

# A Comparison of Freudian and Bossian Approaches to Dreams

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## Abstract

This paper presents a review of Freud's theory about the interpretation of dreams and a review of Boss's criticisms with subsequent exposition of his own existential-phenomenological account of the understanding of dreams. These are followed by a brief review of the development of both original paradigms. The relevance of analysing the meaning of dreams in psychotherapeutic practice is also discussed.

## Key words

Dreams, dream analysis, existentialism, Freud (Sigmund), phenomenology, psychoanalysis, psychotherapeutic techniques

Dreams have been considered by most – if not all – ancient and modern cultures as a phenomenon which carries some kind of meaning that can increase the understanding of waking life (Eudell-Simmons, 2007; Freud, 1900/1981). They are often used as a 'form of communication and expression of information about the dreamer and their life' (Eudell-Simmons & Hilsenroth, 2007: p 331), but what they are and why we dream is something that still eludes us. Nonetheless, some sort of significance for waking life is constantly being extracted from dreams according to different traditions and hermeneutical systems, either by the dreamer or by an expert culturally empowered with the authority to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Sigmund Freud is often cited as the first author to put forward a systematic analysis of dreams in his seminal book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, suggesting the possibility of a scientific approach to decipher their meaning. The idea is best summed up in the famous phrase: 'the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind' (1900/1981, p 608), later repeated in 'Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis' (1910/1981), where he added that it is 'the securest foundation of psycho-analysis' (p 33).

Freud's body of work inspired many to embrace his ideas as well as instigating many critics, with both groups often defending their affiliations passionately. One man who began as a follower and became a detractor was Medard Boss. Formally trained as a psychoanalyst as well as a psychiatrist, he would eventually reject Freud's metapsychology and denounce it as a bundle of pseudoscientific inventions, especially his theory on dream



interpretation and the foundational psychoanalytic concept, the unconscious.

This paper presents a review of Freud's theory on the interpretation of dreams and a review of Boss's criticisms with subsequent exposition of his own existential-phenomenological account of the understanding of dreams, supporting the latter and rejecting the former. These are followed by a brief review of the development of both original paradigms. The relevance of analysing the meaning of dreams in psychotherapeutic practice is also discussed.

### **Psychoanalysis of dreams: The primacy of the latent**

In the original Freudian concept (1900/1981), dreams serve to preserve sleep through the (covert) *realization of unconscious forbidden desires* (subdued by *repression*) which result in a safe libidinal discharge under the hegemony of the *pleasure principal*. It's a psychological phenomenon without intentional value in itself, but rather a *facade* that acquires meaning only in relation to the dreamer's waking life.

**Dream-work.** This facade consists of a series of deformations produced by *dream-work*, the set of mental operations that transform the latent content of the dream into manifest content to render its true sexual meaning unrecognizable to the *consciousness*. Freud (1900/1981) points out several *mechanisms* used by the dream-work to disguise the forbidden wish fulfilment:

- i. *Condensation* (combines several ideas into a single element);
- ii. *Displacement* (replaces important ideas or feeling with insignificant thoughts in the manifest content of the dream);
- iii. *Representation* (turns ideas into visual images);
- iv. *Secondary revision* (presents the dream content in the form of a consistent and intelligible scenario, even when its elements are absurd or incoherent).

For these mechanisms, which produce *dream distortions*, there are also *day-remnants* from events that occurred during the previous days, which arouse childhood desires.

**Censorship.** Forerunner of the *superego* concept (Freud, 1923a/1981), *censorship* is the main reason for dream deformation. It lets pleasant content pass through into consciousness and keeps everything else in a *state of repression*. During sleep, censorship relaxes and the repressed content emerges into consciousness in the form of a dream, modified by a *compromise formation* between the *id desires* and the *ego defences*.

**Symbols.** *Symbols* allow the dream to overcome censored inhibitions, depriving all sexual content of its intelligibility. Symbols can be *universal* – common to all – or *individual* – particular to each person (Freud, 1900/1981). Thus, the task of dream interpretation is to undo what the dream-work wove and decipher the symbolic meaning of the dream. From



the manifest content, analyst and dreamer seek to extract the latent content that is the true meaning within the dream, which only appears after the dream is deciphered in light of the client's *free associations*.

