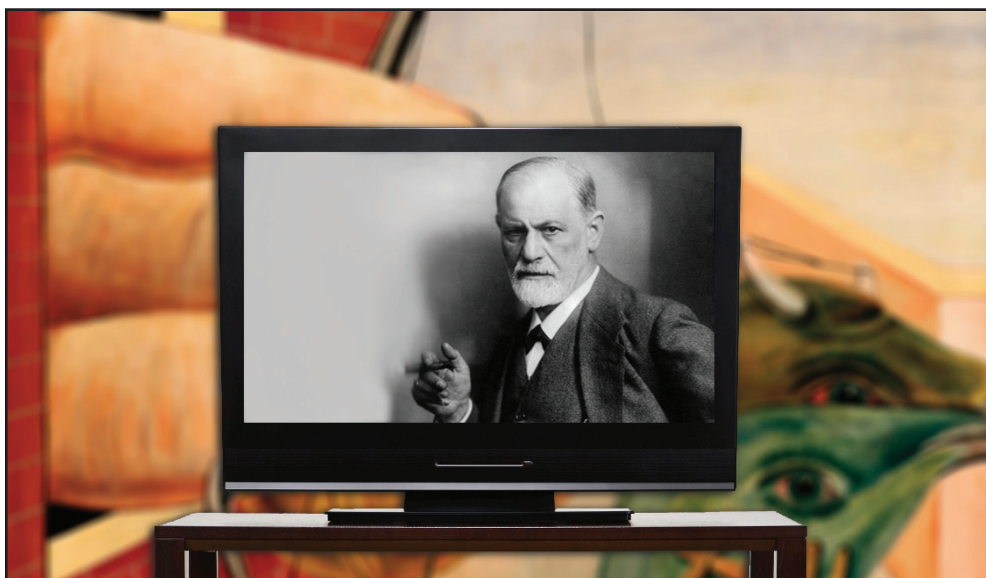

# Dream Sequences in Television Narrative:

## A Freudian Perspective

By John V. Pavlik, Robert W. Kubey, Franklin Bridges

From the *The Twilight Zone* in the 1950s to *The Sopranos*' concluding episode in 2007, and to the present moment, dream sequences have been used with great frequency to advance television narratives and reveal insight into characters in nearly every major U.S. television series ever made. The frequency of dream sequences in television is so great that we have chosen—as did Freud—to focus on case studies. Just a few U.S. television series with notable dream sequences over the first 60 years of U.S. television are: *Ally McBeal*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Cheers*, *Dallas*, *Family Ties*, *Golden Girls*, *Happy Days*, *M*A*S*H*, *Moonlighting*, *Mork and Mindy*, *Newhart*, *Night Court*, *Star Trek*, *Star Trek the Next Generation*, *The Simpsons*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *St. Elsewhere*. We will look at *The Sopranos*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *M*A*S*H*, and *The Twilight Zone*.

### *The Sopranos*

In the first episode of *The Sopranos*, the HBO original drama series, we learn quite a lot, in condensed and idealized fashion, about how a patient in therapy might work with his therapist on what a critical dream means and how it might explain: in

the case of Tony Soprano—why he is passing, out for no apparent reason, in this extended scene from his first visit with Dr. Melfi. Like so many other dreams in television, the dream is a narrative device. In the case of *The Sopranos*, it is critical to the exposition of everything that will come later: what psychodynamic psychotherapy is, how it can rely on dreams and looks at the unconscious, why Tony is in therapy in the first place, and so much more.

**"I had a semester and a half of college, so I understand Freud. I understand therapy, as a concept. But in my world it, does not go down!"**
**- Anthony John "Tony" Soprano, Sr., at his first appointment with psychiatrist, Jennifer Melfi, M.D.**

*The Sopranos* opened its eight seasons with an unforgettable first episode and a dream sequence. Tony Soprano, head of the New Jersey Mafia, lives with his wife and two children in a mansion with a large pool. One day, a flock of ducks with ducklings alights in the pool and splashes about. Tony, prepared for a morning swim, is so delighted to be near the ducks that he enters the water without even taking off his bathrobe. He calls his alienated teenage children out to see the ducks, and they are totally disinterested, thinking their father is a fool who is re-experiencing his childhood, as he may be.

That afternoon, Tony is barbequing for a family picnic by the pool, where the ducks are still swimming. The ducks begin to fly away, and the enormous cigar that Tony is smoking begins to dangle from his mouth and an expression of distress comes over his face. The cigar falls onto the grill, where a can of lighter fluid has just turned over. Tony stumbles backwards as he loses consciousness and ends up face down, prone on the ground. A moment later the grill explodes, a portent of things to come.

