



CLASS-RELATED EXPERIENCES IN CHILDREN'S DREAMS

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The symbolic manifestations of children's dreams have been an object of interest since the beginning of psychoanalysis. Different perspectives tinge and even alter quite significantly the understanding and interpretation afforded to them, depending upon the theoretical tendency one departs from.¹

Dreams glimpsed at from the assumption that what is most significant for our psychic welfare is a successful development of our libido until the genital or Oedipal phase is reached (considering that this process must pour out aggressive behaviour and destructive instincts towards the exterior, as well as to avoid a reversion of these instincts against oneself, which would make us selfdestructive) cannot be understood in a similar fashion as the one based on the assumption that during the development process, certain survival patterns unfold, patterns with which the child is biologically equipped since his birth, and which allow him to establish healthy, affective bonds with his social environment. It is in this environment where the child looks for solutions to his needs, although this environment (mother, father, or substitute) may provide alternate solutions (whether adequate or defective) which in turn may affect considerably his maturation process, which in many cases will be distorted by causes other than the ones thought to be instinctive, since these causes occur during the dynamic interaction of both



elements (i.e.: child - environment) and not exclusively and inevitably within the child, as would follow from the first of these two conceptions. Having obtained a great amount of evidence opposite the previous statements, we can no longer accept simplistic solutions which give exclusive value to children's mental creations, their seduction fantasies, their egocentrism and lack of reality. Under no circumstance can we deny the fact that these symbolic products start as, and frequently represent, (both in children and adults) experiences which actually happened, and in many occasions, they condense the most conflictive family and social deeds. Those are the happenings which are hidden to our first sight, which are handled as "secrets" because they refer to grave traumatic questions, repressed, denied, and ignored for as long as possible.

There is no doubt, that sometimes children's dreams are realizations of their wishes, as set forth originally by Freud, and which is also common with reference to adults. At the same time, however, it cannot be denied that sometimes this is not the case; that some dreams present themselves as repeated attempts to solve conflicts for which, during vigil hours, no exit door has been visualized; dreams during which, there is an insistence to find a solution. On other occasions, there are diverse dreams which simply denote a different process of creation. In them, facts are condensed in such a way that, at first glance, they seem to be unrelated to each other; this is only if one does not know, comprehend or take into account the emotional weft which links and threads them until it makes a



whole, acquiring then a different sense or place, as a distinctive way of taking a glimpse at experiences, and integrating them.

To peek at children's dreams and to try to understand the implications of their emotional lives and to emphasize, above all, the way in which these dreams reflect what actually may have been experienced by children is what I aim to highlight here, as well as to point to the fact that these dreams may become highly valuable material for investigation and knowledge, and also to review the kind of children's lives and experiences which are produced in them by the society in which they live, under their own usual conditions.

Next, let us analyse some children's oneiric images so we can demonstrate what these images transmit in reference to the child's environment and feelings which this environment may, and usually generates in the child. The following are dreams experienced by children (between the ages of 6 and 12) who belong to two quite different social groups.

For some of these children, sons and daughters of well-to-do families, the common thing is to live in material abundance, surrounded by persons, other than their own parents, who serve, attend and take care of their needs. For the other children, the sons and daughters of laborers, eventual workers, etc., the rule is to go about life by themselves, solving a good portion of the daily family problems, helping their mothers in all kinds of household chores, and their fathers in an endless list of tasks.



Dream One:

"I dreamed that I was at home and my grandmother was telling me: 'do your homework, because your mother is about to arrive and if you don't, she will get upset'. Later, a man appeared, he was going to knock the house down because, he said, it was on his property, then I told him that the house belong to my grandfather. We phoned my dad, because my grandfather was ill and could hardly do a thing. When my parents arrived, my mother asked the man why was he doing such a thing; he answered that the Chief of Police had authorized him, or, I don't know what kind of documents which he was carrying; some patrols were coming and other men came to see why (this man) was knocking our house down; I was very scared for them to knock my room down, then I awoke."

Dream Two:

"I dreamed we had a space ship at home. We flew among the clouds and we encountered God. He said He was pleased with our arrival, so we could take care of Him, and also that we could make a wish. I asked for magic powers, and He granted them to me. I made a well produce a tree of popsicles and candies. Everything was very pretty and Paradise was a very big place. It had a special paradise for men, another one for women, and it even had a special room for dogs. I liked it very much because we (the family) saw each other daily and because I found again my little dog that had died before."



