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 prede-
cessors 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 pheno-
menon 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 mas-
ter'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 tradi-
tion. 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 West-
ern 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; PSY-
CHIC DREAMS). This motif is found throughout the
Homeric epics. In the *Iliad*, for example, Zeus de-
ceives 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 inopera-
tive. 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 perspec-
tive, exemplified by the works of Shakespeare,
which are loaded with dream motifs. *Macbeth*,
mentioned earlier for its treatment of sleepwalk-
ing, 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 tradi-
tion. 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 domi-
nant 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 character psychologically, but also began to attempt to capture the essence of dreaming in highly surrealistic 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 Finnegans 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.

REFERENCES


Thomas Wheatland