

The Nightmare and the Narrative

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Abstract

This paper proposes that dreams can be analyzed from a narrative perspective and that this approach produces a new appreciation of dreams. When we ask the dreamer narrative-like questions such as “How would you change the story of the dream?” or “If they were making a movie of this dream, who would play you?” we take the dream work in a different direction than when we ask questions of the form “Does this dream remind you of something in your waking life?” Consideration of the formal narrative components of the dream report allows us to address issues and remedies that are not readily apparent in other approaches. In the case of the nightmare, imagining the dream as a story can prepare the dreamer to master the nightmare’s climax. Within the logic of the nightmare, it enables the dreamer to identify or create sources of support and to see herself as someone who can solve the nightmare problem. It provides the dreamer with the means to eliminate the nightmare.

A dream report is rarely a complete story and narrative can be utilized when we can conceptualize the dream as a fragment implying a narrative whole. The nightmare can be seen as a fragment which consistently halts at what would be the climax of a plot. Correspondingly, there is a quasi-nightmare embedded in the plot of many novels and films, Stephen King’s horror story, *Carrie*, is taken as an example. Many of the analyses and techniques used in both nightmare studies and in nightmare interventions already imply a narrative perspective. In particular, narrative offers an explanation for

the success of the Imagery Rehearsal Technique (IRT) method of working with nightmares.

Narrative analysis can benefit dream work in three ways. Firstly, narrative suggests a framework in which current approaches to nightmares can be understood; secondly, it offers a different way to consider dream reports; and thirdly, the extensive body of narrative theory as well as practical applications, such as screenwriting techniques, can be applied to dream work.

Keywords: Nightmare, Dream, Mastery, IRT, Narrative

The Nightmare and the Narrative

Narrative analysis provides an alternative lens through which to consider dreaming. The focus is directed to the dream report as a potential story which is often rough, inadequate and incomplete, and therefore in need of improvement. By considering these “deficiencies”, narrative provides a frame of reference that allows dream workers to work with their clients’ nightmares. In addition, analytic tools from the study of novels, films and theater may provide new perspectives and even interventions that can assist those working with nightmare sufferers.

The affinity between dreams and narrative is clear but elusive. In many ways dreams are story-like, and stories dream-like. The dream may have high drama, and it may involve ideas, perspectives, and situations a writer might envy, but it is also free, so to speak, to break any of the rules of storytelling: dreams typically fail to possess even a beginning, a middle, and an end. No one would complain that a dream which began without explanation or context, ended arbitrarily, and had no tension was therefore a badly formed dream; there is no such thing. Equally, if someone always recounted dreams of a literary quality, we might well doubt the accuracy of these reports.

That it is difficult to claim definitively that all dreams are narrative structures is widely acknowledged (Hunt, 1989, chapter 11; States, 1993; Deslauriers & Cordts, 1995; Kilroe, 2000). The overall view is aptly summed up by Kilroe:

Dream texts will vary in their degree of narrativity, ranging from fragmentary snapshot to epic tale. Some remembered dreams seem less coherent than others, but it is still the case that we remember “a dream”, no matter how bizarre or tenuous the connection between images seems to the waking mind. So, we do not necessarily impose narrative structure on the dream, since we are as capable of reporting a dream with narrative form as without (p. 135).

Hunt offers a possible way out of this rather pessimistic consensus: “What might we learn,” he asks, “by considering more directly the ways that dreams fall short—or better yet, *just* fall short—of being literary?” (1991, p. 237). We can follow this line of thought, and rather than ask: “Are dreams narrative structures?” we can consider the question: “When dreams cannot be deemed narrative structures, what narrative features do they exhibit or fail to exhibit?” We could classify individual dreams according to their specific narrative features and look for patterns (for example, Coriola, 2008). Another approach would be to consider categories of dreams and ask whether a particular type of dream consistently showed, or lacked, certain narrative features. Following the logic of the second approach, this paper suggests that the *nightmare* is a type of dream possessing a clear narrative “signature” and that many nightmare studies can be seen as utilizing an implicit narrative framework.

Why the Nightmare?

