Martha in this area would also open old wounds. Freud was by no means indifferent to Martha’s level of interest in his theories. Cole quotes passages from Freud’s letters to his then fiancée to show his love for her: “Martha is mine, the sweet girl of whom everyone speaks with admiration...who strengthened my faith in my own value and gave me new hope and energy to work when I needed it most.” “With you I am allowed to feel rich and to enjoy unlimited praise and recognition.” “I know that you do love me and it is your doing that I have become a self-confident, courageous man.” These are expressions of love for Martha, but blended with the love