**Metapsychology.** This project is only possible in reference to a theoretical framework that exists *a priori*, serving as a tool with which the latent can be searched for. 'All phenomena must be interpreted in a very specific and concrete manner, in fidelity to the Freudian categories' (Smith, 2010: p 212). That should allow any trained psychoanalyst to obtain accurate and valid interpretations, transmissible between themselves.

**Latent over manifest.** Freud (1900/1981) considered the manifest content of the dream so irrelevant that after describing his own dream 'Irma's Injection', he said that 'no one who had only read the preamble and the content of the dream itself could have the slightest notion of what the dream meant' (p 108). This disrespect for the existential value of the manifest content of dreams persisted throughout his career. In 1932, he stated after a client's narration of a dream that 'we decided to concern ourselves as little as possible with what we have heard, with the *manifest* dream' (Freud, 1933/1981: p 10) because there are memory falsifications resulting from an *unconscious insincerity*, also present in waking life. In both situations, it is the patient's memory that needs recovering, not only by the dreamer but also by the analyst, who through free association and interpretation can and should use his own subjectivity to select which content should be valued to the detriment of others (Freud, 1905/1981). What the analyst can be sure of is that 'when the work of interpretation has been completed, we perceive that a dream is the fulfilment of a wish' (Freud, 1900/1981: p 120).

**Anxious and punishment dreams.** Even nightmares are seen as unconscious wish fulfilment, the wish for punishment derived from the repressed system *Ucs* – later called superego, the structural model anti-libidinal force – that aimed to obtain libidinal gratification through distress (Freud, 1900/1981). Freud stated that

*a dreamer's relation to his wishes is a quite peculiar one. He repudiates them and censors them—in short, he has no liking for them, and their fulfilment will give no pleasure but just the opposite. Experience shows that this opposite appears in the form of anxiety, a fact which has still to be explained. Thus a dreamer in his relation to his dream-wishes can only be compared to an amalgamation of two separate people who are linked by some strong element in common*  
(pp 215-216)

**Therapeutic goal.** These hidden desires of the unconscious can be unveiled through the *analytical work*. The goal is that when the psychoanalyst communicates his findings to the client, the tension is alleviated and the



symptoms should disappear, because knowing their own unconscious motivations should allow them to control and express themselves through verbal language.

### **Subsequent revisions by Freud of his own theory**

It is important to remember that Freud's metapsychology is not a unified, cohesive body of work. He kept changing his mind over time about the aetiology and nature of the psychological phenomena he observed. His theory of dreams also went through several changes during the course of his life (e.g., 1911/1981, 1916-1917/1981, 1920/1981, 1923a/1981, 1923b/1981, 1925/1981, 1933/1981, 1940/1981).

In 1916-1917, he clarified that when mentioning a dream, we must refer either to 'the manifest dream – that is, the product of the dream-work – or, at most, the dream-work itself as well – that is, the psychical process which forms the manifest dream out of the latent dream-thoughts' (p 223).

In 1920, he said that it is 'impossible to classify as wish-fulfilments the dreams/.../which bring to memory the psychical traumas of childhood' (p 32), postulating the existence of the traumatic dream as an exception to the rule (Freud, 1933/1981; 1940/1981). This dream 'functioned to increase tension in the unconscious, to awaken the dreamer, and to master trauma in accordance with the reality principle rather than to function, as he had previously asserted, to gratify a libidinal wish and to preserve sleep' (McLeod, 1992). Through repetition, the traumatic dream allowed the trauma to be mastered 'in accordance with the instinct for self-preservation' (*idem*).

In 1923b, when his structural theory was fully developed, Freud divided the dreams into two types (an idea reaffirmed in 1938 in the paper 'An Outline on Psycho-Analysis', published post-mortem in 1940):

*Dreams from below are those which are provoked by the strength of an unconscious (repressed) wish /.../ [and] Dreams from above correspond to thoughts or intentions of the day before which have contrived during the night to obtain reinforcement from repressed material that is debarred from the ego*

(p 111)

This idea is supported by a footnote added in 1925 to 'The Interpretation of Dreams', where Freud (1900/1981) wrote that readers 'seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work' (p 506n).

