Nightmares have had an abundant life in the visual arts from the earliest days of human culture. Gombrich (1961) has suggested that much of the art from prehistory as well as primitive art was created as a means of providing some magical assistance to a vulnerable humanity in a hostile world. Giving symbolic representation to the seemingly implacable forces of nature was possibly an act of propitiation.

Nightmares and dreams are seminal elements in the creative process. In the 20th century dreams have played a significant role in various visual media including film, television and comic books. The comic books in particular give evidence of many mythological motifs structurally similar to those produced in dreams.

Goethe was speaking of dreams when he stated, “These whimsical pictures, inasmuch as they originate from us, may well have an analogy with our whole life and fate,” (Fromm, 1951, p. 142). Yet what Goethe suggests may be true of dreams may apply equally to the whimsical and intellectually disreputable graphic story medium of comic strips and comic books. The comics are as fugitive to “serious” literature as dreams are to the reality of waking life. The graphic story medium is, in effect, a waking dream, a momentary regression to the primacy of image.

Significantly Goethe refers to dreams as “pictures” for dreams consist, like the comic strips, of a story told in a sequence of images. The visual narrative in art dates back to 4000 B.C. with stone carvings documenting a Sumerian king’s triumphs (Horn, 1974, p. 14). Language itself at one time consisted of a series of pictures called pictographs. As the pictograph acquired symbolic weight it conveyed an idea other than the object depicted and became an ideograph (Johnson, 1971). With the cartouche or word balloon which is a distinguishing feature of comic strips the medium combines pictographic and ideographic expression. In both the individual and collective life vision precedes speech.

Graphically, comics evolve from the “doodle.” Doodles are a safety valve for the unconscious mind (Politzer, 1949). As transitory as dreams, they are scribbled glosses in the margin of life that emerge when the rational mind is distracted or at bay. If the left hand is the dreamer then it is the left hand that doodles.
The most successful of the newspaper comic strips are openly derived from the doodle. So the comics rise, in a sense, from an individual unconscious and through a vast technological corpus effectively harmonize with the unconscious depths of the public. Identification is strong because the reader is also a doodler. The reader could easily have drawn the comic strip.

Comic strips became a regular feature in newspapers with Richard Outcault's Yellow Kid appearing in the New York World in 1896 (Daniels, 1971). Motion pictures and comic strips began to proliferate at the same time that Sigmund Freud began to publish his revolutionary theories based, in part, on studies of the dream.

Most of the early comic strips were domestic comedies. But one artist in particular, Winsor McCay, made dreams and nightmares his special forte. The earliest of McCay's comic strips (1905) is The Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend. When the hero of this strip eats too much Welsh rarebit before bedtime he experiences a series of fantastic nightmares. The hapless dreamer flies above the city at night on his bed and awakens abruptly. McCay, using a process of his own invention called "animated drawing," made The Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend into a series of animated films. One of these versions features a flying house that is propelled by a large gasoline engine in the attic. The occupants of the house fly to the moon and into space in what is a rather elaborate science fiction fantasy. Another version depicts a rat that grows to an enormous size.

Winsor McCay's masterpiece was the comic strip Little Nemo in Slumberland (see Figure 1) which appeared in many different newspapers from 1905 to 1927 (Politzer, 1949). The artwork in Little Nemo has an ornate, bizarre quality. McCay utilized his technical virtuosity to wreak havoc with the visual laws of time and space. In one strip a little man who suddenly appears commands Little Nemo's bed to begin walking (McCay, 1960, p. 37). The bed walks on spaghetti legs about the city. In another strip Slumberland is seen arising from the ground in a series of elaborate panels (McCay, 1960, p. 35). It effectively provides a visual model for the immanence of the subconscious mind ascending into consciousness.

As McCay's Little Nemo appeared in America, the surrealist artists in Europe, following Freud's lead, were making investigations into the aesthetic potential of dreams (Cardinal & Short, 1970). Automatic writing was used in an attempt to directly tap the unconscious mind. Drawings and paintings were produced in simulated dream states.

