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## The Traumatic Element in the Typical Dream of Feeling Embarrassed at Being Naked

Wayne A. Myers, M.D. 

### ABSTRACT

Material is presented from three cases, where analysis of repetitive dreams of feeling embarrassment at being partially or totally naked was an important feature of the treatment. The indifference by the other people in the dream to the dreamer's nakedness was initially linked to perceived transference slights at the hands of the analyst, and later to repeated episodes of actually being treated indifferently at the hands of the parents. This indifference was related to latency or adolescent attempts by the patients to gain love or attention from the parents by exhibitionistic means.

The stereotypical presentation of the manifest content of these dreams is seen as evidence for their underlying traumatic roots. Such dreams are likened to the typical examination dreams described by Freud, which have also been noted by others to have traumatic roots. This finding is consistent with my own work with certain repetitive manifest dream configurations and with Freud's (1920) reevaluation of his theory of dreams in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, wherein he noted that dreams of patients suffering from traumatic neurosis often manifestly repeated the traumatic situation in an attempt to master it retrospectively.

FREUD (1900) DESIGNATED INFANTILE WISHES AS the agents responsible for the formation of dreams. He later (1920) modified this viewpoint. His revision of his earlier theory was based on the observation that the dreams of patients suffering from traumatic neuroses often manifestly repeated the traumatic situations, rather than simply serving as vehicles for the gratification of infantile wishes. Freud then postulated that these stereotypical repetitive dreams were produced by the

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Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Cornell University Medical Center, Training and Supervising Analyst, Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, New York.  
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dreamer in an unconscious attempt to retrospectively master the overwhelming affects associated with the trauma.

My own work with patients reporting certain repetitive manifest dream configurations (Myers, 1973), (1977), (1980), (1983), (1984), (1987) has led to the uncovering of chronic strain traumata in their past histories. This finding is in keeping with the modification of Freud's (1920) theory of dreams.

In this paper, data will be presented from the case histories of three patients who frequently reported another repetitive manifest dream configuration, that of feeling embarrassed at being naked. In the clinical material to follow, traumatic elements will be described in the past history of each patient which contributed to the formation of these dreams.

Turning to the psychoanalytic literature in this area, we find that the typical dream of feeling embarrassment at being completely or partially naked was first described by Freud in 1900. To the infantile exhibitionistic meaning ascribed to the dream by Freud, others have offered additional explanations for the appearance of this dream.

Fromm (1951), for example, suggested that being naked may be a reflection of the wish to be one's natural

self, and the embarrassment may be a function of the disapproval of this wish. Gutheil (1959) found guilt and inferiority feelings at the basis of the formation of the dream. Saul (1958), (1966) added the notion that the affect of embarrassment present in the dream need not inevitably be the ego's response to the dream image. Rather, it may actually represent the motivating force responsible for the formation of the dream itself, as when the dreamer's ego defends against the embarrassment aroused by the need to make some painful revelation to the analyst. By virtue of the dream work, as Freud (1900, p. 460) has noted, "... *the ideational material has undergone displacements and substitutions, whereas the affects have remained unaltered.*"

In the most typical form of the dream, the dreamer is naked in the midst of a social gathering, but no one pays attention to him. Saul (1966) notes that, in the dream, the embarrassing

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revelation to the analyst is not what is revealed; rather, it is the patient's nakedness. In the dream, it is not the dreamer who disregards the embarrassing revelation, but the onlookers. Saul notes that it is the dreamer's wish that the analyst, too, will disregard the painful material, inasmuch as the onlookers portrayed in the dream are seen by him as representations of the analyst. I have found, in addition, that for patients who frequently have this type of dream, the indifference of the onlookers is a traumatic repetition of a painful early experience. To wit, no matter how much they attempted to attract the attention and love of their parents with some form of exhibitionistic behavior (either positive or negative), their efforts were not crowned with success. The end result was always the same: they remained unnoticed. This indifference of the early parental love objects to the patients' machinations, or even to their very lives as such, led to intense feelings of rejection and of damage to their self-esteem, which are continuously replayed in dreams such as these. The stereotypical presentation of the manifest dreams in such individuals is typical of traumatic dreams in general.