There are several reasons for initially restricting our inquiry to nightmares. The studies already cited suggest that not all dreams can be understood from a narrative perspective. The narrative perspective does, however, appear to apply especially clearly to nightmares, and this establishes a link between narrative and dreams. Taking a narrative approach to dreams will be more than justified if we can demonstrate its efficacy with respect to nightmares.

The nightmare has the advantage that it has been heavily scrutinized because it is patently a problem requiring resolution: “Nightmares stand out among all other dream experiences in demanding conscious attention” (Bulkeley, 2000, p. 55). We may have dreams, but we suffer from nightmares. When a nightmare recurs, we have an incentive to change it.

The recurring nightmare also has the distinction of being relatively well defined: what is and is not a nightmare is reasonably clear to both the dreamer and the researcher. Thus the claim that an intervention relieves entrenched nightmares – whether of PTSD or other origin – can be judged reliably. If the nightmares continue, the intervention failed; if they diminish in frequency or intensity or even disappear, then, given rigorous methodology, that benefit can be attributed to the intervention.

What is a nightmare?

In 1984, Ernest Hartmann considered the generally accepted definition of the nightmare (after distinguishing it from night terrors) to be: “waking up from sleep terrified (without an external cause) or something from inside that awakens a person with a scared feeling” (p. 10). More recently, some researchers have explored the role of awakening (for example, Blagrove & Hayward, 2006) and others have suggested that fear might not be the only primary emotion in nightmares (Zadra, Pilon & Donderi, 2006). Zadra and his colleagues have proposed that nightmares are “very disturbing dreams that awaken the sleeper” (p. 250) in contrast to “bad” dreams which do not awaken the sleeper. From a narrative perspective, the critical issue is that the nightmare stops at a moment of extreme distress. Additionally, because we are considering nightmares in the context of narrative, it is worth noting that nightmares usually describe an event or series of events. They entail the passage of time, and in that respect, they are story-like rather than purely image-like (see sidebar). For Domhoff, dreams have “an elaborate story line” (2011, p. 60). Spoomaker, Schredl and van den Bout note that compared with night terrors, nightmares have a “complicated plot” (2006, p. 20) and, in a proposed cognitive model of recurrent nightmares, Spoomaker has shown how nightmares can be considered as scripted sequences of events (2008, p. 16).

Narrative Considerations

Aristotle's *Poetics* (1967/ca., 350 BCE) continues to be one of the defining works on narrative. Aristotle's definition includes dividing plot (see sidebar) into three phases: beginning, middle, and end. Dreams rarely fulfill this condition.

Using a similar tripartite structure, Todorov (1986) conceptualized plot around the issue of equilibrium. He proposed that a plot begins in a state of equilibrium. Something then occurs to disrupt that balance, and events finally reach a resolution in which a new equilibrium is established. Even if a dream commences in a state of equilibrium, it commonly ends without any sense of restored equilibrium. The nightmare never ends in a state of equilibrium.

Freytag (Jahn, 2007/ca., 1863) extended Aristotle's system to propose a five-part analysis that specifically incorporates the climax. His five parts are: (1) exposition—the inciting incident, (2) rising action, (3) climax—the turning point, (4) falling action, and (5) dénouement or catastrophe—resolution. The plot reaches its point of maximum tension at the climax. From there, the falling action takes us to the resolution of the tension. Prince defines the climax as “The point of greatest tension; the culminating point in a progression of intensification. In traditional Plot structure, the climax constitutes the highest point of the rising action” (1989, p. 14). The salient feature of a nightmare is that it stops when affect is at an extreme, at the point comparable to a climax. Because it stops at this moment, there is no falling action or resolution; there is no Aristotelian ending.

Anatomy of a horror story.