Another popular early strip was Krazy Kat by George Herriman (see Figure 2). First appearing in 1908, Krazy Kat was a symbolic world of animals that talked and acted like people. Krazy Kat is an early prototype for the "funny animal" genre which is a prominent feature of American popular culture and particularly the comic books. Some better known funny animals of the present day are Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Pogo and Bugs Bunny. There is no overt concern with dreams in Krazy Kat aside from its symbolic base. Yet there is an essential, irrational element in the strip. Looking closely at the backgrounds it is evident that there are slight but arresting changes from panel to panel (Herriman, 1946). This element of mutability gives the strip a distinctly dreamlike character.

Motifs combining animal and human imagery have an ancient life in the history of art. Many different cultures have myths involving the marriage of human and animal forms. Ernest Jones in his work On the Nightmare postulates that dreams have contributed to the idea of a soul that can live and move apart from the body, fly and enter other humans and animals. The ancient Egyptians, who gave us the
cartouche, worshipped such gods as the hawk-headed Horus and the cat goddess Bubastis. The nightmarish paintings of Hieronymous Bosch which prefigure the visual dynamism of comic books feature grotesque combinations of animal, vegetable, mechanical and human elements.

Interestingly, a synonym for the word grotesque which came into use in 16th century Italy was *sogni dei pittori* or dreams of painters (Kayser, 1963). Excavations in the 15th century had brought a grotesque art style to light that dated from the time of Augustus. It featured the marriage of human and vegetable forms. Albrecht Dürer was familiar with this "new" style when he wrote; "If a person wants to create the stuff that dreams are made of, let him freely mix all sorts of creatures" (Kayser, 1963, p. 22).

In positing the existence of the unconscious Freud (1901/1952) divided the content of dreams into manifest and latent content. The manifest dream is largely a pictorial drama and psychoanalysis is the process by which the latent content of the dream is brought forth. Only after a process of dreamwork involving condensation and displacement is the latent content sufficiently disguised to be in the manifest dream. Freud characterized the dreamwork as the guardian of sleep. An early edition of his (1900) *Interpretation of Dreams* contained a visual narrative that illustrated the principle of dreams as the guardians of sleep (MacKenzie, 1965) (see Figure 3).

The manifest dream is a dramatization in which two or more elements are given a logical connection by proximity in time and space. Composite figures, collective structures not unlike those out of folklore, are created in an inexhaustible variety.

Carl Jung in *Man and His Symbols* (1964) has elaborated some of the characteristics of the archetypes that recur in dreams on a widespread basis regardless of time or place:

> The experienced investigator of the mind can similarly see the analogies between the dream pictures of modern man and the products of the primitive mind, its "collective images," and its mythological motifs. (p. 67)

Archetypes arise as a result of the human psyche's age-old collective basis. Jung characterizes the dream as the dominant symbol-making mode of humanity.

The graphic story medium of comic books is visually analogous to the dream. With the staggering varieties of superheroes the comic books feature characters that are composites or "collective images" similar to those the human mind produces in dreams. We find that human and animal elements are mixed with such characters as *Spiderwoman*, *Batman*, *Hawkman* and *Black Panther*. Vegetable elements are used with such characters as *Swamp Thing*, *Woodgod* and *The Heap*. Humans combined with machines are to be found in *Machine Man*, *Bionic Woman* and *Deathlok*, the *Destroyer*.

Comic books became a regular aspect of American life in the late thirties (Daniels, 1971). It was the appearance of Superman in National Periodical's (1938) *Action Comics* No. 1 that set off the "golden age" of comic books. Superheroes proliferated in an overwhelming profusion. World War II was the backdrop for the golden age. The comic books were a four-color battleground for the superheroes and sidekicks to punch it out with the enemy. Superman remained the most popular character and began appearing in a syndicated comic strip and a series of films.
The common element in children’s dreams, Freud found (1901/1952), is fulfillment of a wish denied in waking life. Superman is a child’s dream in pictures. Through Superman the child gains emotional compensation for being small and vulnerable in a world of giants. Jones (1951, p. 66) remarks that dreams comprise the myths of the individual. Myths, he also notes, contain in disguised form the childhood wishes of the human race.

