

## Dreams, Desires and Delusions: A Study on *Inception* and *Shutter Island*

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### Abstract

Dreams are codes, presenting themselves as complex images so that the repressing force is bypassed. They are distorted expressions of desires that have to be decoded by the analyst in order to understand what desire's prohibitions exist in the person's unconscious. Dreams are, therefore, the expression of a repressed desire. Freud argued that during sleep there is no danger in the unconscious desires which is put into action. They find a measure of fulfilment when they express themselves as dreams. In fact, Freud argues that the dream is a state of tension between the power of the impulse or instinctual desires and the power of repressing force. This study aims to prove that those dreams that the individual encounter with, let it be a nightmare or a wishful dream, has some connection with that person, either with his past, present or future with respect to two Hollywood movies, *Shutter Island* and *Inception*.

**KEYWORDS :** Dream, distorted expressions, repressed desires, instinctual desires, unconscious, wishful dreams.

Dreaming is not as simple as it seems; it can be quite dangerous. While dreaming, the most powerful engines are put in motion and it can no longer hide the true meaning of life from itself. Freud argued that during sleep there is no danger in the unconscious desires which is put into action. They find a measure of fulfilment when they express themselves as dreams. The dream may not be a direct expression of the repressed desires. In fact, Freud argues that the dream is a state of tension between the power of the impulse or instinctual desires and the power of repressing force. Dreams are codes, presenting themselves as complex images so that the repressing force is bypassed. They are distorted expressions of desires that have to be decoded by the analyst in order to understand what desire's prohibitions exist in the person's unconscious. Dreams are, therefore, the expression of a repressed desire; they show us the unconscious. Dreams form a language, the language of the unconscious and of repressed desires.

Sigmund Freud, who is known as the father of psychoanalysis was the first one to propose the importance of dreams. His analysis of dreams as wish-fulfilment provided him with models for the clinical analysis of symptom formation and the mechanisms of repression as well as for elaboration of his theory of the unconscious as an agency disruptive of conscious states of mind. Freud postulated the existence of libido, an energy with which mental processes and structures are invested and which generates erotic attachments, death drive, and the source of repetition, hate, aggression and neurotic guilt. In his later work Freud developed a wide-ranging interpretation and critique of religion and culture. The term 'dream interpretation' was and still is indeed fraught with unpleasant and unscientific associations. They remind one of all sorts of childish, superstitious notions, which make up the thread and woof of dream books, read by none but the ignorant and the primitive. The wealth of detail, the infinite care never to let anything pass unexplained, with which Freud presented to

the public the result of his investigations, are impressing more and more serious-minded scientists, but the examination of his evidential data demands arduous work and presupposes an absolutely open mind. Dreams tell us many an unpleasant biological truth about ourselves and only very free minds can thrive on such a diet. Self-deception is a plant which withers fast in the pellucid atmosphere of dream investigation. Five facts of first magnitude were made obvious to the world by his interpretation of dreams. First of all, Freud pointed out a constant connection between some part of every dream and some detail of the dreamer's life during the previous waking state. This positively establishes a relation between sleeping states and waking states and disposes of the widely prevalent view that dreams are purely nonsensical phenomena coming from nowhere and leading nowhere. Second, Freud after studying the dreamer's life and modes of thought, after noting down all their mannerisms and the apparently insignificant details of his conduct which reveal his secret thoughts, came to the conclusion that there was in every dream the attempted or successful gratification of some wish, conscious or unconscious. Third, he proved that many of our dream visions are symbolical, which causes us to consider them as absurd and unintelligible; the universality of those symbols, however, makes them very transparent to the trained observer.

Fourth, Freud showed that sexual desires play an enormous part in our unconscious, a part which puritanical hypocrisy has always tried to minimize, if not to ignore entirely.

Finally, Freud established a direct connection between dreams and insanity, between the symbolic visions of our sleep and the symbolic actions of the mentally deranged (Freud 3).

