IVAN FYODOROVICH SHPON’KA
AND HIS NIGHTMARE

Michael R. Katz

In Russia during the early part of the 19th century, writers became fascinated by dreams and nightmares. It is virtually impossible to find any major work of the period in which fictional characters do not witness imaginative night visions. The dream was unique as a literary device inasmuch as it provided Russian writers with their first means of depicting the human unconscious in literature. Well before Freud formulated his psychoanalytic system, Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy were exploring the unconscious of their fictional characters.

In the introduction to “Delusion and Dream,” Freud’s only attempt at psychoanalyzing a fictional character, Freud draws a significant methodological distinction:

There are two possible methods for this investigation; one is the delving into a special case, the dream creations of one writer in one of his works; the other consists in bringing together and comparing all the examples of the use of dreams which are found in the works of different story-tellers. The second way seems to be by far the more effective, perhaps the only justifiable one . . . .

Freud’s essay is an example of the first method, inasmuch as it treats the dreams of “one writer in one of his works.” This article is based on the second method, and is part of a larger work-in-progress which will bring together and compare “all the examples of the use of dreams which are found in the works of different story-tellers,” namely, dreams and nightmares in Russian literature from the 10th through the end of the 19th century. Here I limit my analysis to the hero’s nightmare in Nikolai Gogol’s short story, “Ivan Fyodorovich Shpon’ka and his Auntie” (1832).

The emphasis centers on dreams and nightmares as literary devices and my analysis is based on the following questions: How do dreams contribute to our understanding of fictional characterization? What functions do dreams fulfill with regard to the narrative structure of the work as a whole? How do dreams relate to the author’s principal themes? Finally, why does the dream, perhaps more than any other literary device, reveal in such concentrated form the individual characteristics of the author’s style?

Dreams and nightmares occur in all of Gogol’s major works from his early narrative poem through his Ukrainian tales, Petersburg stories, and his comedy The Inspector General (1836), to his full-length novel Dead Souls (1842). The final story
in *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, “Ivan Fyodorovich Shpon’ka and his Auntie,” deserves special consideration. It bears little resemblance to the other tales in the collection, but looks forward to the work of the mature Gogol and contains the most spectacular nightmare in all of Russian literature. Shpon’ka’s dream provides a major contribution to the hero’s fictional characterization; it fulfills an important function in the narrative structure of the story; it leads directly to a discovery of one of the author’s main themes; and it reveals in concentrated form Gogol’s mature literary style.

The central character of the story is Ivan Shpon’ka, a modest Ukrainian landowner, a bachelor, about 38 years of age. At one point his Aunt, an enormous, unmarried amazon who is managing his property with ruthless efficiency, urges him to get himself a wife. Shpon’ka is appalled at so strange, so fantastic, so incomprehensible an idea. Unable to forget his Aunt’s suggestion, he can conjure up no more than one image of married life: two people sharing one room all the time. Shpon’ka retires “earlier than usual,” and when he finally falls asleep, his unconscious, far more imaginatively than his conscious mind, devises four distinct vignettes, Gogolian “scenes from a marriage.” Each vignette contains significant references to characters and objects from his life.

First he dreamt that everything was whirling noisily around him; he was running and running, as fast as his legs could carry him. He was at his last gasp. Suddenly someone caught him by the ear. “Ouch! Who is it?” “It’s me, your wife!”, a voice resounded. And suddenly, he woke up. Then he imagined that he was already married, that everything in their little house was so peculiar, so strange: a double bed stood in his room instead of a single one. His wife was sitting on a chair. He felt strange; he didn’t know how to approach her, what to say to her; and then he noticed that she had the face of a goose. Inadvertently turning aside, he saw another wife, also with the face of a goose. Turning to another side, there was a third wife. Behind him—still another wife. He panicked and ran out into the garden, but out there it was hot. He took off his hat, and—there was a wife sitting in it. Beads of sweat ran down his face. He put his hand in his pocket for his handkerchief, and—there was a wife in his pocket, too. He took a wad of cotton out of his ear, and—there was a wife there too. Then he suddenly began hopping on one leg and his Auntie, looking at him, said with a dignified air, “Yes, you must hop now, because you are a married man.” He went towards her, but his Aunt was no longer his Aunt, but a belfry. And he felt that someone was dragging him by a rope up the belfry. “Who’s dragging me?”, he said plaintively. “It’s me, your wife. I am dragging you because you are a bell.” “No, I’m not a bell. I am Ivan Fyodorovich!” he cried. “Yes, you are a bell,” said the colonel of his (former) infantry regiment, who just happened to be passing by. Then he suddenly dreamt that his wife was not a person at all, but some kind of woolen material; and that he went into a shop in Mogilev. “What sort of material would you like?”, asked the shopkeeper. “You had better have some wife, that’s the latest thing. It wears very well. Everyone’s having coats made from it nowadays.” The shopkeeper measured and cut off a wife. Ivan Fyodorovich put her under his arm and went off to a Jewish tailor. “No,” said the Jew, “This is poor material. No one has coats made from it anymore.”

Ivan Fyodorovich woke up terrified, hardly remembering where he was, and with cold sweat pouring off him.

In the first scene Shpon’ka is exhausted from running; suddenly someone grabs him by the ear and identifies herself: “It’s me, your wife.” The reader recalls the incident which, according to the narrator, had the greatest influence on the hero’s early life, when the young Shpon’ka was caught eating that pancake and was
grabbed by the ear by his stern Latin teacher. Thus, in the very first vignette, his "wife" is identified with the strongest male authority figure in Shpon'ka's youth.