If the nightmare is a consistent narrative fragment then many novels and films should contain a quasi-nightmare within their plot. The horror genre stands out as offering innumerable examples. Most horror stories, if they were stopped at the climax, would correspond to a nightmare. To illustrate this, consider Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974). At the story's climax, an awkward, naive, and unpopular girl has been voted the school's prom queen. She has just been crowned, and the audience is clapping. The reader, or viewer of the movie, knows that the election is a setup maliciously engineered by some of Carrie's fellow students. Two students have placed a bucket of pig's blood in the rafters above the stage. As the audience claps, the bucket is turned over, and Carrie is drenched with blood. The clapping stops and Carrie suffers the humiliation of the entire gym full of people laughing at her. That is a nightmare situation: the negative extreme of tension. King takes us into this humiliation and then leads us through it. Out of—and because of—this moment, Carrie summons up her nascent telekinetic powers. The doors lock, pandemonium breaks out, and Carrie wreaks a murderous revenge.

If we consider the narrative of *Carrie* up to the climax, it resembles a teenager's dream in which the dreamer experiences the pleasure of being chosen as prom queen only to be humiliated in front of the whole school, and then to awaken terrified by the experience. That is the nightmare within the narrative, the nightmare which occurs

when the dream “story” stops abruptly at a moment of great tension and misfortune. While horror is not the only narrative genre that contains a nightmare, many horror stories do show this correspondence.

Types of climaxes.

The nightmare climax is not like *any* climax. It dominates the dream “story”. A nightmare-type climax typically involves a moment of considerable danger and the risks of shame and humiliation to the dreamer. It is often action-oriented and lacking in any subtlety.

In narrative, not all plots require a climax and not all climaxes have an extreme, nightmarish quality. The film *Julie and Julia* reaches its satisfactory end without any apparent climax. The climax of Polanski’s *Chinatown* or of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* is not comparable to a nightmare in the way that *Carrie* is. A climax of our type is common in thrillers, ghost stories, detective stories, films noirs, and suspense stories. Most Hitchcock movies contain a nightmare-like climax.

This correspondence also works, with some qualifications, in the other direction. We can create a story from a nightmare: Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, both horror stories, are amongst the best known examples. I will argue that successful nightmare work can be seen as the process of transforming the disturbing story into one more acceptable to the dreamer. When we examine the way

nightmares are currently analyzed we will find that the nightmare is implicitly treated as a narrative.

Nightmare Studies

The nightmare comes under professional scrutiny when it becomes a problem for the dreamer. Clearly, nightmares are not necessarily problematic. If the dreamer can take the nightmare as a communication about waking life or convert it into something of benefit, it needs no further dream analysis. After her Frankenstein dream, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote, "Swift as light and cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. 'I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others, and I need only describe the specter which had haunted my midnight pillow'" (Barrett, 2001, p. 41). However, when a nightmare recurs and interferes with sleep, or excessively occupies waking thoughts with a frequently attendant sense of guilt or shame (Lansky & Bley, 1995), it attracts the attention of researchers and therapists. Many studies, though not all, are about the treatment of trauma.

I will examine two types of nightmare studies: (1) those which might be termed *naturalistic*, in which the nightmare is primarily observed; and (2) *interventions*, in which the intent is specifically to affect the participant's dream life. In both types of studies, there are three discernible trends connecting narrative to nightmare resolution.

Naturalistic studies.

Nightmares that begin after a traumatic experience are of considerable interest to dream researchers, because there is an identifiable start to the nightmares, and also to many therapists, for whom the post-traumatic dreams are part of the treatment. There is a somewhat typical process, irrespective of the particular trauma, that Barrett describes as:

A pattern of post-traumatic nightmares in which the initial dreams are fairly close to a literal reenactment of the trauma.... Then, as time passes, and especially for those whose PTSD is gradually improving, the dream content begins to make the trauma more symbolic and to interweave it with concerns from the dreamer's daily life (1996, p. 3).

The goal of this work is to treat the waking client. Successive dreams can identify waking issues and can be tracked as a means of measuring progress: the dream functions as a "barometer" (Schiraldi, 2000, p. 222). When the nightmare diminishes, three trends emerge that can be seen in narrative terms:

1. References to the presenting trauma tend to transition from literal to indirect.
2. The intensity of the stressful moment tends to diminish.
3. The dream "ego" tends to become more active.

