

LITERATURE, SLEEP AND DREAMS IN

The literary world contains countless references to the topics of sleep and dreams. Subtle differences exist in the treatment of sleep and dreams in literature from author to author and society to society; this article focuses primarily upon Western literary traditions. A useful means of surveying these literary themes is to explore sleep and dreams separately, following their historical usage through the centuries to more contemporary manifestations.

Sleep in Literature

Sleep phenomena are prevalent in early Western myths, medieval and Renaissance fairy tales, and modern and contemporary fiction. Poets, playwrights, and storytellers have spun yarns regarding characters who sleep, can't sleep, cause others to sleep, or suffer from sleep disorders. Examples from the Judeo-Christian tradition include the story of the prophet Elijah, who is said to be asleep in the bosom of Abraham until the Antichrist appears. An example of New Testament narrative dealing with sleep is the story of Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion. He asks his disciples to spend the evening praying with him after the Last Supper, yet every one of them falls into a deep slumber. Perhaps the New Testament writers considered that the disciples' inability to remain awake represented a figurative abandon-

ment of Jesus and further distinguished him by illustrating his ability to overcome the mortal need for sleep.

Greek mythology includes many famous sleeping characters, such as the hero Endymion, with whom the moon falls in love. A kiss from the moon causes Endymion to sleep forever and thereby remain eternally youthful (Urdang and Ruffner, 1986). Hypnos, the god of sleep, also figures prominently in Greek myths.

The Arthurian legends of the medieval era are remarkable for several sleeping characters. King Arthur is said to be asleep by enchantment and will return to the world someday to regain the throne of England. Likewise, Merlin, the wizard who helped Arthur ascend to power, is said to be asleep rather than dead. It is likely that the Arthurian storytellers sought to show that England, like King Arthur and his counselor, was not dead but would someday rise again to glory and splendor.

Among the fairy tales that originated during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, many deal with sleep and magic. Tales of the SANDMAN, who sprinkled magical, sleep-inducing sand in the eyes of children, are thought to be from this era, as are the popular fairy tales of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. Snow White was poisoned by an apple that caused her to sleep until she was kissed by a prince; likewise, Sleeping Beauty was magically put to sleep for a hundred years until a prince's kiss woke her. The writers of these stories used sleep as a symbol to illustrate Snow White's and Sleeping Beauty's awakening to life as mature women. The two girls are not just physically asleep; their adult wisdom, intellect, and sexuality are symbolically asleep as well. (See also LONG SLEEPERS IN HISTORY AND LEGEND.)

One of the most famous English literary figures from the Elizabethan era, William Shakespeare, wove themes of sleep throughout his works. Perhaps the most memorable reference to sleep in the work of Shakespeare is the appearance of the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth in the tragedy *Macbeth*. The Scottish lord Macbeth kills the king of Scotland in order to become king himself; Lady Macbeth not only urges him to the hideous murder but helps him commit it. Later she suffers from NIGHTMARES and SLEEPWALKING, and eventually admits to the murder in her sleep. Shakespeare may have meant to suggest that these sleep disorders punished Lady Macbeth for her crime.

Writers of Shakespeare's and earlier times were both puzzled and awed by the sleep process.

Sleep was as compelling to their minds as it is to our own, but they did not have the scientific and physiological explanations that we have now. As this premodern literature illustrates, our predecessors often viewed sleep as a mystical or death-like occurrence. Modern writers have a more sophisticated understanding of sleep, and therefore tend to focus less upon the supernatural aspects of slumber and more upon the phenomenon itself.

Perhaps the most famous British novelist to write of a specific sleep disorder was Charles Dickens. In *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens tells of a boy named Joe (sometimes referred to as "the fat boy") who continually falls asleep during the day. Joe's affliction came to be known as *Pickwickian syndrome*. This disorder is a close cousin of sleep APNEA.