Tony's next-door neighbor, Dr. Cusamono, refers him to a female psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, who asks him why he had an anxiety attack. Tony won't admit to it and dismisses the idea. He is embarrassed to be in psychotherapy and knows that it is risky for him, as a Mafia Don, to be in therapy, should the information leak out. The therapist asks over and over if he is depressed, and he keeps shrugging, but she can tell he is depressed. He finally admits that he has been depressed "since the ducks left."

Dr. Melfi: What about ducks?
Tony: God damn ducks!
Dr. Melfi: What is it about those ducks that meant so much to you?
Tony: I don't know; it was a trip having those wild creatures coming into my pool.
Dr. Melfi: Little babies. *She smiles broadly.*
Tony: I was sad to see them go. *He begins to cry and is embarrassed to do so.*
Dr. Melfi: *Sweetly, while smiling supportively.* When those ducks gave birth to those babies, they became a family.
Tony: You're right, there's a link. I'm afraid I'm going to lose my family. Like I lost the ducks. That's what I'm full of dread about. It's always with me.

David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos*, has told numerous interviewers that he has spent considerable time in psychotherapy,

Photo: Home Box Office Inc.

*Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) in session with Jennifer Melfi, M.D. (Lorraine Bracco).*

and he clearly knows a good deal about it. He wrote nearly all of *The Sopranos* dream sequences.

A distinctive aspect of *The Sopranos* are these dream sequences. There are very few television series that have not had a dream sequence in them at some point. Some programs, The Sopranos chief among them, use dream sequences very frequently.

In "Funhouse," episode 26 of season 2, Tony has a dream sequence where he is talking to Sal "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero, his fellow Mafia member. In the dream, Big Pussy is a fish, and Tony realizes that his friend has become an FBI informant, potentially threatening the entire crime family and Tony's life, his family's life, and everyone around him. David Chase explains the scene:

> "We could have been a story in which Tony gets some information that (the character) Pussy's the rat and he tracks it down and we do some stultifying procedural until we have the proof in hand. But I just couldn't go through that. I can't stand that stuff. So we just decided it would be more interesting, that on some level Tony knows this, that his friend is betraying him, and it makes him ill… and his subconscious erupts like that and gives him the information."

Eight years after its beginning, the The Sopranos comes to its dramatic, inconclusive, and highly controversial conclusion. Over the course of a few minutes, Tony and his family arrive one at a time at a diner for a family dinner—first Tony, then his wife, followed by his son, and then finally his daughter. As the family enters, and during the short period they are together in the diner's booth, deciding what to order, the camera view scans the restaurant's patrons, stopping occasionally, giving certain individuals an air of suspicion. The camera work and editing have led the audience to the edge of its seats, as the family is like "sitting ducks" at the table. And then, out of nowhere, the screen goes black, and at the same instance, the powerful chorus to Journey's song "Don't Stop Believing" comes up at full volume.

The long-running series suddenly screeches to a full stop, and we never know if Tony's initial dread that he would lose his family—or his own

life—is realized. So from the first visit with Dr. Melfi to this concluding scene, we have come full circle in Tony's Odyssey. And so we see, as we will see in many other television series, that dreams offer an extraordinarily effective means by which to explore character, foreshadow—in this case, the entire series—and provide narrative order for the storytelling.

**Dreams, A Freudian Primer**

Over one hundred years ago, Sigmund Freud concluded that dreams constituted the royal road to the unconscious. Dreams are not what they appear to be. They speak in a special language that Freud decoded in his masterwork, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, first published in German in November 1899 as *Die Traumdeutung*. Freud surmised that dreams require deep interpretation that can inform the structures and processes of the unconscious. Here is how Freud describes his work in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

> "In the following pages, I shall demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique, every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state. Further, I shall endeavor to elucidate the processes which underlie the strangeness and obscurity of dreams, and to deduce from these processes the nature of the psychic forces whose conflict or co-operation is responsible for our dreams."

Freud draws on ancient Roman and Grecian Oedipal dreams and myths, one reported by Julius Caesar himself. Here, the dream interpreters saw Caesar's dream of intercourse with his mother as very favorable, as it meant that Caesar would take possession of the earth (Mother Earth). Otto Rank, who is credited with assisting on some of Freud's work, had some of his writings from 1910 and 1911 incorporated in later editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The Oracle's interpretation given to the Tarquins, according to Rank, is as well known as Caesar's Oedipal dream. Here the prophecy was that the conquest of Rome would fall to he who should first kiss his mother.

