

# ***Zhuang Zi's Dream of the Butterfly: Dreams, Reality and Artistic Creation from the Perspective of Psychoanalysis***

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**Abstract:** Dreams are an integral part of our daily lives. Every night, people fall asleep, and dreams—an important psychological and physiological phenomenon—occur frequently, experienced by both children and adults. These dreams are often strange yet fascinating. They may significantly impact our lives, or exist in complete isolation from reality, free from societal constraints. Most people forget their dreams shortly after waking up, retaining only fragmented memories and lingering sensations. Dreams, an eternal theme, have coursed through the annals of history. They've had a profound influence on philosophical and artistic research. This article commences with the renowned Chinese allegory “Zhuang Zhou’s Dream of the Butterfly.” It delves into its philosophical core, drawing parallels with Western dream psychoanalysis. Moreover, it explores how this ancient tale continues to shape the artistic exploration of dreams in contemporary art, uncovering its long - standing significance.

**Keywords:** Dream, Butterfly, Zhuangzi, Freud, Surrealism

## **1. Introduction**

Why are humans perpetually intrigued by dreams? The allure of dreams lies in their vivid authenticity. In dreams, we can experience a gamut of emotions and scenarios, often becoming convinced that we are living through real - life events. For instance, imagine falling asleep and dreaming of giving a speech on stage. The intense nervousness and anxiety you feel during the dream may still linger even after waking up. Such lifelike dreams prompt us to question: How can we be certain that we are in a dream at that very moment? Descartes, in his *Meditations*, posed a profound philosophical query: "There are no distinct signs enabling us to clearly demarcate wakefulness from sleep."

This question has spurred in - depth contemplation about the boundary between reality and dreams. The experiences within dreams bear a striking resemblance to our perceptions in waking life [1]. Sometimes, the details in dreams can be even more vivid than those in the real world, leading to post - dream doubts about the authenticity of what we have experienced. The thought "I might be dreaming" seems to be an intractable paradox. If we think about this in a dream, that very thought becomes part of the dream. In other words, everything that transpires in a dream, including our reflections on it, is subsumed within the dream's domain. This gives rise to a more profound philosophical conundrum: How do we define "reality"? If dreams can so deeply influence our emotions and thoughts, can they be regarded as a form of "reality" [2]?

## 2. From Zhuang Zi to Sigmund Freud

In the West, there are ideas parallel to Zhuang zi's. Analyzing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory offers a fresh perspective for understanding Zhuangzi's thoughts and emotions. Freud's psychoanalysis [3] aims to explore how adults grapple with unacceptable unconscious desires originating from early experiences. His method primarily focuses on how the unconscious impacts the conscious process and disrupts healthy psychological functions. He posited that unconscious forces driven by biological instincts significantly influence human behavior, and the motives and desires of these latent unconscious forces usually lie beyond the scope of individual conscious perception. He divided psychoanalysis into three components: the unconscious, human instincts, and personality. In his theoretical framework, human psychological activities are categorized into three levels: consciousness, the unconscious, and the preconscious, with the unconscious being closely linked to the act of dreaming. It can be said that our subconscious shapes the content of dreams, while dreams, in turn, contain diverse information from the unconscious.

The unconscious is like a mysterious "black box" hidden deep within our psyche, storing a vast amount of thoughts, desires, and memories that remain undetected in our daily lives. When we dream, the contents of the subconscious "surface" and sway the course of the dream. For example, if you have a strong yearning for something during the day but are unable to fulfill it due to various reasons, that desire might materialize in the dream in extraordinary ways.

Instincts are the internal driving forces behind our actions, compelling us to take steps to acquire the energy essential for survival and development. Initially, Freud classified instincts into the self-preservation instinct and the sexual instinct. The sexual instinct, the most primitive and natural impulse in humans, adheres to the pleasure principle, seeking only immediate pleasure and satisfaction, with little regard for external rules and constraints. Just as a baby instinctively cries for food when hungry, without considering mealtime or the surrounding environment.