These are, broadly speaking, the developments Freud made to his theory during his life. For a comprehensive review, see McLeod (1992).



## Discussion and overview of Freud's theory

Overall, this approach does not always seem to work. Freud (1920/1981) recognized it himself, stating that the simple communication to clients of their unconscious libidinal wishes and associated childhood traumas failed to 'solve the therapeutic problem' (p 18). It can be argued that sometimes it even aggravated it, as in the case of Dora (Freud, 1905/1981).

Since then, and particularly over the past thirty years, the traditional psychoanalytical therapeutic intervention with weekly multiple sessions has been gradually replaced with one-session-per-week psychodynamic psychotherapy. Along with this significant adjustment to the psychoanalytic setting – but not necessarily depending on it – focus has changed from the interpretation of dreams as a privileged means to analyse unconscious activities, to the examination of *transference* and *countertransference* processes in the therapeutic relationship (Langdridge, 2006; Loden, 2003). In 1911, Freud himself said that 'it is of the greatest importance for the treatment that the analyst should always be aware of the surface of the patient's mind/.../It is scarcely ever right to sacrifice this therapeutic aim in detriment to dream-interpretation' (p 92). *Au contraire*, dream interpretation should be used to reveal the transference process.

Another change that can be found is that dynamic contemporary psychotherapy has been giving more relevance to the manifest content of dreams in its interpretations, no longer focusing exclusively on the latent content (Glucksman, 2001; Kramer & Glucksman, 2006). By starting to attribute some comprehensive value to dreams' the manifest content, it can be argued that the psychodynamic method has been moving closer to the phenomenological method and now offers a more direct connection to the present waking experience of the dreamer. According to Eudell-Simmons and Hilsenroth (2007), 'the dreaming process is considered to be a continuation of waking thought and, therefore, dream narratives of manifest content should reveal the same patterns of object relations and interpersonal functioning that are demonstrated by narratives of waking events' (p 334). The focus on the dream experience in itself can help evoke the importance of the immediate experience of the present and thereby can improve the outcome of the therapeutic intervention (Craig & Walsh, 1993).

Bion's (1959/1992; 1962/1991) contributions on dream theory also added, from an existential-phenomenological perspective, at least one important notion to Freud's formulation: Dreaming continues throughout day and night, which in a way comes closer to the *horizontalisation* between dreaming and waking life found in the phenomenological method. He also acknowledges the dreamer's anthropological condition, arguing that 'dreams are imaginative fictions that preserve emotional truths' (Grotstein, 2009: p 736), thus acknowledging the historical continuity of the person in both states. Nonetheless, dreams are still considered by most psychoanalysts 'as a



reflection of a patient's current waking functioning' (Eudell-Simmons & Hilsenroth, 2007: p 335), a clear distancing from a traditional existential-phenomenological perspective.

### ***Daseinsanalysis of dreams: The unity of the manifested***

In 1953, Boss denounced several antinomies in Freud's metapsychology in general and Freud's theory of dream interpretation in particular. He argued that

*[the psychoanalyst] doesn't actually interpret, that is, make intelligible the phenomena of dreaming itself, but consistently 'reinterprets' without this reinterpretation having any basis in observable data / ... /, preferring instead to impose upon it an outside meaning in order to make it conform to the theory prescribed*

(1975/1979, p 145)

He goes on, saying that dreams do not show evidence of the reality of psychoanalytic concepts such as '*dream elaboration*', '*endopsychic processes*', '*instinctual childhood desires*', '*psychic energies*' or '*latent contents*'. 'Any interpretation at either a subjective or objective level presupposes the existence within the dreamer of an already existing double, [the] "unconscious"' (Boss, 1975/1979: p 42), but experience leads to its rejection: it is impossible to be aware of the unconscious without it becoming conscious. Thus, the crucial question, already previously raised by Husserl (1907/2008), is whether anything has the possibility to exist without being perceived by human consciousness. It is in this sense that 'depth psychology's dream theories exert violence since the beginning, both on the dream state and on what is dreamed, by means of biased and abstract conceptualizations/.../ based on completely indemonstrable propositions' (Boss, 1977: pp 7-10). **What latent content?** To Boss (1975/1979), all 'latent content' is merely hypothetical. The manifest contents of the dream are experienced by the dreamer as real and true in their immediate state, not as fantastical images or as symbolic facades that withhold meaning from consciousness in a devious manner to be unmasked by the analyst's personal and theoretical speculations. The common meaning of dreams is that they are intrinsically honest, and the inability to comprehend them does not mean that they are by nature deceiving, but rather that the interpreter is short-sighted (Dolias, 2010).