Authors of classic literary works are handled in a footnote, where Freud draws on a work by James Sully (1893). In his essay "The Dream as a Revelation": "Dreams are not the utter nonsense that they have been said to be by such authorities as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. The chaotic aggregations of our night-fancy have a significance and communicate new knowledge."

***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

*The Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series ran from 1996 to 2003. It aired in more than 20 countries and still has online fan groups in many of these same nations.

During the fourth season, the creator of the program, Joss Whedon, learned from fan websites from around the world that the season was not being well received. Fans were actively complaining that the episodes and even the season as a whole seemed scattered. There seemed to be a mutual agreement that there was not an overarching story line. Wheedon concluded that he needed to do something to tie up the loose ends in the final episode of the

season and bring a sense of closure for fans, while simultaneously setting up issues for the next season.

And so he used the narrative device of each of the main characters experiencing a vivid dream that would provide him with the narrative thread that the audience (and he) wanted. The season finale was aptly entitled "Restless." The episode starts with The Scooby Gang--comprised of Buffy; Giles, Buffy's Watcher (mentor); Willow, a witch; and Xander, who has no super powers—at Buffy's house, relaxing and watching movies. They all end up falling asleep and experiencing frightening nightmares that are being controlled by a menacing figure that is out for their demise.

On the DVD of this episode, Whedon provides commentary on how he wrote the episode. He clearly knows what happens in dreams and how they are often experienced. He is more than likely familiar with Freud's dream work. He knows that dreams are transitory. In dreams, things are not what they appear to be. Time and place are highly malleable. Characters and story can go from place to place and connect to one another in ways that they shouldn't, or couldn't, but for in a dream.

For Wheedon, "It's about combining the totally surreal with the totally mundane." And so it is throughout this episode. It's as if Wheedon had *The Interpretation of Dreams* open on his desk as he wrote. He reports free-associating on each character for the writing of each scene. Each character's dream is a journey, and each character study involves what each of the characters has gone through in previous episodes. There is also a self-examination that takes place in each of the four scenes, or acts, of the season finale.

For Wheedon, that is what "Restless" is about: "the journey of life," a journey through each character's psyche enabled by the narrative device of a dream. And as in Freudian dream interpretation, each character's dream provides a window into the individual's unconscious. Each character's dream ends with the First Slayer, the very first slayer in the line, in the process of killing them in a horrific manner. This frightening figure "goes from dream to dream so there is some connective tissue." "It then became an issue of basically writing poetry, basically free-associating… beyond that there was no structure."

**"I walk. I talk. I shop. I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out, and I don't sleep on a bed of bones."**

**- Buffy to the First Slayer**

Only when Buffy encounters the Final Slayer in the final act do we learn the character's identity as "the first" Slayer. Says Wheedon, "I wanted to set up the coming year. I wanted to set up the idea of what it means to be a slayer." The original slayer reveals her identity to Buffy, because it is Buffy who she is truly out to get. It has been tradition that the Slayers work alone, and the Final Slayer is incensed that Buffy has friends who help her.

When finally confronted with the Final Slayer after pursuing her, Buffy realizes that she is just having a dream, and she can control the situation if she wants to. Buffy tells the Final Slayer in her stereotype-breaking heroine way, "I

walk. I talk. I shop. I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out, and I don't sleep on a bed of bones."

Buffy and the Final Slayer begin to fight violently, but all the while Buffy is telling the Final Slayer she is going to wake up. They end up back in Buffy's living room where her friends are still asleep. She tells the Final Slayer, who seems to finally understand that she does not hold any power over Buffy:

> "It's over, okay? I'm going to ignore you, and you're going to go away. You're really gonna have to get over the whole… primal power thing. You're not the source of me. Also, in terms of hair care, you really wanna say, what kind of impression am I making in the workplace? 'Cause…"'

And Buffy wakes up with a start, and the three friends wake up as well. For Buffy, the dream permits her, and the audience, to look at her own archetypal past and feel reassured about the Scooby Gang's future.

**Typology Explanation**

Not only did both of the episodes from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Sopranos* rely heavily on dream sequences, but they were also both highly abstract and required outside explanation. In the case of "The Sopranos" it is Verbal, because he is retelling the dreams to Dr. Melfi. However, in "Restless" the dream is occurring while we are watching it. And in this case, it is Buffy who ends up interpreting the Abstract dreams she and her friends are experiencing.

