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Dreaming: Narrative or Poetry?

Abstract:

Dreams are visual, vivid and active experiences, produced by our sleeping selves in various forms, throughout a sleep cycle. Writers and poets are known to harness these experiences as anchors and inspiration for their creative products. There are, however, many issues surrounding the metamorphosis of, or leap from, a dream experience to text. I have been working with dreams as the foundation for the creative component of my thesis and this has led me to encounter particular problems. While it is widely acknowledged that a dream report constitutes a narrative (Kilroe 2000), Webb (1992) draws a direct comparison between dreams and poetry by highlighting common qualities. For example, both tend to be fragmented, vague, contain symbolism and metaphor, and rarely have a clear beginning or end – closer to the poetic than the narrational. Other issues involve the relaying of and capturing of emotions and atmosphere, the inevitable question of interpretation, a consciousness of the life of the dreamer (including socio-cultural environment, physical environment, on-going projects), or the dreamer's identity narrative, as a context for the dream. By considering samples of both dream narratives and dream poems through the lenses of dream studies and narrative theory, I will begin an exploration of these issues.

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Introduction

In 2003, a special issue of the journal *Dreaming* (a publication of the American Psychological Association) was published entitled *Dreaming and the Arts*. In the introduction to this issue, Richard Russo (2003:2) discusses the under-representation of research in the intersection of dream studies and creative arts. He goes on to explain that dream researchers often know very little about the technical aspects of the arts, such as writing, painting, and filmmaking, while artists rarely know much about psychology or dream research. At the same time much of the research done tends to rely on theory and critique, and is likely to be subjective and anecdotal since so much depends on the personal *experience* of art, a fact that Russo sees as problematic. Russo calls for an interdisciplinary approach to this area of research and hopes that more dream art and research will be generated by the work presented in the journal. On a positive note, I can say that it has definitely inspired and aided my own research in dream studies and creative writing. Unfortunately, I have to make the disclaimer that my work, like so many others, also falls under the canopy of theory and personal experience.

Dreams have featured in literature since ancient times. The oldest known representation of dreams in literature is the presence of several sequences of dreams recorded in the narrative of Gilgamesh. The clay tablets on which this narrative was engraved, in cuneiform, date back almost to the third millennium BCE (Van de Castle 2012:1)¹.

Dream poetry, as defined by Russo in terms of non-interpretative dream work, began to appear in earnest during the nineteenth century (Russo 2012:3). The romantic period of English Literature saw a number of authors and poets engage in dream work as a source of inspiration. Mary Shelley based her novel *Frankenstein* on a dream and Robert L. Stevenson dreamed part of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Coleridge wrote *Kubla Khan* entirely from a dream experience (Russo 2012:3). Percy Bysshe Shelley published a collection of poems called *The Catalogue of Phenomenon of Dreams, as Connecting Sleeping and Waking* and Christina Rossetti also wrote many poems based on her dream experiences (Barrett 2012).

Contemporary poets and authors whose work includes significant dream-related material are Michel Leiris, Maxine Kumin, C.K. Williams, Naguib Mahfouz and Sarah Arvio. Most of these authors and poets have used dream work for specific poems or novels, or have gleaned inspiration from dreams, which has then informed and mixed with other ideas to create poems or sequences of poems. *Nights as Day, Days as Night*, by Michel Leiris (1988), is essentially a dream diary. The dreams are entered as short passages of prose poems with some waking

reflections interspersed. It is unique for a number of reasons: firstly it is identified as highly autobiographical at the same time as being lyrical in nature; secondly it explores the idea of self-identity and the constant transformation of self-identity (Hand 2002:39).

The Dreams, by Naguib Mahfouz, is a series of 212 dreams which the author developed into 206 stories, or ‘nanonovellas’ (Stock 2009)². They were originally published chronologically in a Cairo magazine and were subsequently translated and published in two volumes (the second posthumously). These stories were recorded in prose much like dream reports. They are presented chronologically and represent a type of autobiography, although they do not include any explanatory notes, analysis or reflections on the part of the author.

