

Lucid Dreaming and Plot Development

Clare Jay, PhD

Published in the winter 2005 edition of Dream Time, pp.12-15 & pp.34-35.

This paper considers the role of lucid dreaming in the development of fictional plots. The term 'lucid dreams' was coined in a paper entitled 'A Study of Dreams', given in 1913 by Dutch novelist and poet Frederik Van Eeden (1860-1932). Lucid dreams are dreams in which the dreamer is aware that s/he is dreaming. Other terms used in this paper can be defined as follows. 'Consciousness' is the state of mind in which we ordinarily find ourselves when fully awake; a state in which the level of rational thought is high and our imaginings are far less vivid than sensory perceptions. 'Dreaming consciousness' is a term used to depict the state of mind experienced in ordinary (non-lucid) dreaming, whereby a low level of rationalism is combined with a high ability to create images. 'The unconscious' represents that part of the mind which is normally inaccessible to the conscious mind, but which affects behaviour and emotions and which manifests in dreams and other states of consciousness. In lucid dreaming, consciousness is present in what is generally viewed as an unconscious realm, resulting in a state in which rational thought is present while imaging ability remains high. Parapsychologist and states of consciousness researcher Dr. Charles Tart explains that the lucid dreamer has "awakened in terms of mental functioning *within* the dream world..." (2000, p.54). 'Plot development' refers to the progressive linking of fictional scenes and images to compose a coherent sequence of events.

For my doctoral thesis, I am currently engaged in an exploration of the role of lucid dreaming in the creative process. Case studies of writers and artists who are familiar with the concept and practice of lucid dreaming have been asked to complete a research questionnaire, and their responses have generated original data which I am in the process of collating and investigating. Since the study is still in progress, the material and ideas outlined in this paper do not represent a concluded train of thought; rather the intention is to provide an overview of what is emerging from these case studies and from my own practice of drawing on lucid dreams in the process of writing a novel. In this paper I will limit myself to a discussion of one area only: lucid dreaming and plot development in fiction writing.

Firstly, it is pertinent to consider the nature of the link between dreaming and creativity. Sigmund Freud was interested in understanding creativity and the impact of artistic

works. His interest prompted an analysis of Shakespeare plays, Jensen's novella *Gradiva*, and Da Vinci's childhood memories and paintings (1969). Carl Jung also turned his attention to the source of creativity, stating: "Every creative man knows that spontaneity is the very essence of creative thought" (1993, p.196). As a state in which inhibitions fall aside, where actions have no visible repercussions upon waking life, and where thoughts metamorphose involuntarily into images, dreaming itself could be considered a form of spontaneity.

Arthur Koestler, novelist and essayist, writes: "Some writers identify the creative act in its entirety with the unearthing of hidden analogies." He then remarks upon "the dream's tendency towards creating unusual analogies. These may be verbal puns, or 'optic puns' or visual symbols..." (1975, pp.200-1). This tendency is supported by sleep laboratory studies carried out to compare the brain's associative abilities while awake and immediately after REM sleep. After a 1999 study, Harvard psychologist Stickgold commented on post REM associative abilities, "It's as if the brain is preferentially searching out and activating weak associates, unexpected paths, instead of the obvious, normally strong associates" (pp.181-192).

If the dreaming mind takes the less trodden path, it is bound to happen upon the unfamiliar. Ungoverned by the constraints of rational thought and convention, the unconscious does not hesitate to provide visual depictions of these unfamiliar concepts or ideas. Psychopathologist Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel writes: "The process of creation, including literary creation...(is) accompanied by the capacity to communicate with the most primitive layers of the unconscious" (Person et al, 1995, p.113). The connection between dreaming and creativity is a popular conception today, with dreams viewed as an artistic source, and there is a growing amount of literature on this subject (Epel 1994, Royle 1996, Mellick, 1996). However there is a marked absence of literature and research studies on the role of *lucid* dreaming in the creative process.

The line of reasoning that this paper follows is that the unconscious is recognised today as inherently creative, and that accessing it could therefore be said to enhance creativity. The question then raised is whether or not lucid dreaming constitutes a tool which can be used to draw upon the unconscious for creative inspiration. The element of conscious awareness in lucid dreams could engender a particular familiarity with the processes and material of the dreaming mind, which in turn could facilitate artistic endeavours such as creative writing.