## Clinical Material

### Case 1

The patient was a twenty-seven-year-old single woman, who entered analysis because she recognized she had continuously chosen to be involved with men who mistreated her. As the treatment progressed, we discovered that the men selected were essentially cut from the same cloth. Specifically, they were in a position of authority over her in her job, were inevitably married, and were invariably indifferent to her emotional needs. Their indifference was particularly evident on weekends and holidays, when they left her to her own devices without a thought about the effects of their abandonment on her well-being. Needless to say, similar feelings were soon verbalized

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toward me, in the transference, with respect to my holiday and weekend departures.

The feelings of abandonment she expressed with respect to my perceived indifference, were particularly evident in her associations to a series of repetitive dreams of being inadequately clothed in a roomful of people. I should note here that she had had such dreams throughout most of her life, in an essentially unmodified form. The first few times she had the dream during the analysis, it followed the prototypical form it had always taken in the past. The following example occurred during the second year of the analysis, shortly before I was to leave for spring vacation.

*I was in a room with a large group of elegantly clad people. Suddenly I realized that I was not completely dressed. I felt acutely embarrassed, though no one seemed to notice it at all.*

She associated minimally; hence I began to question her about various elements in the manifest content of the dream. In response to my query about the elegantly clad people, she spoke of a charity ball her employer was going to that weekend. If only he would ever think of taking her, rather than his wife, to such a gathering! That seemed to be out of the question. Anyway, that was why she was seeing me, because of her propensity for selecting men who were indifferent to her.

I then asked her whether she thought that the timing of the dream might have anything to do with my forthcoming vacation. She was silent for a moment and then replied: "It hurts me a great deal when you leave me alone as you do. You're just like everyone else in my life. Your needs come first. Mine don't count at all."

The rest of the session was essentially unproductive. My attempt to delineate the exact manner in which she had been incompletely clad in the dream elicited no further information. All that seemed clear was the feeling that I had hurt her by my presumed "indifference" to her needs and wishes. She had revealed

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her desires for love and attention to me in the dream, and I had responded no differently than her lovers.

This tone, of my having wounded her in her self-esteem, was the predominant one in the transference for the first few years of the analysis. As noted above, this was particularly apparent in periods of separation from me on weekends and holidays. During this period, the embarrassment dreams of being naked essentially followed the form of the one detailed above.

As we began to unearth more historical material about the indifference of her father to her emergence as a sexually attractive woman during her adolescence, the dream underwent a transformation and appeared in slightly altered form. The example that follows was presented during the third year of the treatment.

*I was in a classroom at college. The professor asked a question of the group, and I stood up to answer it, only to discover to my embarrassment that I was naked from the waist up. Neither the professor nor the rest of the class seemed to notice, however, as someone else had gotten up to answer the question at the same time.*

The patient initially connected the professor in the dream to both me and the latest of her indifferent lovers. When I asked about the specific feature in this version of the dream of her being naked from the waist up, she was embarrassed for a few moments. She then spoke of having frequently wanted me to notice her ample breasts. As she said this, she began to cry. When she stopped crying, she noted that she had often paraded around in her bra as a teenager in order to attract her father's attention. He had rarely, however, looked up from his newspaper or from whatever else he was doing. "He must have been the prototype for the indifferent man in my life," she commented. "No matter what I did or how seductively I behaved in front of him, it never got me anywhere. He was completely blind to my existence."

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A number of dreams similar to the one just mentioned appeared in the next few months, as we began to work through the material about the father's rejection of her reawakened oedipal desires during her adolescence.

