A glimpse of C.G. Jung's teaching style

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A Review of

Dream Interpretation Ancient and Modern: Notes From the Seminar Given in 1936–1941: Reports by Seminar Members With Discussions of Dream Series

by C. G. Jung (John Peck, Lorenz Jung, and Maria Meyer-Grass, Eds.; Ernst Falzeder, Trans.; Tony Woolfson, Col.)

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After Jung broke with Freud between 1913 and 1914, he resigned from his position as president of the International Psychoanalytic Association, resigned his teaching post at the University of Zurich, reduced his clinical practice, and entered into a long period of self-exploration and reflection. Although he continued to publish his ideas during this time, he essentially removed himself from the public light. Starting in 1916, he slowly began reestablishing public contacts with the creation of the Zurich Psychological Club, a group of friends, supporters, patients, and ex-patients.

Although Jung traveled to England to deliver a series of lectures in 1920, 1923, and 1925, and to Germany in 1931, he personally presented the majority of his new ideas at the Zurich Psychological Club on Wednesday mornings. Some of his seminars there have been published to date, and many more are slated for publication by the Philemon Foundation, an organization dedicated to the discovery and publication of the entire Jung oeuvre. Three superb examples of Jung’s Psychology Club seminars that have found their way into print are Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934 (1939–1941/1997), Dream Analysis 1: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1928–30 (1984), and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: Notes of the Seminars Given in 1934–1939 (1934–1940/1988).

During the early 1930s Jung decided to expand his public arena and desired to reestablish something of an academic career. In 1933 he wrote an informal note to the president of the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) in Zurich offering his services as a private lecturer; these services were accepted, and Jung began teaching in the fall of that year.

Jung’s decision to apply to the ETH, rather than returning to the University of Zurich, is a bit surprising. The ETH, like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the California Institute of Technology, is essentially an institution dedicated to the teaching of and
research in technological subjects such as natural science, mathematics, and engineering, not the social sciences and the humanities. It did not and does not have a medical school or department of psychology, as does the University of Zurich.

In deciding to apply for a teaching post at ETH, Jung was making a statement that his ideas were part of the natural sciences and not medicine or the social sciences per se. The ETH’s administration’s acceptance of Jung might indicate that they agreed with him, although the president of ETH, Arthur Rohn, was dedicated to ensuring that ETH students had a strong ancillary education in Swiss culture, and that might be the real reason Jung was accepted as a faculty member. This academic position was so important to Jung that he and some of his followers gave ETH an endowment dedicated to the study of analytical psychology of 200,000 Swiss francs, or about two million U.S. dollars today. Following this donation Jung was finally granted the title of “Professor” in 1935.

From 1936 to 1940, Jung conducted an extensive seminar at ETH on children’s dreams and the history of dream interpretation. Admission to this seminar was by invitation only. The seminar’s members consisted of some members of the Zurich Psychological Club as well as psychiatrists and other interested persons. Jung insisted on this because his first lectures, “Modern Psychology,” had over 550 attendees that included regular students of ETH, students from the University of Zurich, patients, analysts, and friends of Jung. Many of the regular ETH and University of Zurich students were critical of Jung’s teaching style, complaining that his breadth of subject matter was too great to easily follow. This criticism stung Jung, and he probably wanted to avoid it again. He was also uncomfortable with such a sizable audience, as he was used to the smaller group of the Club.

The bulk of the seminar on children’s dreams has been published by Princeton University Press as Children’s Dreams: Notes From the Seminar Given in 1936–1940 (1987/2008). The section on the historical ideas of dream interpretation, however, has been separately published as Dream Interpretation Ancient and Modern: Notes From the Seminar Given in 1936–1941: Reports by Seminar Members With Discussions of Dream Series. This review will be on this latter work.

The first part of the seminar covered by Dream Interpretation Ancient and Modern, 1936–1937, was dedicated to the method of dream interpretation. By including reviews of Western dream interpretation methods, Jung was establishing how his method both devolved and differed from prior attempts to understand dreams. In this part of the ETH seminar, students were requested to present papers on dream theories of historical persons such as Artemidorus, M. l’Abbé Richard, and Paul W. Radestock. Jung would first listen to the paper and then make comments, criticisms, and suggestions. This was an apparent deviation from his pedagogical method used in Club seminars, suggesting that he was attempting to be more “academic” than he was at the Club. It is unclear just how far this attempt to be academic extended in the seminars, as there is no evidence that he gave examinations, grades, or academic credit to the participants.

Jung’s pedagogical style in these seminars was based on his asking “phony” academic leading questions of the students. Phony questions are ones to which the asker knows the answer and expects the respondent to guess the right answer. Phony academic leading questions are asked by many professors to frighten and intimidate students. When Jung’s students failed to guess the right answer, Jung was critical and even sarcastic. If the
student guessed correctly, Jung was not very affirming. It must have been difficult to be a student in this seminar.

Jung’s questions to his students show that he was not interested in their mastery of the material per se but rather in how well they understood how these historical ideas related to his theory. He was clearly not trained how to be an effective teacher. Weaker student presentations were interrupted by Jung, who then took over and displayed his considerable knowledge of the subject. This is not the best way to help students learn. Jung at least once complained that he could not attract first-rate thinkers to his Zurich School. Perhaps if he had been a better teacher, he would have discovered the superb thinkers he was yearning for right in front of him.

