

## Everything and Nothing: On the Value of the Dream

Abstract: Juliet Flower MacCannell, University of California, Irvine

*The story goes that just before or after he died, he found himself in front of God and he said: "I, who have been so many men in vain, want to be one man: myself." The voice of God replied from a whirlwind: "Neither am I one self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many persons—and none."—Jorge Luis Borges, "Everything and nothing," in Dreamtigers*

People have long valued dreams for a remarkable variety of reasons: as prognostications or premonitions, as commands from the divine or the infernal; as signs of trouble in the soul or psyche.

In the Old Testament's Genesis 41 we find the story of the Pharaoh's dream of seven fat cows and seven lean ones. A young Hebrew prisoner, Joseph interprets that it portends seven years of famine after seven years of excellent harvests. He then advises Pharaoh to prepare for the coming famine by saving a good portion of the agricultural bounty each year of the first seven.

During the early European enlightenment dreams were used to illustrate the illusory nature of the senses as opposed to Reason (Descartes) or as satirizing visionary aspirations toward the perfected new world to be inaugurated by scientific reason ("D'Alembert's Dream" by Diderot). Political leaders call upon the dream to represent their hopes for a better future, as in King's inspirational speech "I Have a Dream"; others use dream references to argue for the status quo, as in conservative invocations of "the" American Dream.

Freud had remarkable insights into the dreamer's disturbances of mind and body, but more importantly he demonstrated the precise rhetorical mechanisms that shape the dream, the symbolic code that structures them. Dreams, like literary works, are rife with distortions, distillations, displacements and disguises regarding the identity of their objects. Dreams, however, are not to be read as literary works are, but must be understood as structured as a rebus, where sight and sound and meaning all exchange places with each other.<sup>1</sup> Each dream solicits or even demands interpretation: dreams are meanings in metaphorical or disguised form.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the context of a psychoanalysis, the analyst demands that the patient bring them a dream specific to the moment course of the analysis.

However, when dreams appear within a fictional or poetic work, we must not only try to interpret them in themselves, but in the context of the text in which they appear. For example, Lockwood's dream in *Wuthering Heights* (he dreams he is attending a sermon when the preacher singles him out, pointing at him and saying, "thou art the man!") is puzzling and may seem pointless, despite the fact that Lockwood is one of two main narrators of the tale.

The importance of Lockwood's dream appears only once the whole novel is read as a condemnation of monstrous egotism—with Lockwood as an exquisitely banal, quotidian and boring example who brings Heathcliff's massive egocentrism into relief. The value of this dream is that it offers a key to realizing the significance of the work as a whole.

What the Borges epigraph above tells us is that dreams inside a literary work are not a way of grasping Emily Brontë's psyche or her hidden desires. In this as in Borges' Shakespeare the author is everything in her characters and also nothing in herself.