In the second scene, Shpon'ka's unconscious elaborates on the theme of his pre-sleep fantasy: his vision of married life. He and his wife share one room with a double bed; she is on a chair while he sits opposite, not knowing what to say or do. This vignette closely parallels the previous "courtship" scene with Maria Storchenko. Then Shpon'ka notices that his wife has the face of a goose, a vicious and delicious fowl, referred to earlier at the Storchenko's home, where the hero was sitting opposite Maria.

Shpon'ka then finds himself totally surrounded by goose-faced wives. This extraordinary proliferation produces intense terror in him and the feeling of claustrophobia. He flees from the house into the garden, a domain previously associated only with women. Instead of escape and relief, Shpon'ka's claustrophobia intensifies as the proliferation of wives becomes even more threatening. He doffs his hat, and discovers a wife inside; he pulls out a handkerchief, and finds another; he removes a cotton wad from his ear (the same kind that Storchenko used to keep out cockroaches), and there finds a third. The wives are closing in on his person. There is no escape.

In the third scene Shpon'ka finds himself "hopping"; Auntie says he must hop now because he is married. Auntie, the central domineering female figure in the hero's life, first devised the plan to marry him off. Here she is forcing him to perform a suggestive act against his will. Auntie is then transformed into a belfry, while another wife drags Shpon'ka by a rope up the belfry because he is now changed into a bell. When Shpon'ka protests this involuntary metamorphosis and tries to reassert his own identity, an innocent "passer-by," the colonel of his regiment, confirms that he is indeed a bell, an inanimate object.

In the fourth and final vignette the wife is transformed into woolen material which a merchant convinces Shpon'ka to buy. When he takes the "wife" to a Jewish tailor, he is informed that the material is no good at all. The merchant's persuasive order ("You'd better have some wife") echoes Auntie's original suggestion that Shpon'ka marry. Similarly, when Shpon'ka returns from the Storchenko's, Auntie had evinced particular interest in the sort of dress that Maria had on: "These days it's hard to find such strong material." The tailor's negative verdict on the same is yet another indication of the doom which Shpon'ka anticipates.

He awakes from his nightmare in terror and turns for help to an abridged dream book. But the narrator informs us that "there was absolutely nothing in it that even remotely resembled his incoherent dream." Shpon'ka finds neither explanation nor consolation.

Shpon'ka's nightmare serves as a coherent summary of the hero's character traits introduced and developed throughout the story. It not only emphasizes his passivity as he submits to others, but also reveals his mortal dread of women, marriage, and sexual intimacy. This fear becomes an obsession and results in a proliferation of aggressive wives which pursue the hero and drive him to desperation. The dream is a remarkably accurate portrait of Shpon'ka's unconscious.

As the final episode in the tale, Shpon'ka's nightmare provides a carefully ordered recapitulation of his own past, a biography in telescopic form, with allusions to all of the domineering figures in his life: his Latin teacher, the colonel of his regiment, the Storchenkos, and his Auntie. Every one of these figures exerts some form of control over Shpon'ka, and their direct or implied presence in the
dream, as they become associated with the hero’s images of married life, further reinforces his fear of emasculation. As all of the characters of his life appear before him, so too objects and places reappear: ears, beds, geese, gardens, cotton wads, material, and so on. Thus the dream is also a brilliant synthesis of all the “things” in Shpon’ka’s life.

Furthermore, the nightmare leads directly to a discovery of one of Gogol’s fundamental themes, namely, the helplessness of any one particular person before inexorable social forces, not the romantic notions of fate or the supernatural, but rather the forces of normal societal processes: courtship, marriage, and children. Shpon’ka is trapped by social conventions, and in his dream he produces a vision of life far worse than death.

The fact that Shpon’ka’s nightmare concludes the story is further evidence of the hero’s predicament. His life had been tolerable, albeit limited, until threatened by a wife; then his unconscious fear of women and sex, combined with the forces of society destroy any chance for happiness. For Shpon’ka there is no life possible after his dream, and the story ends abruptly.

Fictional characterization, narrative structure, and fundamental theme are advanced by the dream. The style of “Ivan Shpon’ka and His Auntie” is also remarkable in its use of the dream. All the other tales in Gogol’s first collection are oral narratives, related in a colloquial style, full of ethnic detail and local color. Some are love stories in which handsome Ukrainian lads pursue pretty lasses; others are tragic thrillers in which wizards and witches meddle in human affairs. Gogol freely combines farce and fantasy; his Ukrainian tales stand well within the popular romantic tradition of the period.

The one exception is “Ivan Shpon’ka.” It is introduced as a written work with a literary style suited to the choice of a more sophisticated genre. Its setting is more or less realistic: the familiar characters are drawn from the author’s own social class and the events occur at the present time. In order to distinguish his hero Gogol emphasizes his verbal incoherence, his bizarre obsessions, and his limited worldly experience. Such a portrait together with satirical remarks directed at various social institutions (education, bureaucracy, the military) introduce the world in which Gogol would set his major works.

But this realistic story unexpectedly concludes with a surrealistic nightmare. In it, all of the individual stylistic devices of the mature Gogol are previewed: people are transformed into things; images duplicate and proliferate; bizarre hyperboles, hypnotic repetitions, and illogical propositions predominate. The dream undermines the realism of the entire preceding narrative and demonstrates that the surface reality of Gogol’s world is only apparent. The genuine reality is revealed in the chaos of Shpon’ka’s nightmare.

This is the “stuff” of which not only Gogol’s dreams are made, but also his mature works. Ivan Shpon’ka’s nightmare prophesies not only that character’s imaginary fate, but also the future literary style of a great prose writer.

In describing his own role in the founding of psychoanalysis, Freud paid generous tribute to his predecessors: “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.” Throughout the 19th century Russian authors were
discovering the unconscious and exploring its mysteries in the literary dreams attributed to their fictional characters. Shpon'ka's nightmare is a striking example of that artistic exploration.

Reference Notes