It could be argued that writers get ideas not from their unconscious minds, but from anywhere and everywhere – their own experiences, other people's experiences. A writer

backpacking through India sees a ‘missing person’ poster flapping on the wall of a café and her brain whirs into gear, inventing, elaborating, pushing reality across the border into fiction. However, this process of concocting reasons and outcomes implicates a leap from the factual to the imaginary, and the imagination resides in the unconscious. The girl’s face staring from the poster could be considered the spark; the initial ‘idea-image’, but without the imaginary connections and further images which follow, the spark remains inert; it does not make the leap from image to story idea, from spark to flame. Thus the unconscious mind, with its facility for expansive, incautious associations, is a vital component of the creative process.

Most dreams depart from hypnagogic states in that they are not a random series of disassociated images, but hold a certain coherence and continuity which emerges in the form of a tellable tale; a story. D. Foulkes, author of *Children’s Dreams* (1982) observed that “the potential to narratize dreams is as surely wired into the human brain as is the potential to speak language” (p.276). In dreams, this storytelling style, where action follows action, often departs from the logic of waking life as capricious mental associations emerge in pictorial form in the mind’s eye. Nevertheless, even the strangest dreams often retain the characteristics of a narrative.

D. Barrett comments that “dreams do need arousal to have true narrative coherence, and dozing, hypnagogic dreams often do this best” (2001, p.64). Building on this statement, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the conscious or aroused nature of lucid dreams implies that they are endowed with greater narrative coherence than non-lucid dreams. This, combined with their intense visual realism (LaBerge, 1985; Green and McCreery, 1994) would appear to render lucid dreams an ideal forum in which to experiment with plot development. As John Locatelli, author of the novel *Lucid Dreams* (1997) says, “That extra ability to really be in the story gives the lucid dreamer a much richer experience to draw on” (Case study no.8: CS-8).

Carl Jung suggests that dreams are often reminiscent of drama, with characters and a plotline (1968, p.266). Given the wealth of possibilities open to a lucid dreamer, it is not unreasonable to suppose that an experienced lucid dreamer could shape and explore the unfolding fictions of her daytime writing while conscious in the dream state. The lucid dreamer could conjure up a dream theatre, summon her own fictional characters, and then watch them interact rather as a drama teacher might observe a group of students ad-libbing on stage. She could engage her characters in dialogue, or throw a question about plot into the dream environment and observe the response she gets. These experimental actions, whether performed from a standpoint of idle curiosity or prompted by the frustration of writer’s block,

are facilitated by the fact that the structural framework of dreams tends towards a narrative design.

In lucid dreams, we can consciously observe the way that thoughts and external sensory conditions - such as being too hot, or having an aching neck - are translated directly into images. In this way we are led to a greater understanding of our own thought processes. When these thought-images appear in the narrative form which is common to most dreams, we are effectively watching a film of our own minds. Watching this 'film' in action while asleep deepens our awareness of our creative thought processes and enables us to observe the connection of surprising imagery.

Russian Philosopher Piotr D. Ouspensky (1878-1947) observed the orchestration of his dreaming mind while lucid.

"I was fully conscious, I could see and understand how these dreams were created, what they were built from, what was their cause... Usually I gave only the first impetus, and after that the dreams developed as it were of their own accord, sometimes greatly astonishing me by the unexpected and strange turns they took." (1960, p.272)

The lucid observer could employ a similar tactic to experiment with plot possibilities, and perhaps gain additional insights into the process of cause and effect in narrative structure. Understanding the narrative attributes of dreams and exploring potential plot twists in a world where anything is possible promotes familiarity with the workings of the mind and gives free rein to the imagination.

Dreams in which the dreamer is on some level aware that they can modify the dream narrative while remaining caught up in the action of the dream are fairly common. Writer Robert Stone, winner of the 1974 National Book Award, remarks: "Sometimes it's almost as though I'm consciously working out a narrative in which I get off the hook... as if I'm controlling things in the dream" (Epel, 1994, p.259). If the dreamer raises the level of consciousness to one of a full lucid dreaming state in which the dream can be controlled if so desired, the scope for experimentation is raised too. Screenplay writer and film director Paul Schrader has lucid dreams in which he creates films:

"These dreams have characters, dialogue, plot development. I am also aware of the dreaming process; that is, I'll critique the 'dream story' as it occurs. I'll think, 'This is not a good scene,' 'I should drop this character,' or 'I need some action' - back up and 're-dream' the scene." (Barrett, 2001, p.34)