In *Night Thoughts: 70 dream poems and notes from an analysis*, Sarah Arvio presents a book of dream poems spanning a specific time-period in her life. Arvio’s poems can be distinctly identified as lyric poems, as opposed to Leiris’ prose poems and Mahfouz’s prose. Together with the accompanying notes they form an autobiographical narrative. Arvio’s work is unique for two reasons. Firstly, the poems and notes were formed and refined through professional psychoanalysis sessions over the course of many years. Arvio became engaged in therapy and psychoanalysis after suffering from a semi-psychotic experience (Arvio 2013:notes). As a result, her accounts are deeply personal and disturbing. Secondly, although the book refers to 70 ‘dream poems’, several of the poems are memories, fantasies, combinations of dreams and combinations of waking and dreaming. Many of the poems also discuss the waking background to the dreams, which were arrived at through psychoanalysis (Arvio 2013:notes).

Arvio’s use of the term ‘dream poem’ promotes a very broad definition of the term – if we choose to follow her example we are free to include any poem that touches on the dream experience. The key to the definition, however, seems to be a conscious decision to draw on the dream experience in an artistic capacity.

In my efforts towards drawing on dreams in an artistic and writerly capacity I have found it useful to define dreams and dreaming from a common and psychological perspective. I have also found it necessary, much like Russo, to distinguish between interpretative and non-interpretative dream work (I will return to this later in the paper).

It has long since been proven by psychologists that ‘there is no period during sleep in which our mind is ‘blank’; some kind of mental activity is always occurring. This mental activity varies along broad continua of reality, vividness, and descriptive detail’ (Van de Castle 1994:267; Foulkes 1962:24). It is while our bodies are sleeping that our minds are busy

dreaming. Ann Faraday specifically defines a dream as a visual, vivid, and active sleep experience (1973:20-21). Our sleeping mind produces various kinds of ‘dreams, dreamlets, extensive thought patterns, and many hybrid combinations of these mental experiences’ (Van de Castle 1994:267).

Synchronous with the variety of our mental experiences is the variety of scientifically measurable brain activity that occurs throughout the night (or any other period of sleep). Foulkes (1962:14; Foulkes and Vogel 1965:231) has described Dement and Kleitman’s discovery of four stages of brain activity:

- Stage 1 is the lightest stage of sleep and exhibits low-voltage activity with occasional burst of patterns called alpha waves and theta waves.
- Stage 2 is also a light stage of sleep but it is characterised by constant spikes of activity called ‘sleep spindles’.
- Stage 3 is a deep stage of sleep when spindles still occur but there are also the beginnings of low-frequency high-amplitude activity called ‘slow waves’ or ‘delta waves’³.
- Stage 4 is the deepest stage of sleep, which is dominated by ‘delta waves’.
- ‘ascending’ or ‘emergent’ Stage 1 or REM⁴ sleep is a very light stage of sleep characterised by the rapid movement of the eyes and the otherwise general paralysis of the body⁵.

All stages other than REM are typically referred to as non-REM or NREM. The four stages of sleep, including REM, repeat themselves in cycles approximately four to five times throughout a sleep period.

REM sleep produces the most vivid and elaborate dreams (Foulkes 1962; Foulkes 1999:6 in Domhof 2002:10). However, it is believed that considerable dreaming occurs during NREM sleep, particularly during Stage 2 (the light stage of NREM) after the first four REM cycles (Domhof 2002:10). Dreaming in both REM and NREM tend to be longer and more ‘dreamlike’ as we draw near the end of a sleep period, so that a late NREM dream may start to resemble a REM dream from early in the night (Faraday 1973:32).

Foulkes’ study of NREM reports (1962) shows that NREM dreams resemble deep thinking or a daytime reverie. They involve less emotion and imagery than REM dreams and seem to be more connected with recent events or daytime concerns. In a later study, Foulkes and Vogel (1965) explored the mental occurrences of the first stages of sleep. They found that as people

are falling asleep some experience imagery during a short time span, with mild emotions, 'more like a succession of snapshots than a movie' (241). They called this experience a 'dreamlet. Others experienced very real-world dreams, more like being in a movie. The individual differences in mental experiences during Stage 1 sleep were much more varied than those found in REM sleep. Faraday developed some general rules in relation to NREM dreaming; they tend to be shorter, less vivid, less visual, less dramatic, less elaborated, less emotional, less active, more plausible, more concerned with current problems, more conversational, more thought-like than REM dreams (1973:23-24).