Dream Three:

"I dreamed that I was already a grownup, and that I was working as an engineer in a factory. One day I arrived at work and I did an experiment which blew my face up, I then had plastic surgery done on me, but it was not very good, and when I arrived home, my family thought I was someone else trying to be me, and, since they thought that I was somebody else, they threw me out; then, I went back to work and made lots of money and once again had plastic surgery done on me; this time, with all the money I had, they did a good job and when I arrived home again, they were able to recognize me. I was driving a very elegant car; I hope it comes true!"

Dream Four:

"I had a terrible dream. We were on board a ship with a friend. We had gone hunting; but, when we were ready to disembark, some cannibals appeared, they were chasing us. They would grab us by our feet and then proceeded to eat us up. Then, in another place, I saw some thieves who were attacking us (the child's family) and later, they threw my mother to some sharks. We were in a car, all the family (of thieves) attacked us and took us to their hideout. They tied all of us up and then threw my mother into the water where some sharks would eat her up, and I saw how her bones come afloat, and lots of blood. I awoke sweating. It was horrible! But I also have nice dreams, hah, like the other day, when I dreamed I was a soldier and I was wearing a uniform



and I was being promoted all the time. I would get a higher and higher rank."

The first two dreams were experienced by two girls. The one about the man who comes to deprive the family of their home, while the grandmother insists in doing the homework, suggests, among other things, the struggle between two different worlds. It represents a moment of change, during which the traditional way of life of the family is threatened, to the point of destruction, producing sensations of impotence and bewilderment which the girl sees reflected in adults: while the authority figures (grandmother and mother) uphold traditional values (to behave well, to do the homework, to study), it is impossible not to realize that the house which protects them is no longer very safe, that those values no longer represent the stability that up to that point was taken for granted. For the girl is no longer possible to remain naive in the face of danger. It is obvious that there are, in an ever increasing form, other kinds of forces imposing upon the family group, introducing themselves into the household, shaking it and violating the privacy of their precincts. That undeniable reality of the exterior is the one that prevails, i.e.: the one that threatens their privacy, sharply breaking the girl's "innocence", who until then had been kept safe from exterior sieges.

The girl's dream is provocative, denouncing not only her perception with respect to the invalidity of the old principles, but also the fact that although she and the authorities who attempt to



protect her, to whom she gives certain value and importance, are also at the mercy of the events taking place, and find themselves equally impotent to defend the family from what is happening, even though, the authorities keep on instructing her, verbally and unceasingly.

The image describes in detail situations which directly and openly affect the family life, also abruptly, without previous notice. These situations cover her small personal world, revealing another world which is large, complex and bureaucratic; the one that denounces the great, enormous organizations which, step by step, set up traps until they grab the last and most private corner of our lives. The new "authorities", the ones the family appeals to in the dream, are unknown (policemen, papers, unknown chiefs) but are above the ones which used to legitimize the beliefs of both the girl and her family. Parents and grandparents sink, impotent and confused, before the conflict; the insecurity and fear of being swept away become ineludible. Will the authorities agree to what seemed so simple to her, so plain, like the fact that it was, and can still be, a house where she lives and where she fulfills her obligations as a child - school work and feminine related chores, which her grandmother advocates? or, on the contrary, are these authorities looking after arguments and demands over the property claimed by the intruder, the one with the documents which would be validated by the chief of police, permitting the dispossession, and the fact that they would for real knock her room down and then throw her out to the street and make her lose her place?



In fact, the girl's dream does refer to a real and frequent problem among the inhabitants of marginal neighborhoods scattered in the outskirts of Mexico City. This is a common occurrence in country estates which are in fact invaded. This is a practice that has been a form of appropriation utilized by these people. Many other girls in the same environment dream of scenes of abandonment; they see themselves unprotected, in the middle of forests, at the mercy of animals, witches, devils and other monsters imagined by them. They live in fear of finding themselves outside their homes, exposed, or as the victims in violent scenes in which their parents are frequently involved. They see themselves as very close to the most absolute impotence, some of them, to the point of not being able to ask for help.

The second dream, the one about meetings with the divinity and concessions of magical powers while in paradise and space ships, tells us, on the contrary, about the very vast possibility of travel, which is common to a life of abundance. It refers, in some way, to an intimate sensation of isolation, to the need to re-enter into contact with what's tender, alive - represented by the finding of the dog which provides his company.

