**Introduction to Sigmund Freud’s Theory on Dreams**

Freud maintained the notion that the dream fundamentally acts as the guardian of sleep. When we go to bed, the curtains are drawn, the lights are turned off and in effect we are attempting to disconnect from our reality by extinguishing all external stimuli. During the night, the mind protects the sleeper from being disturbed by reacting to further external stimuli (noise, temperature, light, the need to urinate, numb arm/leg, pain, etc) as well as all internal stimuli (emotions, fears, dissatisfaction, desires, previous day’s activity) by manufacturing dreams.

Freud’s work was solely concerned with internal stimuli. Essentially, for a person to continue to sleep undisturbed strong negative emotions, forbidden thoughts and unconscious desires have to be disguised or censored in some form or another. Otherwise, confronted by these, the dreamer would become distressed and they would eventually wake up. Therefore the dream, if understood correctly, could lead to a greater understanding of the dreamer’s subconscious.

Freud believed the dream to be composed of two parts. The manifest and the latent content. The manifest content can be thought of as what a person would remember as soon as they wake – what they would consciously describe to someone else when recalling the dream. Freud suggested that the manifest content possessed no meaning whatsoever because it was a disguised representation of the true thought underlying the dream.

On the other hand, the latent content holds the true meaning of the dream – the forbidden thoughts and the unconscious desires. These appear in the manifest content but will be disguised and unrecognizable. Although in rare cases the manifest and latent content can be indistinguishable (Freud referred to these as ‘Infantile dreams’).

The process by which the latent content is transformed into the manifest content is known as the “dream work”. The dream work can disguise and distort the latent thoughts in the following four ways:

1: Condensation: Two or more latent thoughts are combined to make up one manifest dream image or situation.

2: Displacement: Instead of directing the emotion or desire toward the intended person or object it is transferred onto a meaningless / unrelated object in the manifest dream.

3: Symbolism: Where complex or vague concepts are converted into a dream image. For this, the mind may use the image of a similar sounding (more recognizable) word instead or use a similar looking less intrusive object. According to Freud, dream symbols are for the most part sexual in meaning thus many dreams (but not all) have a sexual correlation.

For example, Freud suggested that objects such as tree-trunks, ties, all weapons, sticks, balloons, rockets and other elongated objects were all symbols for the male organ/an erection. Where boxes, cases, chests, cupboards, ovens, suitcases and other hollow objects represented the female genitalia. A room usually signified a woman but so could the whole house, a door or the whole dream landscape. The simple act of walking up a staircase, steps or ladders could also signify a sexual act.

Freud also had a fascination with symbols of castration, which he believed were represented in a dream by baldness, teeth falling out and the cutting of hair. In addition, the genitals could also be represented by another part of the body. For example, the male organ could be represented by a hand, the female organ represented by a mouth or an eye.

4: Secondary Revision: This is the final stage of the dream work. According to Freud, this is where the dream loses ‘the appearance of absurdity and incoherence.’ In essence, secondary revision can be thought of as the ways in which the dream work covers up the contradiction and attempts to reorganize the dream into a pattern in sync with the dreamer’s experience of everyday life.

Freud used the method of ‘free association’ to discover the underlying meaning behind the dream (latent content). A patient would describe a dream as accurately as possible (manifest content). The patient would then be told to focus on a specific element of the dream and form as many associations as they could. Essentially, allowing the patient to let their mind wander. This would continue until all manifest content associations (which had previously been unknown to the interpreter) had been discovered. This essentially means that the interpreter is moving in the opposite direction unraveling the ‘dream work’ until the latent content is revealed.

Freud insisted that dreams are a form of fulfilling suppressed wishes. If a wish (likely to be sexual in origin) goes unsatisfied during the dreamer’s normal day, the mind reacts to this ‘internal stimuli’ by transforming it into a visual fantasy – allowing the dreamer to satisfy his or her desire. The result of which is a peaceful night’s sleep.

References:

Freud, S (1953). The Interpretation of Dreams and On Dreams. In the standard edition of The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. J Strachey (ed). Hogarth Press.