Maggiolini et al. (2010) conducted a study where participants were asked to report their most recent dreams and a recent waking episode (63). Generally, it was found that there is no difference between waking life and dream narratives in regards to characters and social interactions (73). In both situations it was found that there was very little cognitive activity involved with the actual episode. Apart from the similarities found between dream content and waking life experiences there is also some physical similarity between dreamtime and waking thought. Sleep research suggests that large body movements in sleep are responsible for disrupting an ongoing dream and starting a new one within the same REM phase, in the same way that disturbances in waking life will break a person's reverie and send them into another or bring them back to reality. Some participants of dream labs reported up to six separate dream episodes for a single REM period, particularly the last REM period just before waking (Faraday 1973:27).

It is worth noting that psychologists frequently refer to dream reports as dream narratives. It is already widely acknowledged that a dream report constitutes a narrative (Kilroe 2000), and later in this paper all dream narratives will be referred to as dream reports. The content and experience of dreams however seem to be problematic where narrative theory is involved. Dreams tend to be fragmented, vague and usually involve only one event/action/episode, and even when they seem to be more detailed they seldom have a clear beginning or end. Kilroe argues that dreams can only be analysed in the form of a dream report and that in this form they fit into Todorov's definition of narrative as a 'shift from one equilibrium to another' (2000:129).

In the March 2003 issue of *Dreaming*, Russo's article 'Dream Poetry as Dream Work' compares one of his own dream poems, 'Two Snakes', with the dream report/text, 'Snake', that inspired it along with relevant background information. The article ultimately explores the ways in which writers utilise or draw on dreams and explains how this form of dream work

differs from dream interpretation. In many ways this paper can be considered as an extension of Russo's article. I will be incorporating his conclusion that the key difference between dream work as therapy and dream writing lies in the intent of the work (25). Russo makes the distinction clear by defining the one:

All methods of interpretative dream work have in common the underlying presupposition that in order to achieve the goals of 'counseling, psychotherapy or personal/social growth', the dream must be 'interpreted'. In themselves, dream reports do not announce their connection to waking life or therapeutic issues and concerns. The purpose of the work is to find (or, depending on your school of thought, make) those connections. Specific techniques are applied to 'decode', 'decipher' or otherwise 'uncover' the meaning of the dream, which is not explicit in the dream text. (16)

Finally, I have also followed the same methodology for executing the process, based on Jung's description of active imagination (17).

Dream report versus dream poem

What follows is a discussion and comparison of my own dream reports (as they appear in my dream journal) and the corresponding dream poems that were produced. I will give some brief context for each dream experience and then discuss the creative experience of writing; first the dream report/narrative, and second the composition of the dream poem. This discussion will be followed by comments on the strengths and weaknesses of each form in relation to the original dream experience.

For the sake of brevity, I have chosen three samples but I would like to note that there are other types of dream poems; for example, the poem that is composed when a dream prompts certain memories, emotions, or philosophies within the poet. This type of dream-poem makes little or no direct reference to the dream experience. The first type of dream-poem, however, directly represents large elements of the actual dream experience but may also include commentary; the chosen samples fall into this category.

Sample 1: Gazelle dream report

We are running through the jungle, there are nineteen of us. We are hungry, starving, and there is no food left. There are no other people left either. The jungle is dense, almost suffocating. Our stomachs ache, our heads hurt, and we feel weak and ill.

We come to a clearing. There is a great mountain in the distance with snow on top. The whole scene is verdant and full of life. I see a beautiful gazelle in the middle of the field. She does not notice us, her head is down and she is eating the green grass. All of a sudden it occurs to me that we could also eat the grass. The grass is green and lush and the valley is carpeted with it.

I get down on my knees and start to nibble. I become a gazelle. I gingerly move towards another gazelle. I lower my head deep into the grass and take a big mouthful – the sweet and tangy juices roll around on my tongue and with every crunchy bite there is a hint of pepper. A breeze wafts through from the mountain and I can smell the herbs and flowers, the spring water in the distance. My head is swirling with fragrances. The breeze ruffles the soft fur on my back and along my belly. I become aware of my hooves and experimentally tap them in the grass. The ground is comfortingly firm yet soft.