*Dream Interpretation Ancient and Modern* contains 14 presentations of 12 seminar participants (two participants presented twice). Jung’s comments for each presentation are included, although in some cases it seems that some of his comments are missing or are highly abbreviated. Most of Jung’s comments extend to around eight pages in the book, but for one, they cover only four and in another only five pages. The material covered in only four pages could be presented in 15 to 20 minutes, which would have made a very short seminar indeed. One presentation on Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576) extends to 94 pages and covers seven different seminar sessions, indicating how interested Jung was in this figure.

Most of the papers read like student papers (five of the authors are listed as “Dr.,” the others are not), fragmentary and barely formed. Scholars who are versed in these early works on dream theory will no doubt be disappointed in what the participants presented. Most of the papers are really synopses and not full investigations. Scholars of these ancient authors may, however, find Jung’s ideas about these early thinkers interesting.

The book is organized in four sections: Older Literature on Dream Interpretation, The Enlightenment and Romanticism, The Modern Period, and Visions and Dreams. The older literature consists of an investigation of three Hellenic thinkers and one Reformation theorist: Macrobius (flourished CE 400), Artemidorus (flourished third century CE), Synesius of Cyrene (CE 373–414), and Caspar Peucer (1525–1602).

It is interesting that Aristotle was omitted from this group, as he wrote no less than three works on sleeping and dreams: *De Somno et Vigilia, De Insomnis,* and *De Divinatione per Somnum.* *De Divinatione per Somnum* in particular deals with the problem of the divinatory and prognostic aspects of dreams. Perhaps Aristotle was ignored because he did not advance a method of dream interpretation, as did Macrobius, Artemidorus, and Synesius.

It is quite surprising that Hippocrates (c 460–370 BCE), the father of modern medicine, was also omitted from the list, as he wrote an extensive work on dream interpretation and was an Aesculapian, a trained priest of Aesculapius. As an Aesculapian, he used dreams in his daily medical practice and taught how to use dreams clinically to novice physicians. In the temples of Aesculapius, dreams were the primary diagnostic tool used by physicians to determine the etiology, prognosis, and treatment of both physical and mental diseases. The work of Hippocrates would have informed all of the physicians of the Hellenic world for several hundred years. The omission of Hippocrates from this work represents a serious lacuna in Jung’s seminar participants’ education.
These omissions of important thinkers’ ideas about how to understand dreams are evident throughout the book. There is no mention at all of the important ideas about how to understand dreams from the Middle Ages. There is only one examination of a Renaissance thinker, despite the fact that there were several important ideas about the meaning of dreams that were developed then. In the modern period section, the works of Alexander Grant (a.k.a. Frank Seafied), Hervey de Saint-Denys, and many others are not present.

One wonders why Jung had his seminar participants do such a spotty job of collecting historical dream material and what he intended to accomplish by including the topic of ancient and modern dream interpretation in a much larger seminar on children’s dreams. An entire seminar could have easily been given on a more thorough investigation of the development over time of ideas about the significance of dreams and the purpose of dreaming. Readers who are interested in the historical development of systematic dream interpretation would do well to read the opening chapter of Van de Castle’s *Our Dreaming Mind* (1994), where he offered a more complete collection of historical ideas about dreams and dreaming than does this work.

There is also a lengthy introduction by the editor, John Peck, that, albeit interesting, is densely written and difficult to read. This is unfortunate, as he makes the important point that Jung used Aristotle’s *Poetics* as his basic template for dream interpretation, which needs to have a wider audience. Here is an example of his tortuous writing style.

> Western modes of divination have developed in a broadly historical manner, passing from sheer strip mining for the purposes of utility—grubby resource extraction in Artemidorus and others, for the routine purposes of control, prudent navigation, or even aggrandizement, and “the mastery of time” (“time my possession,” boasted the great physician, astrologer, and mathematician Girolamo Cardano)—to the more discerning engagement with an inner natural process that neither tells us what to do nor considerably respects our human limits, but nevertheless deepens a capacity for response. (p. xxxi)

Most readers will simply skip over this important and useful section. It would have been helpful if this editor had had a good editor who would have made his comments more accessible.

Despite these criticisms, *Dream Interpretation Ancient and Modern* can be very useful for readers who have little or no understanding that dreams were interesting to well-educated scholars for thousands of years before Freud and Jung began their investigations. These readers would do well to remember that none of the papers or Jung’s commentaries are exhaustive, systematic treatises on these historical ideas about the meaning of dreams. They are, rather, a sampler of ancient ideas and can serve the purpose of whetting the appetite for further knowledge. In all likelihood, most readers of this book will not be familiar with most of the thinkers reviewed. For this reason alone, the book is worth examination by anyone interested in the ideas of Jung or dream interpretation. Jung’s comments in this work, as usual, are interesting, erudite, and extremely helpful and are worth the price of the book. Jung was quoted as saying to his wife, Emma, “Thank God I am Jung and not a Jungian.” After reading this book, one is tempted to agree.

This work is clearly a companion to the Children’s Dreams seminars, and, although it can be read on its own, it makes more sense if it is read in tandem with that volume.
References