In the fifth year of the treatment, a third and final version of the dream was presented. This form of the dream appeared in the setting of our discussion of the patient's lifelong relationship with her exceptionally narcissistic mother.

*I'm in a room with a bunch of well-dressed people. Then I realize that I have nothing on at all, and I feel terribly embarrassed. I have the feeling that I'm both an adult and a small child at the same time in the dream. Regardless of what age I am, though, no one seems to notice me at all.*

In response to the dream element of being both an adult and a small child, the patient associated to her mother's lifelong indifference and lack of attunement to her emotional needs. The mother was the paradigm of the elegantly clad adult (seen in both the initial and the final versions of the dream), rushing out to the theater or to dinner with the distant father, and giving short shrift to her child's wishes for love and nurturing.

In her choice of indifferent lovers, the patient had thus lived out the repetitive rejections at the hands of both of her parents. Even though she got her father-lovers to notice her, the ultimate denouement of her oedipal enactments was essentially the same. They were in the main indifferent to her needs.

The fundamental trauma to her self-esteem, which had been repeated throughout her life, was thus recapitulated in the embarrassment dreams. Although the dreams had long antedated the analysis in their onset, they quickly incorporated the feelings of abandonment at the analyst's hands in the transference. The slight variations in the dream, however, enabled us to unearth important historical material about the earlier feelings of abandonment and rejection at the hands of both parents.

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## Case 2

The patient was a thirty-seven-year-old academic, who came into treatment after he was passed over for a tenured position at his university. On the surface, he seemed shy, bookish, retiring—just the type of person who might be overlooked in a large gathering. It was hardly surprising, then, when he reported repetitive manifest dreams of being unnoticed when he was partially clad in a social setting. The first example of such a dream was from the third month of the treatment, when he was passed over for an excellent academic position at another school.

*I went to the library at the University in order to return a book. When I reached down to find the book in my briefcase, I not only discovered that it was missing, but that I was not wearing any pants as well. I felt terribly embarrassed by this, but no one seemed to be paying any attention at all.*

His thoughts about the dream were fairly concrete and dealt with an instance in the past when he had been unable to find a book he had borrowed from the University library. He offered no thoughts in particular about the missing pants, but did relate the sense of embarrassment in the dream to his difficulty in revealing to me that he had been passed over for the new job. He explained that it was hard to tell me this fact, inasmuch as he wanted me to admire him and he felt that this would not be easy for me to do, if I thought of him as a failure.

In the next two years of the therapy, the patient dreamt this version of the dream on three other occasions. In the manifest content of the dream, he was either returning a book or some papers to a colleague in the colleague's class when he discovered that the book or papers were missing, as was an item of his clothing. On these three latter occasions as well, no one noticed his partial nakedness, despite his acute sense of embarrassment.

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Midway through the third year of the treatment, in the setting of the patient's feeling rejected by me when he received a rather prestigious academic award for which I did not congratulate him, he told me of borrowing a magazine from my waiting room without asking my permission to do so. Following this revelation, he had another version of the dream.

*I was in grade school, sitting outside of the principal's office. There were a group of us waiting to be punished for some sort of disciplinary infractions. Then the principal stuck his head outside of the office and I got up and noticed that I didn't have my pants on. I felt mortified by this, particularly in view of the seriousness of the situation, but he didn't even seem to notice that I was there.*

In relating his thoughts and feelings about the dream, the patient connected the school principal with both me and the head of the department at the university where he was now teaching. He had the feeling that he was invisible to the two of us much of the time and that neither of us really knew or cared whether he existed, even if he went to considerable lengths to announce his presence to us, as in borrowing the magazine from my waiting room.

When I inquired about the infraction that he was to be punished for in the dream, he became pensive for some moments. "I stole something once in school," he finally replied. "I took a book in order to give it to my father. I think I was in fifth grade. It was about sports, something he was very much interested in. But when I brought it home for him, he just looked inside of the cover and saw the library plate on it and never even opened it up to look at it. It was like getting caught with my pants down, only he didn't seem to care. No wonder the two things are linked together in my dreams."