The other gazelle makes a sudden sound and I notice movement from the corner of my eye. I turn my head quickly to see a tall man approaching, aiming a rifle straight at me. I look him in the eyes, willing him to recognise me. I see hunger, anger, frustration, and then slowly, a question. I see my reflection in his irises. For a moment the hunger wanes, the flicker of a smile, his rifle is lowered. Then he turns and starts running into the skirt of the mountain, following the others, still looking for food, still wanting to survive.

I can still see/smell/feel that place.

Gazelle dream poem

We number nine and ten and we are hungry

I become a gazelle
from the mountain

My head swirls with fragrance
in delight

Staring at the hunter's eyes
past the hunger
willing him

edges of frustration seeping
empathy

Green iris streaks into grey
flecks of gold then
the pupils
a black mirror

flicker
of a smile

The hunter turns
runs away...

This dream occurred while I was living in northern Tanzania. The scenery was very familiar, having visited many national parks. It was a time of great uncertainty in terms of study and employment for both myself and my partner. The dream itself was vivid and had strong sensory qualities about it while maintaining a mild and odd emotional detachment. Since I awoke directly from the dream and well into the morning, not to mention its clarity, it is safe to assume that it was experienced during the final REM stage of sleep.

The dream report was easy to write since the experience seemed to involve a clear story and familiar characters. The report reflects all the traditional elements of narrative – beginning/middle/end, main characters, crisis, resolution, and denouement.

The poem, on the other hand, was very difficult to produce. Although the report contained strong lyrical elements there was no aspect of the experience that seemed more important than the narrative and therefore it was hard to select what to focus on and what to include or write about in the poem. The first draft was largely narrational but very unsatisfactory as poetry. In order to focus on the lyrical qualities of the dream I meditated on the original experience,

incorporating dream re-entry. Eventually moments and details and sensations seemed to stand out. There then followed a lengthy editing process through which the language was refined and the lines determined. The end result is a very fragmented, vague, post-modern poem that is ironically more dreamlike than the initial expression of the experience.

It would be easy to say that this particular dream was better suited to being expressed in prose, however the nature of the poem—minimal, segmented, and musical/rhythmical—manages to capture and intensify the emotions running through the dream experience, including the odd feeling of detachment. Thus the dream poem, as creative artefact, is more effective in conveying particular elements of the dream to its audience. At the same time it is worth noting that the dream report presented here is unedited and unrefined, and viewed as a prompt for creative writing, has potential and scope for development as prose.

Sample 2: Grandmother dream report

I dreamed that I was sleeping in my bed (exactly as I was). I opened my eyes and my grandmother was standing in the room, near the door, watching me, watching over me. In her arms she was holding a baby swaddled in a blue and white striped cloth. When, or once, Grandmother saw that I was awake and had seen them she left. I woke up (for real) when she left.

I have had similar dreams where Grandmother is watching over me over the years, since I was a child.

Grandmother dream poem

Mamanbuzurg,
when I opened my eyes
and saw you standing there,
watching over me,
at the foot of my bed,
one hand resting on the bed post,
the soft glow of lamplight around us,
guarding me from my own future,
and the curious,

the journey that lay before me,
the choices that I must make,
and the making of a strong woman;
Mamanbuzurg,
when I opened my eyes
and saw you standing there,
watching over me,
as you always do,
my baby cradled in your arms,
swaddled in blue and white cotton,
guarding us both from evil thoughts,
and night terrors,
things that go bump in the light,
and our own treacherous hearts,
and people who hold our hearts;
Mamanbuzurg,
when I opened my eyes
and saw you standing there,
your hand on my head,
a smile on your lips,
a beautiful carpet beneath your feet,
elegant patterns of crimson and blue,
in a palace where you belong,
on the mountain,
and I wished I could stay forever,
and I know I must live my life,
and I know my life will be blessed;
Mamanbuzurg,
when I opened my eyes
and saw you standing there,
and I opened my eyes ...

This dream was very short and straightforward. At the last occurrence of the dream I lived in Australia, having recently moved back from Tanzania, and I was going through a period of transition. The room was the same room that I was physically in at the time, incidentally the same room I had occupied during my formative years. I never met my grandmother, since she passed away before I was born, however she always featured as a strong and spiritual figure in family stories. Some years ago I had helped my mother write her own mother's biography.

