

THE NIGHTMARE:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE JUNGIAN ‘SHADOW’
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The subject and purpose of Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781), which portrays an impish fiend perched atop an unconscious woman in white whilst a dark mare, partially obscured by a veil of red, watches from aside, is of much debate. Should this image instill fear? Is the woman meant to be in discomfort or pain? Perhaps it is meant to be provocative in nature, still meant to discomfort the comfortable, only through a different avenue. Perhaps the answer is both, or neither. Perhaps what *The Nightmare* is meant to instill within its observer is wholly dependent upon the observer themselves. Beyond the outward, grotesque appearance of the impish fiend and the dark mare that haunt the central figure of Fuseli's painting, an uncanny terror manifests within the subconscious mind, a familiarity of darkness on behalf of the observer is elicited, and Fuseli's

symbolism is thus displayed in full: *The Nightmare* symbolizes the 'shadow' within us, a subject of analytical psychology discussed in depth by psychiatrist Carl Jung. The shadow, according to Jung, is the metaphorical manifestation of one's darkest traits, desires, and inclinations. It is the attributes we deem 'negative' native to our personality whose existence is rejected at the unconscious level, whilst simultaneously being projected outwards unto the world around us.

To elaborate, the shadow is a product of the unknown, and the unknown is often synonymous with the gothic genre. The fear and terror instilled by the anticipation of some force whose nature is not, or cannot, be fully understood naturally blends with the genre's attempts to disturb and unsettle. The presence of the unknown is, of course, present in Fuseli's *The Nightmare*, but this unknown, like so many others within the gothic, is broad and can be subjected to no small amount of interpretation, and this is only heightened by the nature of *The Nightmare*, that being a painting, whose contents are expressed and subjectively digested visually. Psychiatrist Carl Jung understands the unknown as belonging to "two groups of objects: those which are outside and can be experienced by the senses, and those which are inside and are experienced immediately. The first group comprises the unknown in the outer world; the second the unknown in the inner world. We call this latter territory the unconscious" (Jung, 3). The 'unknown' within *The Nightmare* may begin 'outside' as we absorb its contents, analyzing the terrible and provocative imagery on display, but beyond this initial veil lies an inner unknown native not to the painting but to the self. Ever present but often unnoticed, this 'unknown' within us is reflected by *The Nightmare*. To understand why *The Nightmare* elicits feelings of the uncanny within us is to understand the 'unknown' within ourselves. In this case we may refer to this 'unknown' as what Jung called 'the shadow.'

The shadow is that darkness which lurks below the surface of each and every person. It is the negatives that contrast a person's perceived positives, those unwanted characteristics we deny and suppress within ourselves made manifest almost as a sort of 'alter-ego,' whose nature we are oblivious to (to varying degrees) even though at times our thoughts, actions, and intentions can very well be influenced by them (Jung 8). Some of these characteristics comprising the shadow can be recognized with relative ease, others however are much more difficult to identify, let alone accept, thus as Jung explains we often project them outward so as to deny them within ourselves (Jung 8-9). These projections of the shadow's characteristics, which occur at an unconscious level, "isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one" (Jung, 9).

In examining *The Nightmare* with this notion of Jung's 'shadow' in mind, two things become apparent: Firstly, the painting itself can be interpreted as an allusion to the struggle of coping with the shadow, as the central figure of the painting (the woman) confronts her own shadow, or rather a projection of it, in an unconscious state, represented by the impish fiend whose weight bears down upon her. Likewise the mare, perhaps another projection of her shadow, observes from aside this unconscious struggle, lurking unbeknownst to the woman in the dark corners of the room, rearing its head from behind the curtain of the unconscious, unknowing mind, delighting in her torment. Secondly, we may come to the revelation that this very same metaphorical struggle as depicted by Fuseli is one simultaneously experienced within ourselves, thus the uncanny terror of the unknown is felt twice over, once from without as we digest the horror of Fuseli's art and its implications, and again from within as introspection reveals that the very same darkness portrayed within the painting likewise lurks within us.

What characteristics may comprise your own shadow can be known only to yourself, for only you can discover and confront those aspects of your personality that have been locked away and repressed. However, in the case of Fuseli's *The Nightmare*, we can speculate as to the nature of the subject's shadow due to the metaphorical visualization of the shadow's projections, those being the imp and the mare. For example, the imp could represent a projection of inner insecurities, societal pressures, or a particular vice and the subsequent rejection of its existence. To reiterate, the contents of Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and their meanings are open to speculation, and these speculations are nigh endless, as was intended by Fuseli. But this in no way hinders the effectiveness of the painting. On the contrary it is precisely where the genius of gothic works such as Fuseli's *The Nightmare* lies. In attempting to understand what the contents of the painting mean, or as said in Jungian Terms, what the projections of the central figure's shadow mean, we naturally apply projections of our own shadow, consciously or unconsciously, unto the painting. Thus Fuseli, in making us explore the dark projections present within *The Nightmare*, simultaneously invites us to confront the darkest parts of ourselves.

WORKS CITED

- Fuseli, Henry. *The Nightmare*. 1781. Oil on canvas, 1.02 m x 1.27 m.
- Jung, C. G. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Princeton University Press, 1959.