In the days and weeks to come, the patient began to work through some of the themes which arose in connection with the dream. In particular, he began to see that the feelings of embarrassment and shame in the dream were not only linked to

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his having been apprehended for stealing, but also were connected to his having revealed his failure to me in the childhood attempt to get his indifferent father to love and admire him.

In the actual childhood scene, the father had not even taken the trouble to punish him for his stealing. This traumatic indifference to his need to be loved and admired by his father (or even to be punished by him) was repeated in the dream by the principal's failure to notice his lack of proper attire. Subsequent reconstructions lent

credence to the patient's feelings that he probably had been dealt with indifferently by his parents in response to his episodes of early childhood exhibitionism of his genitals.

### Case 3

The final examples of the manifest dreams of nakedness to be presented are from the case of a twenty-eight-year-old male professional. His presenting complaint was feeling alienated by his peer group at work and by the women he dated. On the infrequent occasions, when he tried to call attention to himself in a public forum through some misplaced protest or other seemingly outrageous action, no one seemed to notice it, as if there had been some sinister conspiracy hatched among his peers to treat his actions with indifference.

Early in his analysis, he presented several dreams of embarrassment at being partially dressed. The format of the dreams had an almost monotonous regularity. An example from the sixth month of the treatment follows.

*I'm sitting at a conference with a group of people. I get up to say something and notice that the zipper on my trousers is open. I feel very embarrassed and hope that no one else has noticed, but they're not even aware that I'm standing up. They seem to be paying attention to someone else.*

In reflecting on the dream, the patient spoke of his long-standing

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feelings of anger at his father for never having been cognizant of his (the patient's) needs. He wondered if I were really tuned into his feelings, since I rarely gave him any feedback on what he spoke about. In addition, did I really care about him for his own sake, or was I only ministering to him in my role as a doctor? He offered no particular associations to the element in the dream of his fly being open. As the treatment progressed, and as he became more aware of how his intense oedipal sexual desire for his mother had interfered with his relationships with women, he had another of the embarrassment dreams, slightly modified from the earlier versions.

*I'm riding on a train with my mother and brothers. The two of them seem to be monopolizing the conversation, and I can barely get a word in edgewise. I stand up to say something and notice that the zipper on my fly is open and my shoelaces are untied. I feel very uncomfortable at the realization of my state of undress, but no one else seems to be aware of it.*

In relating his thoughts about the dream, the patient initially spoke of the embarrassment he was experiencing at having to expose his feelings of sexual desire for his mother again. He then related his expectation that I would be disgusted with him for these wishes and would punish or abandon him.

When I said nothing, he became angry with me for my apparent indifference. He had bared his soul to me and I did not give a damn. I just care more for my other patients than I do for him, just as his mother had always cared more for his brothers. No matter how much he exhibited his accomplishments to her, she was always indifferent to him as a human being.

Again, with this patient, there was an increasing feeling of conviction that he must have exhibited his genitals to the mother as a small child, to little overt response. He thus felt demeaned and rejected by her for his manliness, a feeling that was reinforced in his interactions with his father. The tone of indifference

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and rejection with the two of them was reenacted in the traumatic element of the embarrassment dreams of nakedness.

### Discussion

In the three cases presented in this paper, the dreams of feeling embarrassment at being partially or totally naked were repetitive in nature, in the manner of traumatic dreams. As the treatments evolved, the feeling of indifference by the other people in the dream to the dreamer's state of disarray was inevitably seen to be linked to perceived transference slights at the hands of the analyst.

Analysis of the genetic roots of the transference neurosis led to recollections or reconstructions of episodes of being treated indifferently at the hands of either one or both parents. The reconstructions gave rise to feelings of credence concerning the indifference on the part of the parents to the patients' exhibitions of their genitalia, as children. The instances of recall centered on memories of parental indifference to latency or adolescent attempts to gain love and attention from the parents through exhibitionistic means.