Observers of nightmares are acutely aware of how closely subsequent dreams address the precipitating event. Wilmer (1996) identifies three categories in the nightmares of Vietnam veterans. Category I is the “terrifying nightmare of the actual event” (p. 88). Category II contains “plausible war sequences”. In Category III, a reference to the war is present, but the “story could not have occurred in outer reality”. These categories vary in the extent to which the dream focus has shifted away from the event: from actual to plausible to impossible. A dream that is less directly connected to the waking life event is preferable. Siegel points out that “Nightmares that are like graphic memories of the trauma gradually fade, giving way to dreams less focused on the trauma and more mixed with other concerns” (1996, p. 176).

In narrative there is a somewhat comparable differentiation. For Aristotle it is between history and poetry: “the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that can happen” (1967, p. 32). Ricœur makes a distinction between the way narrative is used in history and in fiction, which Hunt describes as:

In history we go in search of the background context against which later events can be evaluated and placed in a narrative form. In fiction on the other hand, we remain within events and their setting, seeking ways to bring out their immediate aesthetic and dramatic power (1991, p. 240).

The nightmare is fairly intractable when it is seen by the dreamer as biographical, i.e. historical, fact. When it can be seen instead as a story – capable of many variations – the dreamer can begin to imagine alternatives to the actuality of the dream.

The second trend is a diminishing of the dream's climactic intensity. Many dream sequences are assessed according to the extent to which the dream reduces the drama of the climax. For instance, Siegel comments of a client, "Catherine continued to have Tidal Wave nightmares, but they became less frequent and less overwhelming" (2002, p. 156). Consider a nightmare sufferer similar to "Catherine" who subsequently dreamed she was having difficulty mopping up a puddle of water. What had been an extraordinary and overwhelming encounter with water is now a problem within her everyday capabilities. In that case we might say that she has resolved her tidal wave nightmare.

The third trend is for the role of the dreamer to change. After having been helpless, passive, and a victim, the dreamer becomes masterful, proactive, and self-assertive. The dreamer's successful negotiation of the climax is generally referred to as *mastery*. As Siegel notes: "A series of dreams often shows a progression toward mastery as a trauma is resolved" (1996, p. 176). An inevitable consequence of mastery is that the dream is no longer a nightmare.

Mastery is seen by observers as the most reliable sign of relief from the nightmare. A dream in which the dream ego takes a more active role is seen as a direct

measure of progress. Wilmer notes of a Vietnam veteran's dream that "Jim was the hero rescuing the wounded healer" and compares this favorably to his recurring dream: "A far cry from the nightly ambush" (1996, p. 93). Nader says of her adolescent client:

As her ego strength was restored, she began to focus her rage toward the rapist. She dreamed that she took a spear and with purposeful intent penetrated and repenetrated his chest cavity, twisting her weapon. She woke up "feeling good" (1996, p. 23).

Even though the threat is unchanged, this is no longer a nightmare.

The methods used in nightmare work tend to identify processes such as mastery and continuing the dream. They take for granted what is to be mastered, why the dream needs continuation, and so forth. But when we consider the object of these processes, everything hinges on the dreamer's relationship to the climax. The ability to move past the climax into the falling part of the action is lacking, and that is what is addressed in nightmare work.

Nightmare Interventions.

Intervention studies differ from naturalistic studies in that (1) the focus is primarily on dreams and sleep, (2) the participant is given to expect that the nightmare will change, and (3) the participant imagines an alternative to the nightmare report.

Krakow's Imagery Rehearsal Technique (IRT) studies are a landmark in dream studies

(for example: Kellner, Neidhardt, Krakow, & Pathak, 1992; Krakow, Hollifield, Johnston, Koss, Schrader, Warner, & Prince, 2001; Germain, Krakow, Faucher, Zadra, Nielsen, Hollifield, Warner, & Koss, 2004). With their rigorous protocols, large population of chronic nightmare sufferers, and significant outcomes, IRT studies have been accepted as demonstrations that nightmare interventions can be effective. Wittman, Schredl, and Kramer, in a review of dreaming in post-traumatic stress disorder, remark that “Imagery Rehearsal Therapy has repeatedly been proven to be a valuable tool in treating patients suffering from posttraumatic dream disturbance” (2007, p. 25).