By separating the dreams in this taxonomy, it begins to give more insight into the nuances that go into the creation of these television episodes and, to a greater extent, into the whole series themselves. An episode each from the pioneering television shows *M*A*S*H* and *The Twilight Zone* show how their program creators used dream sequences to advance their narratives through a more literal construct.

***M*A*S*H***

In "Dreams," the 22nd episode of season 8 of *M*A*S*H*, first broadcast on February 18, 1980, seven main characters of the highly rated series steal away for catnaps, exhausted after performing several hours of surgery from a non-stop influx of incoming casualties.

The *M*A*S*H* television show was based on the 1970 film, *MASH*, directed by Robert Altman, and in turn the film was based on the 1968 novel *MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors*, written by Richard Hooker. All three incarnations of the *M*A*S*H* franchise were based in Korea during the Korean War (1950-1953). However, the similarities between the Korean War and the Vietnam War (1959-1975), which occurred during most of the *M*A*S*H* era, were uncanny.

Importantly, *M*A*S*H* was a tragic comedy that, like a dream, also cloaked a bitter and terrible truth. So do the seven dreams in "Dreams" cloak the fact, until each dream ends, that none of the characters can escape the war zone. None of them can go home to their families. And in the case of the first dream, had by Major Margaret J. "Hot Lips" Houlihan, there is even more that escapes their grasp.

After leaving surgery, a weary Houlihan returns to her tent and collapses on her bunk. Her dream begins immediately, and she is sitting

up wearing a white wedding gown and veil. She steps outside of her tent and begins running across a field, possibly in Korea, into the arms of a striking man in a tuxedo—presumably her newly married husband. They fall upon a brass bed and begin passionately embracing, still in the middle of the field. Suddenly, Army troops begin to march by in formation. Houlihan's dream husband gets up out of bed and marches off with the troops. She looks shocked.

Houlihan looks back at the bed, and a soldier is lying there with a bandaged, traumatic head wound. She now looks extremely perplexed. As she rises out of the bed and begins to step back, she now sees that there are three bloodied and bandaged soldiers on the bed. As the camera pans back farther and farther, we see that the front of Houlihan's gown and her hands are covered in blood. The dream is over, and the scene cuts to Corporal Maxwell Klinger barging into the Operating Room shouting, "Abdominal wound, where do you want him?"

Repression and denial of every form are rampant in our species according to Freud. This not only goes for individuals, but for all organizations, societies, and cultures as well. We see all of this reified in this single "Dreams" episode of *M*A*S*H*.

As with the cloaking of Korea for Vietnam, comedy—like dreams—serves as a mask, but in theater, film, and television it permits creators to get at a deeper, more frightening truth than otherwise can be faced about war and death. Freud tells us this in *Jokes and Their Relation To the Unconscious*. As William Shakespeare wrote in *King Lear*, "Jesters do oft prove prophets." And this is surely true.

Photo: 20th Century Fox Television

*Major "Hot Lips" Houlihan (Loretta Swit).*

The final vignette of "Dreams" is that of lead character Captain Benjamin "Hawkeye" Pierce. The stream of wounded has subsided, and several of the characters are sitting around a table in the dining tent. Pierce decides to fall asleep at the table instead of returning to his tent. He is "awakened" in his dream by an older physician, doubtlessly one of his surgical residency professors, asking how he would reattach a limb.

Pierce looks flummoxed and doesn't have an answer for the questioner, who now has a disapproving glare. The physician asks for Pierce's left arm, and he detaches a mannequin arm and gives it to the physician, who in turn tosses it into an offscreen lake. Then the physician asks for Pierce's right arm, and it too is thrown unceremoniously into the lake.

Pierce then finds himself afloat in a rowboat with no arms, aimlessly drifting past several limbs floating in the water. The final cut is Pierce walking up to a wounded child on a gurney. He is handed a scalpel, as the sound of approaching helicopters is

heard, and he looks up and screams "No!" This initially appears to be a reaction to what's going on in Pierce's dream, but more than likely it is a segue element, for Pierce awakes to everyone rushing out of the tent to attend to the incoming wounded that are brought in by helicopter.

For the final scene of "Dreams," we see the seven characters that have had dreams sitting around a table in the dining tent. They are all declaring and/or agreeing on what a grueling past couple of days they have been through. Most of them rise up to go back to their tents to finally get some well-deserved sleep.