The traumatic element is of special interest in this category of dreams. Dreams such as this were described by Freud (1900) as typical dreams, because of the commonness and frequency of their occurrence, and the supposedly unvarying latent meaning underlying their manifest content. As will be noted below, however, the presence of repetitive manifest dream configurations clinically has frequently been found to be related to chronic strain traumata.

The linkage between another one of the typical dreams described by Freud (1900), the examination dream, and traumatic dreams has also been described in the past (Bonaparte, 1947); (Kafka, 1979); (McLaughlin, 1961); (Myers, 1983); (Renik, 1981); (Stewart, 1967); and (Ward, 1961).

In papers of my own (Myers, 1973), (1977), (1980), (1984), (1987), certain repetitive features in manifest dreams, such as

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splitting of the self-representations, prevalence of the colors black and white in the dreams of black patients, transformations of the male analyst into a female, and depictions of mourning and separation in the dreams of the elderly, were related to chronic strain traumata in the patients' earlier lives. Thus, when frequent instances of splitting of the dreamer's self-representation into observing and participating components in the manifest dream were investigated analytically, they were found to be related to repetitive childhood exposures to actual primal scene experiences (Myers, 1973).

Clinical investigations (Myers, 1977) also revealed a correlation between the increased incidence of the colors black and white in the ongoing manifest dream life of black patients (as compared with those of a white patient control group) and the traumatic impact of the color differences in the past histories of these black patients. The situation was similar for female patients who had frequent manifest dreams involving the transformation of the male analyst into a female (Myers, 1980). The substitution of the maternal figure for the paternal analyst seems to represent an unconscious attempt to undo painful narcissistic mortifications to the young girl's emerging sense of femininity and sexuality suffered at the father's hands during the oedipal years.

Finally, in work with older patients (Myers, 1984), (1987) I have observed a much higher incidence (as compared with a younger patient control group) of dreams in which the manifest content of the dream depicted either the death and mourning of, or the separation from a loved one. It is obvious that these mourning and separation dreams have multiple functions and meanings, which can only be fully understood by obtaining the patient's associations to them. The stereotypical quality of their manifest contents, however, is suggestive of the underlying traumatic basis of these dreams. In my experience, patients having such dreams seem to be belatedly attempting to master the traumatic intensity of the anxieties and depressive affects aroused by prior object losses. In addition, they appear to be

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prospectively attempting to master the traumatic intensity of the dysphoric affects associated with the inevitability of their own deaths.

As noted earlier, Freud (1920) revised his view that infantile wishes were the sole agents responsible for the formation of dreams. In suggesting that the stereotypical quality of the manifest dreams of patients suffering from traumatic neuroses represented an unconscious attempt to belatedly master the intense affects associated with the trauma, he observed that primary obeisance was being paid by the dreamer to the repetition compulsion rather than to the pleasure principle.

My own work with repetitive manifest dream configurations as well as with repetitive dreams of embarrassment when being seen partially or totally naked is in accord with these later views of Freud. In addition to the spur to the formation of such dreams lent by childhood exhibitionistic wishes and by current transference conflicts, there is an important contribution to the genesis of these dreams from the chronic strain traumata found in the patients' early life histories. To wit, the indifference of the onlookers in the dreams seems emblematic of the type of parental indifference and rejection to the patients' needs for love and affection throughout their lives. I believe the ongoing nature of this strain-type of trauma is responsible for the frequency of these dreams in my patients, and perhaps to a greater or lesser extent in all patients who have dreams of this type.

I suggest that it is possible that there is a historical traumatic underpinning to all stereotypical manifest dream configurations. Thus, further investigations into all of Freud's typical dream constellations would appear to

be fruitful lines of endeavor for the future.

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