I awoke from the dream in the middle of the night, just as had occurred previously with the same dream, and wrote it down before going back to sleep. Although the dream was short, (it felt as though it lasted barely a moment), it was quite clear and life-like. It was possibly experienced during an early REM stage. The dream report constitutes a very simple narrative – I slept, I saw my grandmother standing over me, she left, I woke up. The report falls short as a piece of prose and does not necessarily inspire extension in that form.

The dream poem on the other hand was written with more ease than the Gazelle poem. The Grandmother dream triggered very strong emotions. This is possibly also due to the fact that it has been a recurring dream and so it brings to mind various stages of my life. I felt compelled to write the poem as homage to the repeated image of my grandmother watching over me. The poem came together in a relatively short amount of time, with a structure and rhythm that was apparent from the outset. The language was refined within a couple of drafts. The title I chose to give her in the poem, Mamanbuzurg, is the Farsi word for grandmother which I have always used when referring to her in conversation with family and is the term that evokes greater respect, power, and emotion within that context.

In contrast to the first sample, the poem here expands on the dream report. The dream poem gives more complexity of narrative, both in terms of story and in terms of character/s. The structure is closer to more traditional forms of poetry in regards to rhythm and musicality, which helps to drive the narrative. Instead of translating the single dream experience, the dream poem conveys the recurring experience of the dream over many years and some of the waking experiences that have run parallel to the dreaming. The brevity of the dream itself serves the creation of the dream poem in that there are less points of reference and therefore it is less restrictive in terms of emotional and conceptual direction.

Sample 3: Underwater City dream report

I had an amazing dream. It was not very sharp although it felt like it lasted for a very long time. I was living in and travelling through an incredible city filled with light. Sometimes I was within myself and sometimes I was watching myself. It was half under water and half above ground. There were glass tunnels that connected the different parts of the city. I saw myself walking above ground then swimming under water, both in tunnels and in open water. Everything glowed a soft blue and white. I felt both at home and in awe.

Water-city dream poem

Water flows, it seems
right through her,
blue and white light surrounding
her limbs, lifting
the body up towards the open air.

The city below stretches
her jaws wide in a yawn
her hair of silver and glass sprawling
over the land, strands
standing with static here and there.

A woman in a city of light;
a city
in a woman's light.

Underwater City was experienced while living in Australia, not long after the Grandmother dream. The year was particularly busy with travel, work, study (the mid-point of my thesis), and time with family and friends. As is reflected in the dream report, the experience was full of positive emotions. I awoke from this dream in the morning, however the quality of the sensations and images was weak and fuzzy and it took some time to emerge into full wakefulness. Although it did not comprise much in the way of events, it felt like a relatively long dream.

The dream report was surprisingly difficult to write – it was hard to find the language to explain the experience adequately and I found myself struggling to express the report in prose. In terms of narrative elements the dream was quite simple. In fact one could argue that it struggles to be classified as narrative since the requisite ‘end’ does not occur in the dream experience but rather involves waking up. This sample seems to be representative of Kilroe’s argument that dreams can be classified as narrative only when viewed as indicative of a shift from one equilibrium to another (see earlier reference).

In terms of effort required for composition, Water-city dream poem fell somewhere between the first and second samples. Unlike the second sample this poem was not as conceptually obvious and in order to find a clear direction for the poem I had to meditate on the dream, positioning myself back within the dream experience. The language and form came more easily once the focal point of the experience was identified. The resulting poem translates and reflects the dream experience more adequately than the dream report. It captures the *experiential* nature of the narrative – the structure of the poem highlights the movement within the dream, its scattered yet flowing qualities, the breathlessness, and the sense of wonder.

Conclusion

The three samples presented and discussed here are broadly representative of the types of dreams that I have experienced and drawn on in a creative capacity. I have found that dream experiences involving stronger emotions and attachment to the images/sensations translate into poetry with greater ease. Dreams that contain elements of classical narrative structure translate quite naturally into prose dream reports. Likewise, dream reports have more classical narrative elements whereas dream poems are more powerful in terms of *experiential* narrative.

