

FEAR AND LOATHING WITH FREDDY CRUEGER

THE CONSTANT APPEAL OF

**A
NIGHTMARE
ON ELM STREET**



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A Nightmare on Elm Street is a film that became an instant success and even today, almost two decades later, it is still considered as a synonym for fear, even by people who have not watched it. The original *Nightmare on Elm Street* was so popular that it was followed by no less than six sequels as well as a TV series, all of which, gave rise to a new mythology, with Freddy Krueger as one of the most famous bogeymen that keep terrorising children around the world. However, by today's standards, especially when it comes to special effects, the film can be quite disappointing and contemporary audiences cannot help but notice the lack of any original plot as well as the less than adequate performances, which make one wonder what it was that made this film so famous. Despite the problems in the cinematic quality, though, the continuing appeal of *Nightmare on Elm Street* has a strong basis. The ideas and images of the film have a continuous effect and they aim directly at the human psyche.

A Nightmare on Elm Street was released in 1984 and was part of a wider horror movie outburst, which took place around the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s. According to Linda Badley, “since the late 1970s, horror has been popularly equated with the slasher” (102), which is exactly what *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is. A detailed definition of the slasher film is given by Barbara Creed:

[T]he term ‘slasher’ is used to define those films in which a psychotic killer murders a large number of people, usually with a knife or other instrument of mutilation. In the contemporary slasher film the life-and-death struggle is usually between an unknown killer and a group of young



people who seem to spend most of their time looking for a place to have sex away from the searching eyes of adults. The killer, who is usually – but not necessarily – male, stalks and kills relentlessly; his

powers are almost superhuman. His weapons are sharp instruments such as knives, pokers, axes, needles, razors. His bloodbath is finally brought to an end by one of the group – usually a woman. Intelligent, resourceful and usually not sexually active, she tends to stand apart from the others. (124)

This description of the characters as well as the structure of the slasher films is tailor-made to fit those of *Nightmare of Elm Street*.

Picking up where earlier horror films left off, slasher films produced the image of a psychotic serial killer, a monster often endowed with supernatural powers, who, according to Linda

Badley, is the descendant of Jack the Ripper and Dracula (120). Freddy Krueger is one of the most representative specimens, although, not as “unknown” as Barbara Creed’s definition would



have the killer be. What is, at first, unknown about him is his past. He is a dead child-murderer who returns to life as a sort of ghost haunting the dreams of the teenagers on Elm Street and then starts killing

them one after the other. The weapon with which he slashes his victims’ bodies and causes their blood to gush is mostly his sharp razor blade glove that he wears on his right hand.

Always in accordance with the demands of the genre, blood is an element that figures prominently in the film. It is a very significant image with many connotations attached to it. First of all, blood could be characterised as uncanny. In Freud’s words regarding the notion of the uncanny,

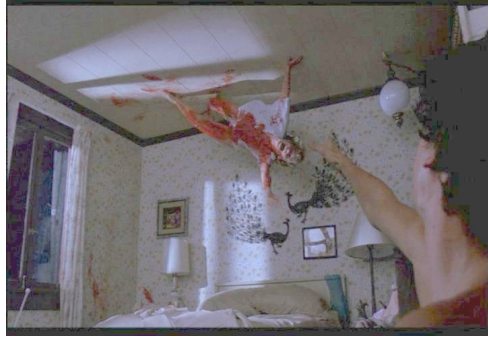


... on the one hand it means that which

is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight. . . .

According to [Schelling] everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light. (“The ‘Uncanny’” 77)

Blood is, of course, familiar, in the sense that it runs inside every human body sustaining life, but, at the same time, it is something, which should be kept inside the confines of the body and not be seen out of it. The image of blood outside the body becomes at once disturbing because it signifies death. Even though this might seem a rather unpleasant experience, the fact that the sight of blood attracts the fans of the genre could be attributed to the “repetition-compulsion”, which as



Freud informs us, “is overcoming even the pleasure principle” (PF 2: 140). Additionally, Julia Kristeva’s theory about blood is that it “becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together” (96). This grave importance which envelops the image of blood explains why it has always occupied a very special place in art and why it is so much more attractive when presented in the visual medium of film.

