

"The Interpretation of Dreams" by Sigmund Freud (1900)

In 1897 Sigmund Freud began his famous course of self-analysis. He had already noticed that dreams played an important role in his analysis of neurotic and "hysterical" patients. As he encouraged them to free-associate, that is, talk about whatever came into their minds, they often referred to their dreams, which would set off other associations and often illuminate other important connections in their past experience. Freud also had noticed that hallucinations in psychotic patients were very much like dreams. Based on these observations, Freud began to believe that sleeping dreams were nearly always, like day-dreams, wish fulfillment.

Freud had always been an active dreamer, and much of his self-analysis focused on dreams, convincing him conclusively in the wish-fulfillment theory. Within a few months of beginning his self-analysis, he decided to write a book about dreams. He looked into the literature and was pleased to see that no one had proposed his idea before. In fact, most people believed dreams were just nonsense. It took Freud about two years to write *The Interpretation of Dreams*, finishing it in September 1897. It was published late in the year and released in 1900. Freud was paid about \$209.

The book explained the double level of dreams: the actual dream with its "manifest content," and the dream's true if hidden meaning, or "latent content." The idea of dream as wish-fulfillment was explained, and he introduced the theory that sexuality was an important part of childhood, a shocking idea at the time. He also outlined a sort of universal language of dreams, by which they might be interpreted.

Most people now agree that *The Interpretation of Dreams* was Freud's most important work, but it took eight years to sell the 600 copies printed in 1900. In the first year and a half, no scientific journal reviewed it and few other periodicals mentioned it. It was largely ignored, though in psychological journals it received crushing reviews. One critic warned that "uncritical minds would be delighted to join in this play with ideas and would end up in complete mysticism and chaotic arbitrariness."

In 1910, however, Freud's overall work was becoming better known and a second edition was printed. There would be six more in Freud's lifetime, the last in 1929. He changed very little in the book, only adding illustrations, elaborating certain ideas, and adding to the portions on symbolism. The book was translated into English and Russian in 1913, and into six more languages by 1938. Though he was a prolific writer, *The Interpretation of Dreams* remained Freud's most original work. Despite the initial cold reception, Freud himself knew it was a breakthrough. "Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime," he wrote.

Source:

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