IRT treatment, as described in Krakow et al. 2001, consists of three group sessions. At the first session, participants are presented with various cognitive-behavioral considerations of their nightmares. Participants are informed that “nightmares can be changed into positive new imagery” (p. 539) and at the end of the session, they practice “pleasant imagery exercises” (p. 539). At the second session, participants learn how to use IRT on a single, self-selected nightmare. They are asked to choose a nightmare that “does not seem like a ‘replay’ or ‘reenactment’ of a trauma” (p. 539), to “change the nightmare anyway you wish” (p. 539), and to write down the changed dream (known in IRT as the “new dream”). Three weeks later the group meets for a one-hour review of the treatment.

The instruction not to replay the trauma parallels the view that progress occurs when the dreams become symbolic. The dreamer is being expressly guided away from literal reenactment.

IRT addresses the issue of the intensity of the nightmare in its instructions: participants are told that nightmares may be a natural occurrence after trauma and that, for most people, they “gradually change into dreams that become increasingly less disturbing” (Krakow & Zadra, 2006, p. 62). This degree of “disturbance” is essentially the same as the intensity of the nightmare’s climax. Indeed, participants taking the Disturbing Dreams and Nightmare Severity Index (DDNSI) are specifically asked to estimate the intensity of the actual nightmare (Krakow, 2006, p. 1314). Strategically IRT focuses on “acknowledging the unpleasant image and choosing to move on to a new, preferably more pleasant or neutral image” (p. 55). Participants are provided with behavioral tips on how to “overcome” (p. 55) or to “manage” (p. 56) unpleasant images.

The process of reducing the intensity of the climax manifests in the new dreams of participants. Germain et al., in an analysis of IRT data, explain that not all new dreams were entirely pleasant. Participants continued to address their problems:

[New dreams] were not completely devoid of occurrences of negative elements measured by the H/V subscales, which suggests that participants might be changing their reactions to these negative elements in the early application of

IRT rather than removing all occurrences of negative elements from the [nightmare] scenarios” (2004, p. 202).

The notion of mastery takes on considerable importance. Krakow noted that “mastery was pivotal in the resolution of chronic nightmares” (2001, p. 538). Likewise, Germain et al. concluded that: “An increase in mastery over negative dream elements is a core process involved in [nightmare] reduction” (2004, p. 196).

While mastery is the most common term used to express this transition, amongst practitioners of nightmare intervention there is a constellation of concepts with an emphasis on ending and resolution that necessarily involve successful passage through the climax. For Marks, the approach was to create a “triumphal” ending (1978, p. 462); for Willner, “positive new endings” (2004, p. 459); for Wiseman, “finding solutions” (1989, p. 15); for Greenleaf, “complete the dramatic action” (2000, p. 5); for LaBerge, “redream the nightmare, seeking resolution” (2009, p. 59); for Pantley, “a resolution or a happy ending” (2005, p. 208); and for Bishay, “a masterful ending” (1985, p. 67). Cartwright stresses that, when the nightmare recurs, it is the lack of an ending that is responsible (2008, p. 162).

Turning Dreams into Stories

Even if the theoretical connections between dreams and narrative are elusive, we can, nevertheless, transpose a dream into a story format very naturally. The simplest

transposition involves asking the dreamer to consider the dream as a story. We can then ask the dreamer to “change” the dream-story. Nothing further is needed. Most dreamers understand this suggestion without any explanation of theory or structure and proceed. (A nightmare sufferer being unable to see the dream as a story strongly suggests that the nightmare will not change.)

We can ask “If they were making a movie of your dream, who would play you?” The question adds another layer to the narrative approach because it proposes to the dreamer that they see themselves as having a central role in the dream – whether or not this was so in the dream report. Again, film is such a universal medium that no further explanation is required. Having established the dreamer as an important figure in his or her own dream, we can then explore the narrative in a variety of ways. We can consider genre: “What kind of movie is this – a romance, a mystery, a thriller...?” We can explore back stories – the imagined histories and motivations of the various characters in the dream: “Tell the dream as though the dreamer’s friend had the dream.” We can cast the characters appearing in the dream: “Who would play the dreamer’s lover?” As we examine the plot structure we can often see a key turning point where the dream becomes a nightmare and the outcome for the dreamer is definitively worse. We can ask the dreamer what could happen differently in the film, thereby averting the climax entirely. We can also ask the often key question for a nightmare: “What happens next?”