**Dream-world vs. waking-world.** From a phenomenological perspective, neither experience in the dream-world nor in the waking-world takes precedence over the other, because the *historical continuity* and *anthropological condition* of the person is not interrupted in either of them: both states mirror with equal reality the biography and *attunement* of the existing



being, reflecting their particular way of *being-in-the-world*. The only thing that changes is the *noetic* presentation of phenomena, a change occurring when waking up. As Heidegger (1959-1969/2006) put it,

*what appears in the dream and how the dreamer relates to what appears shows all the existential condition of the person, his way of being-in-the-world as attachment and attunement [befindlichkeit] what possible choices are presented to him, his questioning or his perception of the present, a return to the past or an anticipation of the future*

(p 346)

Nevertheless, Boss (1975/1979) considered that the ‘waking mode of being’ is hierarchically higher, with there being three essential differences between dreaming and waking life:

- i. In dreams, *openness* is much more limited, even though it appears to be otherwise: ‘openness in the dream existence is largely limited in a manner to admit only the sensorial perceptual presence of what is given as temporally present’ (p 192);
- ii. In dreams, the physical presentation of phenomena is closer to the dreamer, in greater proximity to his body: the relative and fluid nature of temporality and spatiality are more evident in dreaming;
- iii. In dreams, the dreamer ‘rarely reflects about himself in an attempt to gain comprehension of his existential state’ (*idem*), tending to be more reactive.

**Understanding vs. explanation.** As Dilthey (1894/2011) initially differentiated, what matters is the *understanding* of the direct and integral experience of phenomena and not its *explanation* from a rational perspective as used by natural sciences.

Since conscience is a structure particular to Da-sein as ‘that being’s constitution of being [to be disclosed]/.../the ontological analysis of conscience started in this way is prior to any psychological description and classification of experiences of conscience, just as it lies outside any biological “explanation”’ (Heidegger, 1927/1996: p 248).

**Structure vs. content.** As such, existential-phenomenological analysis places its main focus on the *structure* of the dream and less on its *content*, using a set of ‘rules’ from the phenomenological method (Spinelli, 1994):

- i) *Epoche* (allowing an ‘*openness*’ to the immediate dream experience by suspending personal expectations and assumptions as much as possible);
- ii) *Description* (taking into account only those phenomena presented, avoiding conceptual generalisations and explanations);
- iii) *Horizontalisation* (treating each phenomenon initially as having equal value);



iv) *Eidetic variation* (searching for the *ontological* essence of the dream).

The questions to be answered are 1) *where* is the dreamer in his dream; 2) *who* or *what* does he meet; 3) *how* does he experience the encounter with presented phenomena (Condrau, 1993).

*We must first consider exactly to what phenomena the existence of the dreamer is open enough to have penetrated the dream and manifested itself under the light of his understanding. /.../ Then we must determine how the dreamer stands in relation to what is presented to him in his dream world, particularly the attunement that determines that form of behaviour*

(Boss, 1975/1979: p 41)

In this process, there is no need to be familiar with the dreamer's biography. It is only necessary that he describes the dream with contextual detail, referring only to biographical materials of his waking life to which certain elements may be related.