To see each other, and keep in contact, even if it is only visual contact, makes up a motive for happiness. The fact refers to a lack of affection that may be compensated by being close, receiving favours from powerful figures, beings that grant "powers" in a fantastic way; power against mother nature, capable of making



her give, not only fruits, but also candies, well elaborated, sweets and popsicles just for the asking, without the need, realization nor recognition of the process involved in producing them.

The easiest way, to one's reach, is to solve everything by keeping in good terms with the all-mighty and on the basis of dependence on the One who controls the universe. He is the figure which grants happiness, and since He is capable of exercising magic, He is pleased with and kind to the caring and attentions given to Him by the girls.

Even amongst paradises and space ships, the schemes repeat themselves, the necessary divisions, moral, patriarchal, where each one goes about with his own affairs, counting with his own separate space: one for men, another for women, and even a separate one for dogs. This categorical separation and organization which foresee a common and uniformed place for all, and the power to be able to classify them, forms the basis upon which the woman-child supports herself in order to be able to find herself, to feel useful and welcome into this world of progress, the world of machines, space ships and high-technology that her family is able to acquire.

Her "feminine, maternal" protective self and her readiness to offer care which for so long have given her the time to feel the conventional security she needs, continues to be a fundamental alternative, a safe-conduct that permits her to feel welcome as well as to satisfy her needs for warmth and nearness.

In the dreams of other girls of the same type of group, images of friendship and of close relationships with superhuman beings



are present: God, Virgen Mary, Saint Joseph and Christ. When situations present themselves and cause anxiety it is very common to find an exit. One way or the other, the figures of authority find out about these situations and offer their help.

The girl in the first dream (in which the house is knock down, seems to be perceiving the changes of the accelerated development of massive industrialization, in the form of threatening forces which should be resisted to; like externa' agents imposing themselves upon her and then throwing her out of her own, warm environment, and in this way bringing to an end that small familiar refuge, which up until then offered security, warmth, and some tranquility.

These strange forces open, and let other people's eyes, discover the intimate place where she could display her life as a traditional woman: domestic and very much isolated. However, it is the same traditional life which allows her (and this fact cannot be denied) the possibility of fulfilling, personally and efficiently, a transcendentat' function.

An ancient feminine function, which the girl of the second dream - the one about God's welcome to paradise - takes with her to space, to the world of "progress" where she enters happily and in which, according to her, is necessary to "take care" of God, even though he may have everything planned and is certainly capable of satisfying all His needs. She waits, apparently with blind optimism, the coming of a world which will be under the control of a "well" administered order.



Immersed in their own class situation, the girls in the second group do not stop seeing in some of their oneiric images, accidents where disabled persons are run over. The cars in their dreams are usually driven by their mothers, fathers or friends, and always end up producing lamentations and demands from the victims, which curiously, are almost never members of the family, and which differ from the images common to girls among less prosperous groups.

On the other hand, the dreams of boys also result in revelations of unavoidable social contradictions. The boy who dreams of himself as a grownup and that as a professional has an accident, and who later recovers via plastic surgery, belongs to a family of laborers. He looks at himself going up the ladder of social hierarchy, working as an "enginner", doing experiments and trying to find new solutions to problems which may be out of his control, and, finally in a kind of initiation or ritual to enter the middle class, ends up mutilated. During the course of this, he no longer belongs to his family. He becomes a stranger to their eyes. Although, he is convinced that he will be capable of obtaining the rank and money necessary to permit him to recover from the feeling of astonishment with his environment, where nobody seems to recognize him.

The dream speaks clearly of his ambivalence, his desire and fear to escape from the group he belongs to. He manifests without doubt, his ambition and need to get even with his present deprivations by what he wishes and hopes for in the future.

These images illustrate his desire for confrontation, a way of



testing his strength and come out victorious, to get ahead socially, to become "important", to "work" and "make lots of money", even though he fears and at the same time knows, that all of this will end up hurting his face, his own image, his sense of identity with everything he has loved. He wishes to jump over the obstacles which limit him and to stop being what he and his family have always been. Nobody, not even his closest relatives, know who he is, but he is convinced that if he insists and continues working hard, persevering in his efforts to climb higher and higher, he will reach a level that would permit him to get a hold of the "solutions" to the problems of modern life "where everything can be remedied with money", to the point of hiring "experts" to recover, even in an artificial way, something as personal and unique, and that cannot be done over, as his own features. He substitutes money for sensibility, affection, the closest coexistence, and the intimacy of those persons whom, through later events, prove to be too rigid, since they guide themselves only, by his appearance, by that deceptive mask which covers him and which does not correspond to the center of his being.