In the course of this inquiry, the dreamer will encounter circumstances within the dream logic that identify preferable outcomes. For example, in choosing an actor to play the dreamer, the dreamer typically has several instances of mastery suggested by the various roles that actor has played. Since a film with a major star is unlikely to end where the nightmare halts, the imagined film is almost bound to describe a variation on the nightmare. In the case of the nightmare the retelling, whether as story or movie, almost inevitably produces a mastery of the situation which will tend to affect the next dream.

Nightmares and Novels.

If we return to *Carrie*, we can now consider the novel writing process from the point of view of dream analysis. If the novel were based on an actual incident, we could imagine the author starting with a description of that incident but needing to move from fact into fiction. If, at the scene of Carrie covered in blood, the author was continually rewriting the climax but unable to decide what happens next, it would be the equivalent of a recurring nightmare. From the dream perspective we want to know how Carrie can master her situation. In contrast, the task of the novelist is simply to produce a novel: there is no restriction on the intensity of the climax or its resolution. Stephen King devised an extreme climax and a correspondingly extreme resolution that gives Carrie a certain kind of mastery of her situation. The goal of nightmare intervention is to produce a preferred experience for the dream ego: it is eventually to nullify the drama of the nightmare. As a nightmare intervention, we might prefer a far

milder rewrite: suppose our teenager misses the prom because she stays home to nurse a stray cat she found covered in blood. That is arguably preferable to Carrie's telekinetic revenge. It would be a much duller story but mastery would be gained at a lower cost to the dreamer. Either version is a breakthrough, however. Both are radically superior to the writer's block of a nightmare which continually halts at the humiliation of the dreamer. Both rewrites successfully avoid the implied ending of the nightmare.

Conclusions

The use of narrative to analyze dreams is more than just an alternative terminology. Narrative better captures an overall sense of the project of nightmare resolution than do the more specific goals of mastery, resolution, and other current dream terms. The issues required to achieve mastery of the nightmare are directly addressed and thus a narrative analysis allows the dream worker to assist the dreamer in making changes to the dream. Narrative offers a method of qualitative analysis to dream work, particularly because it can be applied to small numbers of dreams.

Our role model for this kind of analysis is neither the Freudian nor the Jungian analyst. We are in the realm of the script doctor (Script doctor, 2011, Towne, 2011) — someone who takes an existing script and improves it:

A script doctor is a writer called in to revise part or all of a script written by others. His or her job is to tinker with the patient in the hope of effecting a cure. A script may pass through the hands of many writers before it is ready to be produced, and even the revised final is likely to be modified by the director and actors while the picture is being shot. The editor, too, may affect the “script” by deleting a line or a speech that turned out not to play well, and the decisions that follow previews may entirely change the outcome of a story (Kawin, p. 310).

Rather than seeing the dream as a passive fact, the dreamer can intervene and imagine alternatives with preferred outcomes. Because the typical story goes beyond the narrative climax, it completes what was incomplete in the nightmare. The success or failure of the protagonist is explicated in a way that is barely implied in the nightmare itself. If we studied those stories in which a nightmare is embedded, we might glean considerable insight into the resolution of nightmares. When Mary Shelley rewrote her dream, although still a horror story, Frankenstein’s monster became self-aware—a device unlikely to occur in a nightmare and one that gives us an element of empathy with the monster.

In the course of a nightmare we experience a powerfully detrimental story about our self. We are defined, as it were, as bad, stupid, or unlucky and our dream self is found so lacking that our waking self’s self-respect and social standing are seemingly forever damaged. The ending that does not occur, which is only implied, is therefore

“undreamable”, and therefore dreadful. It leaves us without recourse and inhibits our good judgment. By creating variations on that story, we undermine the certainty of the implicit ending. Eventually we can see our self from a less debilitating perspective.

