Dreams and Dreaming

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By Alex Schoen

Analyzing how we interact with materiality in the free space of dreaming is vital to interpreting dreams and learning about ourselves and others. In dreams, it is often more common to take notice of the larger picture, such as how the dreamer feels or what ideas about oneself the dream evokes. However, dreams are also collections of material objects. When we dream, our mind builds an entire world. Within a dream, we can recreate our homes, places we visit or the clothing we wear. These material items bear little importance as we are exposed to them every day; they are the base upon which we build the important moments of our lives. However, one may ask why certain material objects appear in the dreaming mind and what they mean. In this essay, I focus on the material aspect of clothing and fashion as they appear in the dreams. I select three dreams in which my clothing played a role. In the United States, the fashion industry in a multi-billion-dollar entity and the clothing we wear is an expression of our identity as well as an expression of our cultural and social bounds. My specific dreams speak on how fashion is culturally responsible for my senses of individuality, femininity and success. In the following paragraphs, I provide the manifest content of three short dreams and an analysis of how each dream fits into the larger sense of social structure and cultural contexts.

Manifest content

Dream A: I have these new overalls. They are floral and made of a light cotton material and have purple and pink color tones. I find them hanging on the backside of my closet door. I was struggling to find something to wear that day and was thrilled to discover the overalls. I remember wearing them and feeling very cool and collected. I wear them out onto campus and feel as though I stand out in them. While wearing them, I feel different as well as very comfortable. I get lots of compliments throughout the day. At the end of that day, I put the overalls in my bag so that I remember to pack them for the Thanksgiving holiday.
Dream B: I am walking around the basement of Libby’s bar. I am fanning out one and five dollar bills in my hands. While looking at the money, I am walking towards the bar to purchase a drink. I have on very high pink heels. I can hear the clicking of them echoing all around me. The people sitting on stools around the bar turn around and look at me. I do not look at them.

Dream C: I am holding this new shirt I got from American Eagle. It is a white knitted pattern and has long sleeves. I like how new and white it looks and I touch it and carefully pull off the tag. The shirt is just there and it is all I can see. I put in on my bed and look at it.

Analysis

It is important to know the context of these dreams. I recently went on a large shopping trip for the first time in a long while, with the specific goal of purchasing new clothing to wear for Thanksgiving. During my waking life, I find shopping for clothes to be genuinely thrilling and these dreams all occurred within the days following the shopping trip. In American culture the idea of having new things is often coveted and seen as a marker of wealth or success. Each of the three dreams features a material item of clothing: the floral overalls, the pink high heels and the white top. Each of these items has identified associations to my waking life culture. The larger concepts brought on by each item are individuality, femininity and success.

Floral overalls and individuality: In the dream A, I am exuding confidence because I have this item of clothing that makes me stand out to others. Within the social structure of UNH students, I feel that we all wear the same outfits. We often seem to follow the current fashion trends. Even if we consider ourselves to be non-conformers, we regularly wear the same types of clothes. Clothing is a mass-produced item and every store is selling a different variation of the same item. For example, while I am writing this paper in the library, I am wearing athletic leggings, slide on shoes and a loose top. I also have my hair in a loose bun, held with a hair scrunchy. Even though I woke up today feeling as though I am my own independent person, when I look up I see five other your females wearing the exact same type of outfit. In the dream
A, I am wearing something unique and I enjoy how that feels. However, the important aspect of the floral overalls is that they do not exist in real life. They are one hundred percent conjured by my dreaming mind. I have such a vivid picture of what they looked like as well as the feelings they brought out, but these overalls are not real. It could be argued that because I dreamt of achieving individuality through a material item that does not exist, true individuality in waking life cannot exist. Clothing is a mass-produced item that plays off of capitalism. Fashion is seen as the marker of individuality in American culture, however it is rare to not see people wearing the same outfits. Fashion creates trends within the population, following a trend undermines personal individuality. This loss of individuality is something that we as a culture are often not considering when we engage with a capitalist economy via shopping for our own clothes. In the dream, I am wearing clothing that does not exist, and if it did the clothing would make a statement of individuality. Because I exist within a capitalist economy true individuality is not possible, thus I used my dreaming mind to achieve it.