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94) reported a similar sense of conscious observation as scenes unfolded in his dreams. Before going to sleep, he geared his mind towards finding

sellable stories, and accredited his 'little people' with the plot ideas which then arose in his dreams. Speaking of himself, he writes, "for the most part, whether awake or asleep, he is simply occupied – he or his little people – in consciously making stories for the market" (1892, p.3). It is impossible to estimate how many writers and film-makers might make use of their lucid dreams to explore different story avenues. Is it a common phenomenon, or a rarity? Would more writers be encouraged to experiment with fictional plots in their lucid dreams if they knew that it was possible? I asked my case studies whether they had ever used lucid dreaming for purposes of plot development, and discovered that although they found it an intriguing possibility, the majority of them had never tried it before. Others told of the ways in which lucid dreaming had contributed to plot development after the lucid dream had taken place. Creative artist and fiction writer Brenda Giguere explained,

"...I have used lucid dreaming indirectly to advance plotlines. I have taken ideas, images, and elements that I've consciously appreciated while lucid dreaming and found them sufficiently intriguing, unusual, and useful to incorporate into a plotline. I've also come at it the other way, with a lucid dream experience initiating a new scenario or set of images for me to use in writing." (CS-1)

It is up for debate whether it is more useful to attempt to advance plotlines while lucid dreaming, or whether it is more productive to let the lucid dream develop as it will and then work on it afterwards, when awake. It is possible that a combination of the two approaches would be the most effective. Bouncing plot ideas off the dreaming mind in a lucid dream is likely to yield interesting, if somewhat erratic, responses. A subsequent consideration of these responses in a state of waking consciousness could temper the outlandish elements and tease out the kernel of the narrative, so providing us with material which can be converted into viable plot components. Yet another possibility is to return in sleep to the same lucid dream one had the previous night, and experiment with different outcomes by guiding the actions within the dream. Jorge Conesa Sevilla, visual artist, poet, and neurocognitive scientist observed that "during recurring lucid dreams, I have developed the dream scenery in a plot-like fashion" (CS-5).

Entering into dialogue with dream characters in a lucid dream could contribute to plot development by providing the writer with insights into character motivation or by supplying her with a representation of characters' physical appearance and speech patterns. However, dream characters are full of surprises and this isn't always as straightforward as it might seem. George Gillespie, poet and author of diverse articles on lucid dreaming, finds that: "Most of the time, when I talk to someone in a lucid dream, they just don't answer, although they

remain pleasant” (CS-6). Physician Dr. Harold von Moers-Messmer (1938) decided in advance of going to sleep that he would spur his dream characters into speech in a lucid dream:

“I gather up all my courage and say to a male personage who is just passing by, ‘You’re a monkey.’ I chose this particular phrase in order to provoke him into a harsh reply. He remains standing there and looks at me. It is so uncomfortable for me that I would have most liked to have apologised.” (pp.291-318)

The above citation demonstrates how dream characters can act so much like real people that they have the power to surprise or even embarrass the lucid dreamer. Moers-Messmer’s account demonstrates the element of unpredictability in lucid dreams: although the dreamer’s expectations almost certainly influence responses in dream characters and dream environment to an extent, lucid dreams often contain the random quirkiness common to non-lucid dreams. It is this random element that could yield interesting and unexpected results when dialoguing with characters within a lucid dream.

In my attempts to develop the plotline of my novel, *Breathing in Colour*, through character interaction while lucid dreaming, I tend to become distracted if my characters reveal something about themselves that I wasn’t aware of. In one lucid dream (16/01/05) I found the artist in my novel sitting on his own, sketching. We had a brief conversation, during which I realised two things. Firstly, that he resented me for the difficult situation in which I had placed my main character. When I reassured him that she would be fine, he replied, “What makes you so sure? You might be the author, but you’re not God.” The second realisation was that he was left-handed, whereas I had always imagined him as right-handed. This latter trifling detail disturbed me so much that I woke up. This short dream nonetheless did contribute slightly to the development of the plot, since the resentment of my character showed me how protective he already felt about the main character, thus adding a dimension to their developing relationship.