One fact which cannot be too emphatically stated, however, is that but for Freud's wishfulfillment theory of dreams, neither Jung's "energetic theory," nor Adler's theory of "organ inferiority and compensation," nor Kempf's "dynamic mechanism" might have been formulated. Freud is the father of modern abnormal psychology and he established the psychoanalytical point of view. No one who is not well grounded in Freudian lore can hope to achieve any work of value in the field of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, let no one repeat the absurd assertion that Freudism is a sort of religion bounded with dogmas and requiring an act of faith. Freudism as such was merely a stage in the development of psychoanalysis, a stage out of which all but a few bigoted camp followers, totally lacking in originality, have evolved. Dream psychology is the key to Freud's works and to all modern psychology. With a simple, compact manual such as dream psychology there shall be no longer any excuse for ignorance of the most revolutionary psychological system of modern times. A reminiscence of the concept of the dream that was held in primitive times seems to underlie the evaluation of the dream which was current among the people of classical antiquity. They took it for granted that dreams were related to the world of the supernatural beings in which they believed, and that they brought inspirations from the gods and demons. Moreover, it appeared to them that dreams must serve a special purpose in respect of the dreamer; that, as a rule, they predicted the future. The extraordinary variations in the content of dreams, and in the impressions which they produced on the dreamer, made it, of course, very difficult to formulate a coherent conception of them, and necessitated manifold differentiations and group-formations, according to their value and reliability. The valuation of dreams by the individual philosophers of antiquity naturally depended on the importance which they were prepared to attribute to fanaticism in general.

Dreams were divided into two classes:

... the first class was believed to be influenced only by the present (or the past), and was unimportant in respect of the future; it included the enuknia (insomnia), which directly reproduce a given idea or its opposite; e.g., hunger or its satiation; and the phantasmata, which elaborate the given idea phantastically, as e.g. the nightmare, ephialtes. The second class of dreams, on the other hand, was determinative of the future. To this belonged:

1. Direct prophecies received in the dream (chrematismos, oraculum);
2. The foretelling of a future event (orama, visio);
3. The symbolic dream, which requires interpretation (oneiros, somnium.)

This theory survived for many centuries (Freud 4).

The naive judgment of the dreamer on waking assumes that the dream - even if it does not come from another world - has at all events transported the dreamer into another world.

A dream fades away in the morning is proverbial. It is, indeed, possible to recall it. For we know the dream, of course, only by recalling it after waking; but we very often believe that we remember it incompletely, that during the night there was more of it than we remember. We may observe how the memory of a dream which in the morning was still vivid fades in the course of the day, leaving only a few trifling remnants. We are often aware that we have been dreaming, but we do not know of what we have dreamed; and we are so well used to this fact - that the dream is liable to be forgotten - that we do not reject as absurd the possibility that we may have been dreaming even when, in the morning, we know nothing either of the content of the dream or of the fact that we have dreamed. On the other hand, it often happens that dreams manifest an extraordinary power of maintaining themselves in the memory. The forgetting of dreams is treated in the most detailed manner by Strumpell. This forgetting is evidently a complex phenomenon; for Strumpell attributes it not to a single cause, but to quite a number of causes (16). Dreams can be divided into three classes according to their relation towards the realization of desire (Freud 22). First comes those which exhibit a non-repressed, non-concealed desire; these are dreams of the infantile type, becoming ever rarer among adults. Second, dreams which express in veiled form some repressed desire; these constitute by far the larger number of our dreams, and they require analysis for their understanding and third, those dreams where repression exist, but without or with slight concealment. These dreams are invariably accompanied by a feeling of dread which brings the dream to an end. This feeling of dread here replaces dream displacement. It is not very difficult to prove that what is now present as intense dread in the dream was once desire, and is now secondary to the repression. There are also definite dreams with a painful content, without the presence of any anxiety in the dream. These cannot be reckoned among dreams of dread; they have, however, always been used to prove the unimportance and the psychical futility of dreams.

Movies delve into a man's dreaming self, that submerged and seething alter ego that emerges when the sun goes down. In the cinema one relive the life of the dreaming self. Movies thus tap the dreaming aspect of human nature. Moreover, they improve upon the dream life. They give one the dreams that they yearn for. It is a rare individual who is not fascinated by his own dreams, with their raw ability to reveal, their magical expressiveness; movies partake in this fascination. The impact of movies stems, then, at least in part, from the primal power of the dream. To be sure,

the dream component of the movie experience is augmented by the special qualities of the medium, but the primary emotional hook originates in the evocation of the dream. There have been studies recently about how the perception of time differs between dreaming and waking life. So getting lost in a dream for a lifetime is impossible. Of course, some observations that movie makes about dreams are true: one will always find themselves in the middle of something with no thought to where they came from, and even the most grotesque absurdities of the surreal rarely seem uncanny.