There were many critics of the superhero comic books. Gershon Legman (1949) charged that the comic books allowed a child to consummate his “Oedipean dream of strength” (p. 43). But Superman is a child of the Hitlerian age, a mythic hero with a technological face.

Carl Jung (1964) has discussed the recurrence of “the antique mystery of the god-man, which has its roots in the archetypal Osiris-Horus myth of ancient Egypt” (p. 79). The universal hero myth always refers to a god-man who vanquishes evil in the form of monsters, demons, and dragons and liberates his race from destruction. In classic literature we have the heroes Beowulf, Hercules, and Odysseus defeating such monsters as Grendel, the Minotaur, and the Cyclops. These ancient heroes and their conflicts have all been recently represented in comic books.

The myth of the hero is the primary idiom of the comic books. This myth has been variously represented in the visual arts thousands of years prior to the invention of comic books (Abell, 1957). Albrecht Dürer with the woodcut entitled St. Michael’s Fight against the Dragon (see Figure 4) from the 1498 series illustrating the Book of Revelation has given us one of the paramount expressions of the theme of hero and monster (Gombrich, 1961, p. 252). St. Michael is seen thrusting a long spear into the dragon’s throat. The various demons surrounding St. Michael are as grotesque as any that ever appeared in a comic book. This woodcut symbolizes a divided self, humanity in conflict with its own unconscious instincts. It also illustrates one of the most visionary books from the Bible with a graphic evocation of doomsday.

Dreams have been regarded from oldest times to the present as signs and portents of the future (Fromm, 1951). The early science fiction comic strips, Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon which first appeared in 1929 and 1934 respectively, might be considered oracles for a technological society. By 1981 many of the inventions and triumphs of science predicted in these strips such as television, space flight, mechanical body parts, and laser guns have become scientific realities.

One of the early superheroes from the golden age of comic books made use of sleep and dreams in his war on crime. “The Sandman” debuted in National Periodicals’s (1939) Adventure Comics No. 40, and in this early version, the Sandman wears a purple cape and a gas mask topped with a homburg hat. Using a strange gun of his own invention which emits a sleep-inducing gas the Sandman breaks up a kidnapping operation.

In reality the Sandman was wealthy bachelor Wesley Dodd, true to the forties standard that all superheroes had dual identities. Superman, otherwise known as Clark Kent, was the prototype. To further disguise their identity many of the superheroes wore masks. The mask is a symbol of our dual life on earth as waking and sleeping, social and asocial creatures. By day the superhero is a respectable scion of the community, but at night a mask is worn with a fanciful disguise to wage war on crime. Perhaps Clark Kent only dreams that he is Superman.
Winsor McCay was one of the first comic strip artists in America and one of the best. No other cartoonist has been able to equal McCay’s humorous graphic trickery in his unforgettable comic strip . . .
These drawings are from an early edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. They depict the dream of a nurserymaid whose child cries during the night because he wants to go to the lavatory. The dream tries to guard her sleep by showing him doing so. But the child continues to cry and she dreams that the pool floods the town becoming a sea, until finally the dream can no longer prevent her from waking.
Figure 3: The Dream as the Guardian of Sleep.

Figure 4: Albrecht Dürer:
St. Michael's Fight Against the Dragon.
Figure 5: “The culture-wide pervasiveness of Freudian theories.”
Figure 7: The eruption of unconscious instincts symbolized by a horse.

With The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde published in 1886 Robert Louis Stevenson, inspired by nightmares, has given us one of our most enduring tales of the dual life of humankind. It is a cautionary tale and a parable that vividly dramatizes Freud's concept of the unconscious. As a metaphor for the irrational unconscious Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde has been one of the most significant motifs in comic books. A popular character of the present day in comic books and television is Marvel's The Incredible Hulk. The Hulk is a symbolic expression of the instinctual unconscious derived from Stevenson's early model.