His illusion and ambition of entering the modern world are trying to touch the increased desperation in which he has grown up. Feeling the strength in the struggle to ascend, and to become successful, produce in him a feeling of guilt which pushes him to the edge of doing selfdestruction acts, accidents, failures, which unconsciously play the role of punishments for what he has done.

Many dreams in this group of boys, reflect an impotence, a dis-



tressing passivity, in which they project the causes for disasters, that often deal with devils, death, monsters, thieves and murderers. They watch accidents and disputes which clearly illustrate the paralysis and limitations in which they feel immersed.

The dream of the boy who belong to the other group (of a higher economical level) speaks from the very bottom of terror itself. It is the one about cannibals, who eat him up as well as his friend, the one about thieves who throw his mother to the sharks. He concludes by making reference to another image, now a pleasing one, which gives us a clue, an explanation of the cause for his most alarming fears. He is a soldier who, in this happy situation, increases in rank, someone who is recognized, for whom there are always higher and higher positions.

He will be successful if he carries out orders, norms, if he is disciplined, if he obeys and accomplishes missions in which the main theme is looking at himself climbing up the ladder, realizing well established merits, within full control (military), of orders, uniforms and permits.

If he tries to get out, to free himself, or to get out of there and be on his own, he will, unfailingly, bump into something unexpected, not regulated nor established.

The two non-military images that he refers to in such detail, speak of his need to be always on the look out, on the defensive, before an environment which is worse than adverse, it is full of enemies. His vision of the world is that of a grave and extreme



dehumanization. He thinks of others persons foreign to his environment as nonhuman, who on top of that, impose a terrible threat: they are simply beings capable of ending with everything that one is or has been.

To get out of the city army (organization and hierarchy) to leave the civilization and its advances and established order, is like entering into a jungle, ready to hunt, ready to kill. Is like setting out on an expedition, which at first sight does not seem dangerous, but which will end, paradoxically, by bringing into play their very own lives. The hunters of the dream end up destroyed, surrounded by hatred and envy, imprisoned by "cannibals" who seem more like hungry beasts and quite capable of devouring them, very similar to the sharks which in the following scene, do eat up the boy's mother in just an instant. The mother was thrown to the sharks by thieves, "persons who appropriate themselves of things that do not belong to them". The thieves (which may actually be poor and hungry people) use the mother as bait, or as a meal for the sharks, those beasts brought up in hunger, known for their voracious appetite. The mother, who is the weakest of the family members in that world of destructive passions, becomes the victim over which the forces of aggression unload themselves. The brutality, full of guilt, that the child's mind is capable of producing, causes him to awake sweating and full of anguish.

Brutality, violence and aggression burning inside of him and from which he escapes by submitting to order, as a soldier, and be able to ascend, to wear a uniform, and to hold an ever increasing rank,



is to be "successful" in life.

Other children in the higher level group show in their dreams clear indications of their concern about war, atomic destruction of the world, death, landslides. Grave experiences from which, at the end, something allows them to escape, alone, or to overcome the difficulties which produce this anguish. They also manage to impose themselves over the thieves and ferocious animals, either on their own, or through their parent's help, or even by policemen who defend them, or by cars capable of flying, or by a lucky charm which gives them superhuman powers and which they use in the most desperate and precise moment.

The products of the imagination, the dreams as well as the games, fantasies, pictures, songs and figures elaborated by the children, contain traces related to the experiences lived by them. Although, since knowledge is experienced on an individual basis, unique and personal, it does tend, nevertheless, to reflect what is common or shared in the social and cultural environment where individuals go about their own affairs, i.e., the conditions produced by their social system.

¹ Refer to, for example: "La interpretación de los sueños", by Sigmund Freud, Amorrurtu Publishing House, Buenos Aires; "El lenguaje olvidado", by Erich Fromm, Machette, Mexico, 1961; "La formación del símbolo en el niño", by Jean Piaget, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1961 and "Los sueños y la creatividad del inconsciente", by E. Zajur in "Erich Fromm y el psicoanálisis humanista", by S. Millán and S. Gojman de Millán, compilers, Siglo XXI, Mexico, 1980.