There are several correlating elements between *Inception* and Freud's ideas. One correlation would be the relativity of dream-content, dream-thoughts and language. Freud claims that "dream-thoughts and dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages" (Freud 22). This idea of separate methods of presentations of ideas regarding the same issue is similar to those concepts in the movie *Inception*. Another issue that arises in the film that correlates with the ideas of Freud is the interference of Di Caprio's deceased wife into the constructed dream maze in a man's unconscious mind. Freud states, "[t]he consequence of displacement is that the dream content no longer resembles the core of the dream-thoughts and that the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious"(23). In other words, the repressed or underlying dream-wishes or desires are displaced into the dream where they do not belong to the original dream-thoughts. These dream-wishes create a distortion in the dream as we can recognize from the movie when a train interferes in Ariadne's construction of an environment in a dream. The train was a memory from Di Caprio's subconscious mind that projected or displaced itself into her dream. Thus this event created a distortion in the dream and had no relation to her original dream-thoughts and content.

Another idea of Freud's that we can use to analyze *Inception* is condensation. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud says, "Dreams are brief [...] If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis setting out the dream-thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space" (44). We can apply this to what is demonstrated in the movie. When mapping out the dream, the team confirms that they will use the 10 hour flight to accomplish this task. This idea confirms Freud's claim that people maintain a certain "under estimation of compression" associated with dreams.

*Inception* does something different; it is explained by invoking some of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. At its core psychoanalysis posits the notion that everyone has a part of the mind which is unconscious whose contents are unknown in any explicit sense. The unconscious is made up of feelings and desires, some of which one may never have been aware of and others which one has repressed as either a defence mechanism or for purposes of social compliance. The unconscious mind of the individual is a mass of contradictions and by definition remains uncontrolled and unordered. *Inception* takes the existence of the uncontrolled unconscious world of the subject which is best exemplified by the scene in which Ariadne and Cobb navigate through his dream world and he cannot prevent aspects of his own mind from attacking her despite his conscious desire to prevent this. Psychoanalytic theory argues that during sleep the barrier weakens and the unconscious bubbles out, albeit often in disguised form. A dream is usually identified as a form of expression of impulses which are under pressure of resistance during the day but which have been able to find reinforcement during the night. As such,

elements of one's repressed feelings and wishes reveal themselves. This notion is seen very early on in *Inception* when Mal, who is dead in the real world and just a representation in Cobb's subconscious, enters into the shared dream world in which Cobb, who cannot prevent her appearance, and team are trying to conduct an extraction from Saito's mind, much to the annoyance and subsequent endangerment of Arthur.

Another foundation of psychoanalytic thought is the overwhelming significance of the child's relationship with its parents. These primal relationships are burdened with largely unconscious problems which in turn affect all subsequent relationships with everyone the individual encounters. In the film, when brainstorming as to how to execute the Inception of a business strategy into the mind of Robert Fischer, the team soon agrees that this can only be done by tampering with the unconscious relationship with the father, as this will be at the cornerstone of the subject's sense of self identification. *Inception* is at its core the symbolic rendering of the psychoanalytic process through the representation of the dream world, which in a manifest form, functions as the narrative of the text and is the very architecture and location of the world Nolan creates. It turns psychoanalytic ideas into a tangible narrative in order to explore them in a new way. In doing this it loses a good degree of the nuance, complexity and psychologically challenging aspects of psychoanalytic theory, but nevertheless Nolan produces a rather compelling case for the concepts of Freudian theory via such a creative, clever and ambitious work.