A question which requires consideration is whether or not interaction with dream characters while lucid in a dream can be of more creative value than thinking about them while in other states of consciousness. For writers to initiate dialogue with one of their fictional characters, even in the most lucid of lucid dreams, amounts to them talking to a vision produced by their dreaming minds, which in turn amounts to talking to an aspect of themselves. That the encounter takes place in a lucid dream could make it a more valuable and enlightening experience than simply holding an imaginary conversation with a fictional character while sitting fully awake on the sofa drinking tea, but it is very difficult to prove

this. Fiction devised or developed in lucid dreams might well result in disappointment when faced with the ‘reality test’ of waking standards of intelligibility. R. L. Stevenson remarked that often, upon waking from his story dreams, he would realise that they were nothing but a “tissue of absurdities” (1892, p.4). However, it must not be forgotten that many of Stevenson’s timeless stories *were* drawn directly from the narratives he observed in his dreams. Regardless of the origin of the ideas, it is always the task of the awake author to siphon out promising plot elements from implausible ones, and knit them into a coherent story.

Lucid dreaming could aid plot development by facilitating empathy. Doing the things your character does without financial, physical, or experiential limitations is possible while conscious in a dream. Throwing an extravagant party, driving recklessly, flying; these and countless other activities can be tried out in the safe environment of the lucid dream, and then incorporated into fiction. Sensory experience can not only be explored in dreams; it can be expanded, as we can do things in dreams that we cannot do or have never experienced in waking life. Anne Rice, author of *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) reported the following dream which helped her writing:

“The last time I had a flying dream I knew I was really doing it. I was aware but I was also really there... Before the dream I didn’t get the real way it felt...that incredible shooting up to the ceiling like a bubble being released, then straightening out beneath the ceiling and having no weight and moving out. That’s really a deepening of the sensuous aspect of flying. And I can take that back to the typewriter or the computer and try to get that down.” (Epel, 1994, p.215)

I am conducting lucid dream experiments in the course of my research, to discover whether I can approach my characters on a fundamental, experiential level. One of my characters has synaesthesia, a mingling of the senses across modalities, and I have attempted to provoke an experience of synaesthesia while lucid in a dream; I stroked different textures on a wall and after a failed attempt, a velour texture prompted the taste of porridge. This experience, combined with a lucid dream in which I spontaneously experienced synaesthesia, helped me in my understanding of the sudden sensory rush experienced by synaesthetes. I was then able to transfer this understanding to my treatment of my character.

Can becoming an expert lucid dreamer facilitate plot development? Often, even experienced lucid dreaming writers have not fully explored the possibilities of lucid dreaming in the rather specific areas of dialoguing with fictional characters and developing plot elements. It is probable that an extremely high level of dream control is required in order to

summon fictional characters to the lucid dream scene and interact with them usefully. In some cases, instead of expending precious moments of lucidity trying to be dream magicians, perhaps it would be of more creative value to writers to use lucid dreams to *observe* the dreaming mind in action. In this way the dreamer can consciously mull over aspects of plot while simultaneously watching the dreaming mind unfold. Ideas can be drawn from the dream environment, images collated, dream narrative structures observed and enjoyed. Leonard Michaels, author of *Sylvia*, says:

“Borges has said that all writing is a guided dream... In writing, something has to feel as if it’s happening but you’re guiding it. You’re not imposing your will on the material, you’re allowing its freedom and dream nature to continue to exist, to continue to be felt and respected. That’s the distinctive feature of real writing.” Epel, 1994, p.159)

Similarly, in lucid dreams it is also possible to take a more passive role rather than imposing one’s will on the dream material; dream control is only one aspect of lucid dreaming. Robert Waggoner, co-editor of the independent quarterly publication *The Lucid Dream Exchange*, comments that “...if a dreamer stops in a lucid dream and simply observes, things continue to happen. Cars move, people walk. All of this happens without the lucid dreamer ‘willing it’ or ‘controlling it’” (Linn, 2003, p.4). It is possible that adopting an alert, witnessing state during lucid dreaming could benefit writers and artists who are searching for interesting images or archetypal symbols with which to inspire their work. Thus they would be consciously present in their dreams, but uninvolved, simply watching their dreaming imagination unfold before them in all its rich surprise.