Major Charles Winchester III then utters from Shakespeare's famous *Hamlet* soliloquy, "To sleep, perchance to dream." And to that, everyone agreeably sits back down, and they start pouring cups of coffee while the credits begin to roll. The joke here is that Hamlet was not referring to going to sleep, but to going to death, and if he were to dream in death, would the eternal dream be good—or bad? "Ay, there's the rub."

***The Twilight Zone***

Here to an entire episode was influenced by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* soliloquy. On November 27, 1959, *The Twilight Zone* episode "Perchance to Dream" aired. Though the episode appears to be a relatively simple story, it does come with an interesting revelation in the end.

Edward Hall, a man who looks exhausted and a bit disheveled, goes to see Dr. Eliot Rathmann, a psychiatrist, at the recommendation of his medical doctor. Upon entering his office, Rathmann sees that Hall is distressed and urges him to lie down on his session couch. Hall appears to immediately fall asleep. He wakes with a start and leaps up off of the couch. He begins to tell Rathmann the story of why he is "the tiredest man in the world." He explains that he has not slept for 87 hours. Hall is convinced that if he falls asleep, he will never wake.

After recollecting his perceived predicament, there is a nod to Freud that is anything but subtle. Hall tells Dr. Rathmann that he was expecting something different from him—an explicate reference to the stereotypical public perception of the Freudian psychoanalyst. Rathmann replies, "Like an old man with a white beard and a German accent?" As he says this, Rathmann and Hall frame a shot of a bust of Freud that's sitting on a credenza behind them. Rathmann adds, "That's what everyone expects, and they're always disappointed."

Hall goes on to explain that he has been having a series of episodic dreams where he is at an amusement park, and a beautiful "woman of his dreams," named Maya, leads him to various attractions that prove to be extremely exhilarating. Hall is convinced that Maya is doing this to exacerbate his rheumatic heart condition and eventually kill him. Hall's dream really achieves a Literal sense from the fact that both he and Maya admit to each other that it is Hall's dream that they are both in. After one instance of Maya insisting on going into the Fun House, Hall asks jokingly as he acquiesces, "How can I argue with a dream?"

There seems to be the same trepidation with Hall that befalls Hamlet. In Hall's case, there is a literal interpretation that he is applying to his dreams—he could give in and have a great time, or he could give in and

meet his death. It's a razor's edge that he walks on. Over time, it appears that Hall's anxiety about dying is what will end up killing him.

Hall recounts some more of his dreams to Rathmann, but decides that the session is not getting either of them anywhere, so he starts to leave the office. This time we see Rathmann's secretary from the front and she is Maya, the woman from his dreams. This pushes Hall literally over the edge. He takes a running leap through the window in Rathmann's office and plunges several stories to his death.

Or does he? Ay, there's the twist. The camera pans back to Rathmann, who gets out of his chair and calls his secretary in. The camera then pulls back to reveal that Hall is still lying on the couch. Dead. We discover that everything that occurred once Hall lay down and fell asleep happened to him in his dreams. Apparently, it was his dream suicide that provided his wish fulfillment. It doesn't get any more Freudian than that.

The episode ends with this narration:

> "They say a dream takes only a second or so, and yet in that second a man can live a lifetime. He can suffer and die, and who's to say which is the greater reality: the one we know or the one in dreams, between heaven, the sky, the earth—and in *The Twilight Zone*."

**Conclusion**

It has been 110 years since the publication of Sigmund Freud's seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and along with it the development of psychotherapy dream interpretation. During this time, there has been a vast amount of research on how the human brain functions, and this has provided a greater understanding of the development of dreams and their function as well. Much of what has been discovered goes against Freud's early theories; however, his pioneering development of psychotherapy still plays a vital role for modern psychotherapists. It is also important to note that, though Freud's theories into the unconscious with respect to dream interpretation may be debated, he still has a powerful effect on other areas of society such as the arts and, as we have analyzed, the creation of television content. It is from the imagination and dreams of the writers of these series that the characters are conceived who leave an indelible impression on our minds.

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*This essay is based on an invited lecture given at the Freud Museum, Vienna, Austria, June 29, 2009. John V. Pavlik is professor and chair of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, and director of the Journalism Resources Institute at Rutgers. Robert Kubey is professor of Journalism and Media Studies, and director of the Center for Media Studies at Rutgers. Franklin Bridges is a Ph.D. student at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers.*