**Pink shoes and femininity:** The pink shoes gave me a sense of femininity in the dream. B. I was walking in front of people in a public setting, almost as if on display. The setting of the dream was the campus bar, which is often a hub of social and romantic interactions. The clothing I wear on a night out in waking life is nothing like the clothing I wear in other contexts (e.g., attending a class meeting). The clothing worn out such as a low-cut shirt, or like in my dream, a pair of shoes that make one stand out, is meant to display the parts of ourselves we want a potential partner to see. At this particular point in history, the pressure on women to look a certain way has never been more apparent. American women use fashion as a vehicle to achieve a sense of sexuality. High heels often carry the social meaning of being a marker of femininity and beauty. They appeared in my dream when I was attempting to exude these same characteristics.
This shows how we as a culture use fashion as a vehicle of communication, to send a message of what we wish people to perceive us as.

*White top and success:* The sense of wanting to be perceived a certain way by others is also demonstrated in the dream C. The white top is something I actually own and was planning to wear for Thanksgiving (2018). For me, holidays are a time of reunion with distant family members. I often feel that a holiday gathering is a time to look my best. The fact that I specifically purchased an outfit to wear for the holiday shows that I care about my family’s perception of me. Just as how I wish to be perceived as feminine at the bar, I wish to be perceived as put together and successful by my family. In the dream, I am careful with the shirt and make note of how white and clean it looks, and describe the shirt as “perfect.” This reflects how I would want my family to see me. In front of them, I would want to look as though my life is put together. As a senior in college, I would spend the holiday dodging questions about my future. In turn, feeling as though I look good would make me more confident. These cultural masks we wear depending on our audience can be expressed through fashion. Clothing plays a huge role in how we are perceived. Even if the non-material aspects of us are what gives us true value, our judgement of others is often based on first impression, including what one wears. Therefore, in dreams, a feeling could be associated with clothing.

In each one of these three dreams, a considerable amount of emotion is placed on the material items. I, as the dreamer, am using these material items to convey how I wish to be presented to the environment around me: how I wish to be perceived by others. In American culture, materiality is frequently a defining factor for people. Fashion, is a method that we as a culture use to convey the message we wish to portray about ourselves. For example, in my dream A about the colorful overalls, I am immediately showing people that I am different, that I am doing
something out of the ordinary. In my dream B, about wearing high heels, I was trying to gain romantic attention. My dreaming mind set the scene of this taking place in a bar, but an important part of that scene is also what I am wearing. In this case, it was something attention grabbing and provocative – the pink shoes. Clothing sets the context for much of what we do. In dreaming, clothing is not always a focus; we wear clothing in every dream we have, unless it is the classic “showing up to class naked” dream. This common stress dream also addresses the materiality of dreaming; when a material standard such as clothes is suddenly missing, the dream quickly turns into a nightmare. When the dreamer conjures specific images of the clothing, or lack of clothing they wear in the dream, it follows that this clothing has some sort of emotional significance for the dreamer. Emotionality toward material items means that we, as a part of American culture, are deeply rooted in the constructs of that material object.

Clothing has been a cultural marker since the beginning of time. Wearing fineries in ancient times denoted prestige within a group. For Europeans, the lack of clothing worn by the indigenous peoples created and reinforced the perception of their savagery. How one dresses and what one wears communicates meaning and is translated by others as information about this person, such as sexuality, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and relationship status. This demonstrates the extent to which our culture is rooted in materiality. When analyzing dreams, the actions of the dreamer are often the foci of the analysis. However, looking into the material objects in the dream, such as the clothing we wear, can also be a useful insight into our culture and identity. If dreaming is a reflection of one’s inner psyche, as Freud (1990) may suggest, then part of the analysis is missing if we ignore the material objects appearing in dreams (Freud 1990). Material objects in our culture directly influence our surrounding environment. Therefore, the material basis of our culture surely effects our personalities. Thus, analyzing how we interact with
materiality in the free space of dreaming is vital to interpreting dreams and learning about ourselves and others.

**Bibliography**