Personality, according to Freud, is composed of three intricate systems: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id, part of the unconscious and the source of all psychological energy, operates solely on the pleasure principle, focused on satisfying immediate desires without considering long-term consequences. The ego, situated between consciousness and the unconscious, while desiring pleasure, also takes into account real-world factors. In contrast to the id's idealism, the ego is more grounded in reality. The superego functions as a monitor, overseeing the id and the ego.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud further pointed out that although we are in an unconscious state while dreaming, dreams are not direct manifestations of unconscious desires but are rather modified or veiled. Even during sleep, the individual's level of consciousness exerts a certain degree of censorship and resistance to unconscious desires. The individual's consciousness constantly assesses whether personal behavior conforms to moral standards. As a result, to find their way into dreams, some desires appear in distorted forms, like donning an inconspicuous or appealing guise to seem less blatant or more in line with universal moral norms. Just as Zhuangzi, in his dream, wholeheartedly embraced the pleasure principle, not pausing to ponder or judge the strangeness of being a butterfly. Instead, he quickly adapted to the role and indulged in the butterfly's free-spirited existence. In this process, his subconscious managed to elude various social expectations and controls, becoming fully immersed in immediate pleasure and contentment.

## 3. Surrealist artists under the psychoanalytic theory

Freud's dream analysis and psychoanalysis have left an indelible mark on numerous philosophers, psychologists, and artists in subsequent generations. Among them, the surrealists were perhaps the most profoundly influenced. In 1921, the French poet André Breton visited Dr. Freud and, within three years, published the "Surrealist Manifesto [4]." He contended that people were living in an era

dominated by logic, yet the prevailing logical methods were only employed to address secondary issues. He emphasized that the essence of surrealism was a literary movement and an artistic revolution that transcended reality. Under the sway of Freud's theory and methods, surrealists expressed the true inner world of humans through free association and unconscious creation.

André Breton, a representative figure of surrealism, was as unconventional as his friend Marcel Duchamp. As one of the pivotal figures during the Dadaist and surrealist eras, Breton was an adept debater with a unique style. In the idiosyncratic world he constructed, the boundaries between emotions, thoughts, and reality were perpetually blurred and defied precise definition. After extensive deliberation on numerous surrealist tenets, André penned a brief yet unforgettable romantic story. The protagonist was his fiancée. Whether she was a real person remains uncertain, but her name, Nadja [5], is replete with strong surrealist symbolism. In Russian, "Nadja" is the beginning of the word for "hope," symbolizing boundless possibilities and beautiful dreams. In Spanish, "Nadie," which sounds similar, means "no one," representing emptiness and loneliness. This contradictory naming seems to have foreshadowed from the start that Nadja was a complex and paradoxical figure in André's soul. She was a flesh - and - blood woman, yet at the same time, she was like a reflection in a mirror or water, enshrouded in an aura of unreality and mystery. Their love story was passionate and tumultuous, mirroring André's own obsession with surrealism. This woman was André's emotional anchor for surrealism, birthed from his subconscious. Her existence for André was akin to that of the butterfly for Zhuangzi, a vessel of desires and a focal point bridging dreams and reality.

Surrealist artists employ a profusion of symbols and images to convey their subconscious and dreams. These symbols and images are closely intertwined with the philosophical thoughts and aesthetic outlooks expressed in the Chinese myth "Zhuang Zhou's Dream of the Butterfly." Both make use of symbols, and in the created artistic realm, time seems to stand still, and space appears to dissipate. We can sense the conflict between contradiction and harmony, freedom and transformation. It represents a connection between the individual and the universe, transcending a mere reflection of the individual self. In daily life, people typically act in a conventional manner, making well - thought - out decisions. However, the power of the subconscious often surfaces unexpectedly, compelling us to have thoughts and impulses that defy logic. These thoughts might signify a deep - seated longing for or reaction to certain situations, or even a rebellion against social norms. Dreams, as an outlet for the unconscious, often lay bare our truest emotions and unfulfilled desires. They can also serve as a means of satisfying desires, expressing inner conflicts and desires through symbols and metaphors. Surrealist artists capitalize on this concept, using the portrayal of dreams and fantasies to explore and reveal the contents of the unconscious. Their works are frequently replete with eerie images and illogical scenarios, directly mirroring the subconscious.