The masterful manner in which "EC" comics dealt with hallucination and insanity can be seen in The Vault of Horror No. 32 (1953). Written by EC stalwart Albert Feldstein, the story is entitled "Whirlpool" and features deft rendering by Johnny Craig of a cyclic nightmare in a modern setting. A young woman is confronted by three demonic faces inquiring her name; frightened she flees down the corridors of her own haunted imagination. She is then seized and successively dropped in boiling water, covered with ice cubes, tied in an electric chair and electrocuted. In a series of sequentially smaller panels her claustrophobia is conveyed. Finally the young woman is taken before three elderly gentlemen. When she tells of her sufferings the gentlemen explain that the torture she has endured is part of her therapy. Hot and cold baths with electroshock therapy have been used upon her. She refuses to face reality as the faces of the three elderly gentlemen change slowly into the demonic faces witnessed at the outset. The nightmare begins anew.

A minor classic of the cyclic nightmare genre appeared in the (1953) comic book from Star Publications Ghostly Weird Stories No. 120. Entitled "Night-Monster," the story is an autobiographical fantasy written and illustrated by Jayson Disbrow. The story involves a comic strip artist named Ray Alexander (a tribute to Alex Raymond who worked on the Flash Gordon newspaper strip). Told by his editor that "Weird stories are the hottest things on the newsstands today! The public is demanding them! People have a subconscious desire to be frightened!" (Disbrow, 1953, p. 2), the artist is commissioned to come up with a gruesome creature as he can imagine. To achieve the proper atmosphere the artist goes from his bed to a graveyard late at night. There he encounters a monstrous demon with four arms which begins to strangle the artist. The artist suddenly awakens to find the bed sheets tangled around his neck. He proceeds to illustrate his nightmare as a comic strip; the editor is pleased with the results. However, at home once again the artist finds some heavy matted hair in his house: Is the monster real? The story ends on this ambiguous note. Disbrow accurately symbolizes the unconscious in the guise of a shadowy, second self.

By the early 1950's Freud’s theories had become quite widespread. Popular films like Hitchcock's Spellbound and The Three Faces of Eve had successfully conveyed the concept of the unconscious. When psychoanalytic stories began appearing in comic books it was a sign of the culture-wide pervasiveness of Freudian theories in America.

"We will buy your dreams! (See details inside)" reads the cover of a (1952) Prize comic book entitled The Strange World of Your Dreams Vol. 1, No. 1. The cover of this book depicts a dreamer asleep above her head Charon rows her spirit-body in a boat across the River Styx. The Strange World of Your Dreams features stories from the casebook of Dr. Richard Temple. The doctor dressed in a plain suit with an omnipresent pipe in hand, analyzes the dreams of the readers. Readers whose dreams were chosen for dramatization were paid $25.00.

As a result of attacks by Gershon Legman (1949), Fredric Wertham (1954) and others the comic book industry drew up a code of self-regulation which eliminated stories of horror and terror (Daniels, 1971, p. 89). By 1955 such derivatives of the unconscious as vampires, werewolves, and the walking dead could not appear in comic books with a seal of the Comics Code Authority. The EC comics were on the way out. But before ceasing to publish comic books altogether Gaines started an experimental line of "New Direction" comic books. One of these comics entitled Psychoanalysis (Feldstein & Kamen, 1955) presented dramatizations of classic
Freudian conflicts. Excellent art by Jack Kamen depicts the psychiatrist hero delving into his patient’s dreams and fantasies.

The cover of *Psychoanalysis* No. 3 (Feldstein & Kamen, 1955) illustrates a dream of one of the doctor’s female patients (see Figure 5). A deep, surrealistic background surrounds the dreamer. A telescoping series of eyes reflects her anxiety. Within the story the psychiatrist helps his patient to discover the latent meaning of her dream by analyzing the manifest content. In another story a male patient has a nightmare in which he is attacked by an automobile. The psychiatrist explains that the nightmare symbolizes the dreamer’s ambivalent emotions toward the opposite sex.

Many of the comic book stories about nightmares deal with the dream as a prophetic warning. This cautionary kind of dream is dramatized in the (1957) St. John comic book *Do You Believe in Nightmares* Vol. 1, No. 1. Artist Steve Ditko, later known for his work on *The Amazing Spiderman* and *Doctor Strange*, renders an atmospheric tale in which a man, heeding his wife’s dream of a few nights prior, saves his own life as a result.