**Existentials analysis.** From the description of the dream, it is possible to analyse how the dreamer relates to the various *existentials* presented as essential categories of their existence. This is the hermeneutic side of Boss's analysis of the meaning of dreams, inspired by Heidegger's (1927/1996; 1959-1969/2006) ontological philosophy. To Boss (1975/1979), the most relevant *existentials* for dream analysis are *spatiality*, *temporality*, *corporeality*, *attunement* or *affective disposition*, *historicity* and *mortality* (*finiteness*), but not all of them need to be considered. Other authors take different *existentials* into consideration. The Sheffield School, for example, considers *identity*, *sociability*, *corporeality*, *temporality*, *spatiality*, the *project* and *discourse* as more relevant (Ashworth, 2003).

## Therapeutic goal

As the person is always the same and the existential structure of dreams is equal to the structure of waking life, the understanding of dreams can be useful to illuminate the dreamer's particular mode-of-being in the waking world by looking for what Jaenicke (2008) would later call *mutualities* between the dream and the waking experience. Based on the phenomena that present themselves and the way they are perceived by the consciousness, the dream may call the dreamer's attention to corresponding existential possibilities in his waking life that had thus far eluded him.

This opens the possibility for a more authentic existence, attained through 'ontic "information" about itself as being' (Heidegger, 1927/1996: p 172). The attunement of *angst* in particular can lead to the disclosedness of the 'ownmost potentiality of being, that is, being free for the freedom of choosing and grasping itself' (p 176). That does not mean that *inauthenticity* is



‘anything like no-longer-being-in-the-world, but rather it constitutes precisely a distinctive kind of being-in-the-world which is completely taken in by the world and the Mitda-sein of the others in the they’ (p 164). There is no moral judgment implied here. It is a given of existence, because ‘*attunement discloses Da-sein in its thrownness, initially and for the most part in the mode of an evasive turning away*’ (p 128).

Therapeutic relevancy can be attained by simply analysing the presented phenomena. With these elements present, the way that the person’s world is being shaped throughout the construction of his existential project can be understood by observing the ‘interrelatedness between the waking and dreaming worlds, which happens through the relationship between client and therapist/.../as an opportunity in the therapeutic relationship to reveal oneself and face truth’ (Dolias, 2010: pp 238, 247).

## Discussion and overview of Boss’s theory

Boss’s work is not immune to criticisms similar to the ones he made about Freud’s ideas. For example, Young (1993) points out that ‘Boss lays down norms for what he considers healthy’ (p14), a view shared by Gendlin (1977): ‘Boss imposes his scheme of ideas and also his personal values onto a dream with as little justification as is done in the methods of interpretation he attacks’ (p 285). Condrau (1993) denounces several excesses too.

While Boss considered that his hermeneutic proposal to interpret the meaning of dreams was truer to their nature than the traditional Freudian and psychoanalytic practices – that he called re-interpretations – Jennings (2006) argues that even the phenomenological approach is a second-order representation. He argues ‘for the importance of *direct self-evident meaning* – that is, first-order expression of meaning, as distinguished from second order representation’ (p 255). The difference between Freud and Boss’s theories is that, for the former dream images are disguised symbols, whilst for the latter they are merely symbols (*idem*).

Ahsen (cited in Jennings, 2007) also states that ‘verbal description and interpretation always fails to capture the realism and intensity of images as they were directly felt and experienced in the original dream state’ (p 256).

What should be kept in mind is that there is a wide range of existential possibilities presented to each person and it should be up to the client to give meaning to their dream experience and decide what to value and accept. Some degree of personal bias is inevitable. Reality in its purest form is ungraspable.

As for innovations, Boss’s daseinsanalysis of dreams – like Freud’s psychoanalysis of dreams – remained mostly unchanged (Langdrige, 2006). Some authors have reviewed it (e.g., Cohn, 1997; Condrau, 1993; Moustakas, 1994; van Deurzen, 1997/2010) without introducing significant theoretical or practical changes.



It is perhaps Ashworth (2003) and the Sheffield School that made the greatest contributions. Its most distinctive feature is the rejection of a demand for essences, as the radical universal structure of the investigated phenomena. This does not mean that they do not exist or that during analysis the emergence of the essence of a particular kind of phenomenon cannot occur. It only assumes that they are not present prior to analysis, because they have not had the opportunity to present themselves.