Under the influence of psychoanalytic theory, surrealist artists embarked on an exploration of the deep - seated structure of the unconscious, attempting to unearth the desires and conflicts hidden within the human soul through dreams, fantasies, and free associations [6]. Surrealism is far more than just an artistic style; it represents a profound inquiry into the human psyche. In this process, artistic creation is seen as an exploration of the subconscious and a means of self - reflection and understanding. The core concept of surrealism is to surmount reason and enter a more liberated and authentic state. Artists believe that rich emotions and unexpressed desires reside in the unconscious, yet their contents are often suppressed by social moral norms and rational thinking. Surrealists use artistic creation to shatter these fetters and release the pent - up emotions and imagination. Their works are often filled with dreamlike scenes and bizarre combinations, challenging the audience's traditional ways of thinking and prompting them to reexamine their inner worlds. For example, among the numerous surrealist artists, Max Ernst is one of the most influential. His contributions to the surrealist and Dadaist movements are undeniable. He was not only a painter and sculptor but also a poet.

In his artistic oeuvre, Ernst employed a plethora of innovative techniques, not confined to traditional oil painting but also venturing into collage, graffiti, and printing. His collage works utilized free association, combining disparate images and materials such as old books, magazines, and other printed matter. He skillfully reconfigured these elements to form new narratives and visual effects, thereby creating novel visual experiences. In one of his works, there is a fantastical black forest that seems to harbor mysterious powers, exuding a strong sense of oppression. The central figure in the picture is a caged bird, which may represent his self - projection and self - reflection. Upon viewing this work, one can't help but wonder: Did he truly experience all of this? Did he ever enter a similar black forest? I suspect not; it may well be a childhood nightmare of Ernst's. Through this artistic technique, Ernst not only probed his own inner fears but also unveiled the innate human desire for and fear of the unknown within the subconscious. This work elicits a profound emotional resonance in the audience, as if engaging them in a dialogue with the artist's inner struggles.



Figure 1: Forest and Dove, 1927, Oli painting, Tate gallery, London

#### 4. The emotional collision in art

Contemplating the relationship between reality and dreams is tantamount to reflecting on the essence of human consciousness and existence. When dream experiences are overwhelmingly real, discerning between reality and dreams becomes a philosophical quandary. Exploring self - consciousness, on the other hand, is a revolution that transcends the bounds of reality. Over the past century, self - exploration has inspired countless artists. By studying the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western concepts of pursuing dreams, as well as the historical factors underlying them, we can gain a thorough understanding of the integrated Chinese - Western dream - pursuing concepts and integrate them into artistic creations.

This exploration not only enriches our comprehension of the human psyche but also challenges the boundaries of artistic expression. Artists often strive to capture the ephemeral nature of dreams, using a variety of media to convey the fluidity of thoughts and emotions. The interaction between the conscious and the subconscious has sparked a cross - cultural dialogue, uncovering the transformation of themes such as identity, desire, and transformation. By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, contemporary artists can create works that resonate on multiple levels, inviting the audience to engage with their inner worlds and question the nature of reality. This ongoing dialogue between dreams and reality continuously fuels innovative approaches in art, literature, and philosophy, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexity of human experience.

In the realm of art, the exploration of dreams has led to the emergence of unique art forms. Take, for example, the works of Salvador Dalí. His paintings, such as "The Persistence of Memory," with its

melting clocks and distorted landscapes, are iconic representations of the surreal dream world. The soft, melting clocks seem to defy the normal perception of time, just as dreams often disrupt our sense of the linear passage of time. These artworks not only showcase the power of the subconscious in artistic creation but also invite the viewers to question their own perception of reality.

## 5. Conclusion

Research findings indicate that there are many similarities between Zhuangzi's "Dream of the Butterfly" in China and Freud's theory of dream analysis in the West. Both serve as cornerstones, laying a solid foundation for subsequent artistic and literary creations. Everyone has their own "spiritual outlet". Dreams, originating from fragments of memory and inner desires, act as a bridge connecting the self to the world and bridging dreams and reality. Exploring this intersection has always been a key issue in the fields of art and philosophy. It not only leads us to perceive the depth of our existence and question its essence, but also enables us to express ineffable emotions through art, triggering collective resonance and driving us to explore new dimensions of human creativity and understanding.

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