Putting the events of a dream, where the dream was complex and/or composed of multiple events as usually occurs during a REM stage of a sleep cycle, into verse does not necessarily result in a satisfactory poem. As I recorded more dreams into detailed prose reports the difference in narrativity between lyric poem and prose became starker. The poems are better suited to capturing the moment, the point on which a narrative pivots, and expanding on that moment in an emotional and conceptual capacity. Some dreams, vague and short-seeming and usually occurring during non-REM stages of a sleep cycle, are more immediately suited to representation through lyric poetry.

Taking into account a great quantity of dream content analysis, many psychologists have concluded that dream images are in fact driven by emotional thoughts (Maggiolini et al. 2010). They call the source of these thoughts ‘affective consciousness’ (61). Dreams are rife with *affective* symbolisation. These symbolic images convey strong emotions, not unlike the use of a storm in a film. Dreams are fertile ground for symbols and metaphors (Faraday 1974:53-57).

In the context of my own dreams, I have found that emotions are often the driving force and that both symbols and metaphors play a strong role in the dream experience. On an intuitive level, however, I have often felt the experience to be strongly narrational. Gregg confirms this intuition in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative: Structuralist analysis of narratives*, however, suggests that individuals construct identities by the same implicit and figurative processes that use ambiguity to create metaphoric, ritual, poetic, and musical meaning (2006:64).

Both Herman (2009) and Le Guin (1980) give definitions and examples of narrative that are less traditional, less reliant on language structure, and specifically mention human experience as a basis for narrative. In a further development, Fludernik and Olson argue that narratology’s traditional reliance on language has created a prison-like stifling of the discipline (2011:22-23). They note that Page (2012) advocates a narratology which is not submissive to language. It is envisioned that the future of narratology will move from transgeneric and transmedial to include more transmodal forms of analysis and narrative theory (Fludernik and Olson 2011). Fludernik, in her book *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996), made a bold move in this direction. The book removes the emphasis of narrativity on events and the action of telling to ‘grounding narrativity in the representation of experientiality’ (20).

In 2007, Eugene Mahon published the article ‘A Dream and a Poem’ in which he analysed a writer’s report of a dream and the poem stimulated by that dream. Although the majority of the article is an exercise in psychoanalysis, and therefore irrelevant to this particular project, Mahon does make some interesting and useful observations in terms of language and the *experience* of the artistic artefact. He discusses the ‘*psychological... being put to the physiological test*’ (253), in terms of word choice, where the reading of bodily, sensory, and elemental words make a more powerful impact on the body of the audience. Hence, in lyric poetry, when these words appear either on their own on a line or surrounded by few others, the translation of experience and *experiential* narrative becomes more immediate.

In light of the process of word selection, that is so crucial to poetic composition, I will now briefly discuss the issue of interpretation. It is possible to say that the very act of translating a dream experience into poetry inherently involves an act of interpretation. One could argue that the elements of the dream that are selected (and therefore highlighted), and the particular words incorporated, the aspects that are emphasised through the lines and segments that are delineated, all represent an interpretation of why the dream experience is important and what it means to the dreamer. However, the purpose of non-interpretative dream work, particularly in this project, is to draw on the dream experience for the production of a creative artefact. Any interpretation that may come through is entirely unintended and coincidental.

A possible project for further discovery in this area might involve poets drawing on other poets' dream reports. This would involve a great level of trust and interchange and may lead to the exploration of other aspects of creative practice, as well as interrogating cultural attitudes towards the dream experience and how various poets treat further translations of dream reports. I would like to see many more writers travelling with their dream journals in tow. Despite the ancient roots inherent in dream work, I believe that there is still great scope for creative research in this area, especially in terms of further diversifying literary forms.

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Endnotes:

1. When a citation refers to a Kindle E-Book the number at the end of the citation refers to the paragraph in the article/chapter; for example, (Russo 2012:3) means article/chapter by Russo, published 2012, paragraph 3.

2. in Mahfouz 2009: Translator's Afterward

3. Elaboration found in Bonnet 2012

4. REM stands for the bursts of Rapid Eye Movement which are characteristic of this stage of sleep (Foulkes 1962:14).

5. Elaboration found in McNamara 2012