An important modern work incorporating a sleep theme is Anton Chekhov's short story "Let Me Sleep" (Miles and Pitcher, 1982, pp. 191–196), which deals with the human need for sleep and the effects of sleep deprivation. The tale's main character is Varka, a nurse who has been chronically sleep deprived in caring for her master's newborn child. She spends the days hard at work with the household chores and the evenings fighting to stay awake so the master's child may sleep. As her weariness grows, she comes to feel that the baby is the cause of her misery. If it weren't for the child, Varka might get the sleep that she so desperately craves. With a smile upon her face, Varka smothers the baby and quickly lies down on the floor beside the cradle to sleep. Chekhov's tale, a chilling social message to pre-Communist Russia about the common worker's needs, is also a testament to the human craving for sleep. (See also DEPRIVATION; VIOLENCE)

Dreams in Literature

Dream motifs abound in the Western literary tradition. Literary works not only show a continuing fascination with dreaming throughout the ages, but also display shifts in peoples' beliefs about the nature and process of dreaming. The earliest Western writings tell us that the ancients believed dreams were caused by gods, devils, and the dead (see DREAM THEORIES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD). Dreams were thought to influence the actions of the living or to foreshadow events (Weidhorn,

1988; see also CULTURAL ASPECTS OF DREAMING; PSYCHIC DREAMS). This motif is found throughout the Homeric epics. In the *Iliad*, for example, Zeus deceives the Greek king Agamemnon by advising him in a dream to advance the warrior Achilles. In another Homeric tale, Odysseus's wife Penelope has a prophetic dream about an eagle killing twenty geese. Penelope's dream is interpreted to mean that her husband will return from his long years at sea to vanquish the suitors for her hand in marriage.

Plato and the Stoics opposed these common beliefs about prophetic dreams, suggesting that dreams were generated internally rather than by external powers of the supernatural. Thinkers such as Hippocrates elaborated upon the Platonic notion of dreaming and hypothesized that dreams were strictly physiological events. Hippocrates believed that the mind continued functioning, thus causing dreams, while the body was inoperative. This Platonic perspective shifted the notion of dreams from a mystical, external manifestation to a psychological or philosophical internal manifestation.

A final concept about dreams that coexisted with these other theories was best articulated by Herodotus, the fifth-century B.C. Greek historian who believed that dreams simply reflected and represented the waking thoughts and concerns of the dreamer. Herodotus's way of understanding dreams suggests that they can be seen as mirrors of reality.

By the Elizabethan period, the Herodotian view of dreaming became the more prevalent perspective, exemplified by the works of Shakespeare, which are loaded with dream motifs. *Macbeth*, mentioned earlier for its treatment of sleepwalking, is full of anxiety-related dreams fueled by guilt. Another of Shakespeare's plays involving particularly vivid dream sequences is *Richard III*, in which Clarence experiences an elaborate anxiety dream, and Richard is plagued by dreams of guilt that are prophetic in the classical tradition. The characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* undergo enchantments while sleeping that cause them to act against their accustomed natures and ultimately change their destinies; the play's title suggests that its action, and perhaps life itself, may be a dream. Other notable works of Shakespeare that employ dreaming as a dominant theme or plot device include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry IV*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Tempest*.

Manfred Weidhorn (1988) suggests that the seventeenth-century materialist philosophies of Bacon, Locke, and Hobbes caused a decrease in literary dream motifs. These three empiricists were concerned primarily with the measurable universe and found little merit in reflecting upon or writing about subjective states; similar patterns of thought persisted in the rationalist Enlightenment of the 1700s. In the nineteenth century, the advent of the Romantic movement made room for subjective experience once again. This broadened realm of discourse permitted dreaming to return as a theme in literature.

Thus, in the 19th century, dissatisfaction with the current state of society led to a renewed fascination with dreaming or dreamlike states as providing routes to greater self-awareness and pathways to the unconscious. Specifically, many writers involved with the growing drug culture became interested in the dreamlike states produced by opium. Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* are but a few examples of literature influenced by opium-induced dreams (see CREATIVITY IN DREAMS). As dreaming returned to literary vogue, vivid nightmares appeared in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* as well as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Modern literature has been greatly influenced by the psychological theorizing of Sigmund Freud. Freudian schools of thought increased the incorporation of dream motifs in fiction (see FREUD'S DREAM THEORY). With the increase in popular attention to dreaming, modern fiction writers not only utilized dreams to develop characters psychologically, but also began to attempt to capture the essence of dreaming in highly surrealist works. Examples include Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. These works represent another profound step in the evolution of public and scholarly attitudes toward dreams—from thinking of them as supernatural phenomena or simple mirrors of reality to using them to reveal important aspects of personal identity. A survey of dreaming as reflected in literature not only displays our continued fascination with this nocturnal phenomenon, but also

illustrates the way that each generation has thought about and explained dreaming.

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