Therefore a distinction can be made between consciously *modifying* dreams and consciously accessing them in a more passive, *witnessing* state. Either technique could be used to good effect to delve into the raw material of dreams, and it is for the dreamer to decide spontaneously which approach to take. As Jamil Nasir, author of lucid dreaming novel *Tower of Dreams* (1999) says: “In my most lucid dreams, it was hard for me to resist meddling!” (CS-2)

The dream world, whether the dreamer is lucid or not, is intrinsically capricious and as such it is a rather arbitrary medium with which to work. However, cultivating intimacy with one’s own mind is likely to assist the creative process and broaden artistic horizons. Lucid dreamers can watch their thoughts spread out and take shape in the form of associational images which flow into and out of each other. They can observe the way that narrative elements are shaken up and then settled into place. If they decide to control the dream, they

can measure the bounce of their decisions. The astute lucid dreamer can carry back from the dream world story-like snippets of her own imagination, studded with vivid images, and these snippets can be inserted into a fictional narrative. The imagination thrives on play, and lucid dreams are a playful arena in which to develop observational powers, experiment with narrative flow, and explore the ceaseless patterning of the mind.

Both lucid and non-lucid dreams are full of peculiarities which demonstrate that in the space where thoughts are born, the laws of waking life do not apply. Bizarre or inconsistent events arise and are incorporated into the dream narrative with barely a glitch. In lucid dreams we can consciously access this raw imagination and observe its shifts and mutations. In doing so, we open ourselves up to a wider range of creative possibilities. Lucid dreaming is a potentially useful tool for accessing the unconscious and supporting the production of original creative writing, and as research continues into its role in the creative process, a greater understanding of its scope will be gained.

References

Barrett, D. (2001) *The Committee of Sleep – How Artists, Scientists, and Athletes use Dreams for Creative Problem-Solving – and How You Can Too*. New York, Crown Publishers.

Eeden, Frederik van. (1913) 'A Study of Dreams.' *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 26, pp431-61

Epel, N. (ed) (1994) *Writers Dreaming*. New York, Vintage Books.

Foulkes, D. (1982) *Children's Dreams* New York, Wiley & Sons.

Freud, S. (1969) *Bildende Kunst und Literatur*. S.Fischer Verlag GmbH.

Green, C, and McCreery, C. (1994) *Lucid Dreaming: The paradox of consciousness during sleep*. London, Routledge.

Jung, C.G. (1968) *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice*, vol. 8 London, Routledge & Keegan Paul.

Jung, C.G. (1993) Staub de Laszlo, V. (ed) *The Basic Writings of C.G Jung*. New York, Modern Library.

Koestler, A. (1975) *The Act of Creation*. London, Pan Books, Picador Edition.

LaBerge, S. (1985) *Lucid Dreaming*. New York, Ballantine Books.

Linn, V. (2003) Cites Waggoner, R. In: ‘‘Lucid’ dreamers say they can learn skills, cure ill.’ Series entitled ‘In Your Dreams.’ Online edition of *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 11.12.03. Printed pages 1-5 accessed 10th January 2004 from: <<http://www.post-gazette.com>>

Locatelli, J. (1997) *Lucid Dreams*. Seattle, Peanut Butter Publishing.

Mellick, J. (1996) *The Natural Artistry of Dreams*. California, Conari Press.

Moers-Messmer, H. von. (1938) ‘Traume mit der gleichzeitigen Erkenntnis des Traumzustandes.’ *Archiv für Psychologie*, 102. pp.291-318 Translated by Beth Mügge.

Nasir, J. (1999) *Tower of Dreams*. New York, Bantam Books.

Ouspensky, P. (1960) *A New Model of the Universe*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Person, E.S et al. (eds) (1995) *On Freud’s ‘Creative Writers and Day-dreaming’*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Royle, N. (ed) (1996) *The Tiger Garden: A Book of Writers’ Dreams*. London, Serpent’s Tail.

Stevenson, R.L. (1892) *A Chapter on Dreams*. In: *Across the Plains. With other Memories and Essays*. London/New York, Chatto & Windus. Printed pages 1-7 accessed 5th March 2004 from Berkeley Digital Library:
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Stevenson/Plains/plains8.html>

Stickgold, R.J et al. (1999) ‘Sleep-Induced Changes in Associative Memory’. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 11(2) pp.181-192

Tart, C.T. (2000) *States of Consciousness*. Author’s Guild Backinprint.com Edition. Lincoln, NE, iUniverse.com, Inc. Originally published by Dutton.