In the early sixties Stan Lee inaugurated the enormously successful line of superheroes in Marvel Comics. One of the characters created at this time was *Doctor Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts*. In his first appearance in *Strange Tales* No. 110 (Lee & Ditko, 1963) Doctor Strange is beseeched for help by a man plagued with nightmares. That night Doctor Strange in his astral body enters the man’s dreams. The dreamer has an act of evil on his conscience and awakens. Fearful of discovery, he plans to kill Doctor Strange’s lifeless body. The astral body of Doctor Strange is meanwhile being held a prisoner in the dream dimension by the mysterious figure of “Nightmare” who has appeared suddenly on an ominous horse. With the aid of his master, the “Ancient One,” Doctor Strange escapes the dream dimension before his earthly body is destroyed.

To balance his early weaknesses the archetypal hero is often accompanied by a tutelary or guardian figure (Jung, 1964). In Greek myth Theseus had Poseidon and Perseus had Athena as tutors. The figure of the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* is the archetypal tutelary figure. This figure symbolically represents the whole psyche, the complete identity which the ego of the hero lacks until the process of individuation, symbolized by the destruction of the monster, is complete.

In *Strange Tales* No. 116 (Lee & Ditko, 1964) Doctor Strange returns to the dream dimension when the tyrant Nightmare begins to imprison the souls of sleepers there (see Figure 6). Steve Ditko masterfully renders the hallucinatory realms of dreams as Doctor Strange frees the imprisoned souls of the sleepers. Nightmare, depicted as a pale jester, is once again defeated in an occult battle of wits.

It is a common belief in some cultures that the soul of a sleeper wanders away from the body during sleep (Frazer & Gaster, 1964). If the soul is prevented by accident or design from returning to the body then death is thought to ensue. With the character of Doctor Strange this atavism has been given a fanciful, graphic expression.

Artist Dan Adkins in *Doctor Strange* No. 170 (Thomas & Adkins, 1968, pp. 16-17) has rendered the character of Nightmare seated on a horse that resembles a malevolent, black unicorn (see Figure 7). Ernest Jones (1951) has demonstrated the extensive connection the figure of the horse has to ideas of the supernatural. Henry Fuseli depicted this archetypal horse in his classic nightmare painting.
Besides representing the animal nature, the horse symbolizes the eruption of unconscious instincts. Many myths worldwide connect the horse to sleep and nightmares.

In 1971 the Comics Code Authority revised its standards to “meet contemporary standards of conduct” (Goldwater, 1974, p. 19). The code now permits vampires and werewolves when handled in the “classic tradition such as Frankenstein and Dracula” (p. 20). Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein like Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was inspired by a nightmare. Bram Stoker’s Dracula is also one of the most enduring characters in popular culture. All these nightmare creations have had a vigorous life in the graphic story medium despite the Comics Code Authority.

National Periodical revived the character of The Sandman (Kirby & Simon) in 1974 and gave him his own comic book. Outstanding Jack Kirby art depicts the Sandman monitoring dreams in a new red and yellow costume. Kirby also worked on the Sandman back in the forties. Technology abounds in this new Sandman and it reflects the scientific progress of recent years. A complex machine called the “Universal Dream Monitor” depicts the images in dreams all around the world on a series of video screens. There is a special machine called the “Nightmare Alert.” Using these machines the Sandman prevents a world takeover by an evil genius with a mechanical brain named “General Electric.”

In the second issue of The Sandman (Fleisher & Chua, 1975) a certain Dr. Spider removes nightmare demons from the “universal dreamstream” so that he might use them to enslave the world. Despite mechanical improvements the Sandman still uses sand to administer sleep to those who would thwart him. The Sandman is a technological fantasy utilizing the concept of a collective unconscious.

By nurturing timeless myths and giving them representation in the contemporary world comic books are true votaries of Homeric culture. The icons and songs have been replaced by newsprint and TV. Besides a cultural and social history the comic books provide a perpetual voyage of discovery in which the image of the hero is ever updated.

Comic strips and comic books are an expression of the primordial character of image. The artists who create them may be said to be Sandmen who, soothing the imperatives of logic, awaken latent images of the subconscious mind and give them graphic life in print and four colors. The public of dreamers instinctively recognizes these images.

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