Langdridge (2006), influenced by the psychoanalytic theory of *symbolic play* of Winnicott (1971/1999), proposed that experiences within dream boundaries allow a kind of *imaginative variation* for creatively enacting waking life possibilities in a safe environment. This places dreams in a subservient relation to wakefulness, something Boss would surely oppose.

Jaenicke (2008) took a step towards depth psychologies by suggesting a *daseinsanalytic* hermeneutic in the process of dream analysis that goes beyond description in search of a 'latent existential meaning, which is concealed in the manifest dream contents themselves' (p 52).

### **Relevance of dream interpretation in therapeutic practice**

Overall, the interpretation of the meaning of dreams seems to be losing popularity. In a recent, thorough study, Hill and colleagues (2013) 'found that dream work (whether or not encouraged by the therapist) was never or rarely used in most cases' (p 33), a result similar to that reported by Hill and colleagues (2008). Nevertheless, psychoanalytic psychotherapists still seem to be more willing to work with dreams than psychotherapists with other theoretical backgrounds (Crook & Hill, 2003).

Few empirical studies have tried to demonstrate the therapeutic value and epistemological rigour of dream interpretation (Blass, 2001; Hill, *et al.*, 2013). Most critical studies focus on denouncing logic fallacies in the formal content of the theories, in particular Freud's (e.g., Spence, 1981; Grünbaum; cited in Blass, 2001).

Recently, Hill *et al.* (2013) found some evidence suggesting that working on dreams can have positive effects on clients, but they also noted that this conclusion was drawn from post-therapy interviews, where social desirability is a major factor of bias. This is even more relevant when considering that

*the 23 clients who discussed dreams in therapy did not have better overall session outcomes than the 23 clients who did not discuss dreams in therapy, suggesting that dream work was not essential to make therapy effective. These results are similar to the general psychotherapy literature (see review in Cooper, 2008) in which no outcome differences are found among different theoretical approaches to psychotherapy*

(p 37)



While quantitative analysis did not show significant positive or negative results, qualitative analysis certainly suggested several beneficial outcomes of working with dreams in the psychotherapeutic context:

- i. Focusing on dreams helped clients to access their emotions more easily;
- ii. 'The dreams presented issues that allowed the clients to articulate some of their underlying concerns' (p 39);
- iii. 'The dreams helped clients connect present events with events from childhood' (p 40);
- iv. Transference dreams brought to light issues in the therapeutic relationship;
- v. It helped to break resistance in accessing thoughts and feelings;
- vi. It helped to create an alliance between client and therapist.

The general conclusion extracted from the study is that 'talking about the dreams clearly promoted therapeutic work in each case' (Hill, *et al.*, 2013: p 40).

Eudell-Simmons and Hilsenroth (2005) had already suggested that analysing dreams in psychotherapeutic practice had four potential contributions:

- i. 'Facilitate the therapeutic process;
- ii. Facilitate patient insight and self-awareness;
- iii. Provide clinically relevant and valuable information to therapists;
- iv. Provide a measure of therapeutic change' (p 255).

This happens 'regardless of a therapist's theoretical orientation' (Eudell-Simmons, 2007: p 332), which seems to be quite irrelevant.

## Conclusion

It is indisputable that Freud is the most influential author when it comes to the interpretation of the meaning of dreams, but there is no evidence that his theories produce more benefits in a psychotherapeutic setting. As a matter of fact, the opposite can be argued. His blunt interpretations, saturated with sexual references, often insulted his clients, leading to their abandoning the analytic process, as happened with Dora. Freud admitted this flaw himself and promptly suggested a correction to his practice.

Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that the theoretical background supporting a therapist's analysis of the meaning of dreams is immaterial for the outcome of therapy; but such analysis does seem to help to establish a positive client/therapist relationship that, at the very least, makes the process more pleasurable and smoother for both parties, thus decreasing the chances of dropouts (Hill *et al.*, 2013).

In that sense, maybe Boss (1977) was right when he claimed that in daseinsanalysis – as opposed to psychoanalysis – 'the patient's readiness and the ability of the patient to complete the daseinsanalytic understanding of dreaming and the dreamed is incomparably greater./.../ [It] has, therefore,



decidedly greater therapeutic effectiveness' (p 33).

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## Notes

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