The character Dr. Jeremiah Naehring in *Shutter Island* is an obvious allusion to Freud with his hard German accent, round glasses, and propensity to wax psychological by talking about things such as 'defence mechanisms'. Furthermore, Dr. Naehring provides his own riff of dream interpretation as he is pinned against the wall by Teddy: "Did you know that the word 'trauma' comes from the Greek for 'wound'? And what is the German word for 'dream'? Wounds can create monsters, and you, you are wounded, Marshal" (*Shutter Island*). As a Freudian mouthpiece, Dr. Naehring draws our attention to Teddy's dreams that elucidate his 'wounds'. Teddy feels personally responsible for their death because at that time he was an alcoholic and while he loved his wife, he refused to see her for who she really was and ended up killing her after discovering the children. In the dreams she tells him to give up because he will be unable to cope with knowing the truth. This leads on to how Teddy distorts his reality to protect himself against his unbearable pain and guilt through the use of defence mechanisms. All of the memories of what really happened to Dolores and the children become repressed and replaced with false illusions that his wife was wrongfully murdered and he recreated himself as a hero in order to cope. In accordance with this mechanism he suffers from post-traumatic stress from which the disturbing memories indirectly begin to reveal themselves in his dreams. Dr. Sheehan who to Teddy was his partner reveals that they had decided to try an elaborate role-playing experiment in which they went along with all of Teddy (Andrew)'s delusions in an attempt to bring his mind back to the real world and thus save him from a brain lobotomy (a form of psychosurgery) which was forced to be their last resort.

Martin Scorsese uses dreams and delusions to force his audience into the same confusion as Teddy Daniels in *Shutter Island*. While watching the film, the audience carries the same dubiousness about the motivations of Ashecliffe and its staff as Teddy does. *Shutter Island* is one of among those movies which showcase a mystery as well as has a psychological aspect to it. Guilt and hurt are what cause Andrew to invent a secondary persona – one in which he is still a war hero and a federal Marshal

named Teddy Daniels. Because he is intelligent, he invents an intricate mental narrative in which conspiracy theories about *Shutter Island* and a hunt for a patient who does not exist keep him occupied with a mystery that he cannot solve: that he is patient 67.

The climaxes are similar in both the movies; they are left to the audience to decide. The ending seemed ambiguous to many people. When Dr. Sheehan sits with him on the steps that next morning, Andrew knows that the doctors and Warden are observing his behaviour. The thing is, his guilt and pain are still so heavy that he knows he cannot live with them; rather than live with the knowledge of his pain, he chooses to pretend that he is still Teddy Daniels and let them lobotomize him, so that he can finally be free of his burden. That's what the line to Dr. Sheehan about 'living as a monster, or dying as a good man,' (*Shutter Island*) means – Andrew would rather be mind-wiped as “Teddy Daniels” than live with the sins of Andrew Laeddis.

However in the movie *Inception*, the totem keeps on rotating and the audience is left with a blank mind, because the movie ends there with the totem in motion and not falling making it hard to believe if it's real or a dream, when asked the director about the ambiguity in the climax, Nolan confirmed that the ambiguity was deliberate, saying "I've been asked the question more times than I've ever been asked any other question about any other film I've made... What's funny to me is that people really do expect me to answer it." The film's script concludes with "Behind him, on the table, the spinning top is STILL SPINNING. And– FADE OUT" Nolan said, "I put that cut there at the end, imposing an ambiguity from outside the film. That always felt the right ending to me – it always felt like the appropriate 'kick' to me... The real point of the scene—and this is what I tell people—is that Cobb isn't looking at the top. He's looking at his kids. He's left it behind. That's the emotional significance of the thing." (*Psychology Today*). Some people have pointed out that the top was not in fact Cobb's totem, rendering the discussion irrelevant. They point out that the top was Mal's totem; Cobb's was his wedding ring, as he can be seen wearing it whenever he is in a dream and without it whenever he is not. As he hands his passport to the immigration officer, his hand is shown with no ring; thus he was conclusively in reality when seeing his children. Furthermore, the children were portrayed by different actors, indicating they had aged.

In every sense a dream has its origin in the past. The ancient belief that dreams reveal the future is not indeed entirely devoid of the truth. By representing a wish as fulfilled the dream certainly leads everyone into the future; but this future, which the dreamer accepts as his present, has been shaped in the likeness of the past by the indestructible wish. Considering the psychological element in *Inception* and *Shutter Island* it can be proved that those repressed desires of the unconscious will be fulfilled and it has its own means of letting them out- via dreams.

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