How nightmare analysis is carried out in practice will vary in many ways, and can utilize any number of non-narrative modalities. For example, for quite different reasons, both Hartmann (2011) and Hillman (1975) analyze the nightmare in terms of the image and IRT incorporates both “Imagery” and “Rehearsal” in its name.

Nevertheless, there is always an implicit narrative goal: to rewrite a dramatically negative situation into one that is better for the dreamer. If we consider the dream from the perspective of a narratologist, we will have a wide range of tools with which to work. There already exists a rich body of knowledge from both academic studies and popular script writing studies that can be adapted to dream work. In addition to the narratology classics, we might look for support to Chatman’s use of events and existents (1978), Herman’s concept of storyworld (2007), plot point (Field, 1984), the ideas of story arc (Lunenfeld, 2007, p. 564), genre (Todorov, 1975), action theory (Herman, 2007, p. 2), and other concepts that might be applied to the theory and practice of dream work.

The nightmare is not the only dream category that stands out for its narrative signature. Recurring dreams may well be stopping at a particular plot-point. Initial dreams in therapy might be perceived in a new light if they were viewed as the opening

statement of a story arc that will unfold in subsequent dreams (Jenkins, 2001, Chapter 3). Dreams that reach a narrative resolution might well be the conclusion of a dream series, and perhaps also provide some indication of completion in the dreamer's waking life (Jenkins, 2011). In practice, the techniques used with nightmares can be applied to any dream with a narrative implication in order to explore that narrative. Succeeding dreams in that dream series can then be fruitfully considered in the light of that implied narrative (Jenkins, 2005).

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The Nightmare and the Narrative Sidebar²

David Jenkins, Ph.D.

Notes on Narrative for Dream Students

There are three concepts, narrative, plot and story, that are used in this study that are important to distinguish:

1. "Narrative" in its very broadest sense refers to anything that can be narrated, whatever its structure.
2. "Plot" refers to the chronological sequence of events in a story.
3. "Story" is the sequence in which the plot is actually narrated.

We tell a story; a story has a plot. The plot of Cinderella might be told through various stories: it could start with the ball, with the wedding, or with Cinderella scrubbing floors. Any change from the chronological order of events inevitably distinguishes the story from the plot. The same story/plot could be told in different media: in a novel, a ballet, a film, or even in a dream report. In dreams, the story/plot distinction is particularly hard to notice; the two categories usually coincide since dreams are most commonly told in chronological order.

² This is a sidebar to The Nightmare and the Narrative

Even though the story/plot distinction is well-established conceptually, terminologies can change confusingly from author to author. What Aristotle's translator called a "plot", Todorov sometimes called a "narrative", and Chatman called a "story". In everyday speech we might call the same idea a "storyline". The term "narrative", as well as encompassing the entire field of studies, can also be used as a synonym for "story" or "plot".

The passage of time is a crucial constituent of narrative. An image is not a narrative. Dreams are rarely instant events that would not accommodate this criterion.

Stories are not generalizations; they are "what happened to particular people – and what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences" (Herman, 2009 p.3). A recipe is not a narrative, nor is a mathematical proof. Almost all dreams have this specificity.

European narrative studies have utilized both functional and structural analyses. In contrast, current American academic narratology is generally closer to cognitive studies.

Script writing, which can be seen as applied narratology, has received a great deal of attention in recent times. The script doctor, while often working incognito, plays an important role in polishing a script and is also claimed as a role model for dream analysis.

The debate about the relevance of narrative to dream theory has centered on the issue of whether there can be dreams that fit the narrative understanding of a plot with beginning, middle, and end. Instead, dreams are often fragments lacking this basic minimum. Having said that, an individual dream and especially a series of dreams will often seem story-like: for instance, a dream in which a young woman has to work while her sisters go to a dance could be seen as a part of a Cinderella plot; in another dream she might find herself married to a prince or a movie star.

Inevitably, narrative theory is rich in complexities that are ignored or simplified in this exploratory discussion of dreams and narrative: “Despite its apparent simplicity of reference, *plot* is one of the most elusive terms in narrative theory” (Dannenberg, 2007). Kilroe (2000) provides an excellent introduction to narrative issues from a dream perspective. For a thumbnail sketch of narrative, see Herman (2009).