Furthermore, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* provides the



audience with a certain amount of violence and sex, therefore appealing to basic instincts in the human unconscious. Freud believes that the most basic are the “ego instincts” and the “sexual

instincts,” and he explains that “the former exercise pressure

towards death and the latter towards prolongation of life” (PF 11: 316). Freddy Krueger, by being both a murderer and a corpse himself, adequately caters for the “ego instincts,” or in other words, the death instincts, while the sexual ones are also represented in his method of stalking and killing his victims.

Violence is an integral part of every slasher film and, thus, a major part of the viewers’ expectations. In fact the audience identifies to a great extent with the killer in the slasher film and Freddy’s character enjoyed great popularity. According to John Fraser,

Violence . . . demonstrates the "real" nature of man, his fundamental disorderliness and will to destruction, his hatred of constraints, his resentment of ideas and all other artificial constructions. Hence the artist who deals honestly with violence becomes a kind of nose-rubber or mirror-holder, someone



rubbing the spectator's nose in the disagreeable, and holding up a mirror in which he can contemplate the essential filthiness, nastiness, and beastliness of mankind. . . . (109)

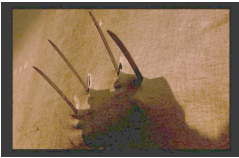
However, the appeal violence has to most people is not explained simply by the realisation that it is a part of the human psyche. What draws people to such a spectacle is more likely their need to find some kind of release for their violent instincts in a “reality” other than their own. Freud said, “It really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other thing or person in order not to destroy ourselves . . .” (PF 2: 139). People, therefore, need to divert the need for violence to a world where the expression of such a need would be harmless to themselves as well as to others. The slasher took advantage of this need and the “recipe” for *Nightmare on Elm Street* was repeated six times.

At the same time, the sexual instincts mentioned earlier are represented in the film by the sex-related bloodbath. On the one hand, Freddy's attacks bare a great deal of resemblance to a rape attack and the murder sites are always on and around the victims' beds. His last victim, Nancy's mother, does not shed a drop of blood. Instead, she dies on her bed, with Freddy on top of her, being literally on fire.



Thus, it is not only their posture but also the element of fire that reveals sexual connotations. After all, as Linda Badley says, in the 1980s, "ghosts, like everyone else, required sex, substance, and a package"(44).

Moreover, the sharp objects used as weapons by the killer in the slasher, in this case Freddy's razor blades, are phallic symbols. They are long and sharp and they're used to penetrate the bodies of the victims. Perhaps the moment in the film when this symbolism is most obvious is in the bathroom sequence. With strong echoes of Marion in *Psycho*, Nancy is relaxing in the tub when the threat appears at the most vulnerable moment. The mood is sensual and the camera position presents a sexually charged atmosphere with Nancy's legs wide apart and Freddy's claws springing from the water and hovering threateningly over her vagina. The threat of penetration is obvious but whether Freddy is intending to kill her or rape her is not as clear.



On the other hand, sex also appears to play a very important role when it comes to the group of youngsters. Unfortunately for them, however, teenagers who give in to their sexual desire are doomed by the conditions of the genre. Carol Clover points out that

In the slasher film, sexual transgressors of both sexes are scheduled for early destruction. The genre is studded with couples trying to find a place beyond purview of parents and employers where they can have sex, and immediately afterward (or during the act) being killed. (33)



Accordingly, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Tina and Rod are presented as promiscuous and are punished, and even Glen, who does not have sex, seems to be punished for thinking too much about it. In Mikita Brottman's opinion, teenagers, in their "budding sexuality," arouse disquieting feelings of desire in the



adult audience and they have to pay for it (24). Punishment of sexuality, though, is not exclusive to the slasher, nor is it a new idea. In fact, it is a common element in gothic literature where patriarchy cannot stand a sexually active female. Tina's death, as well as those of the other unfortunate females in the genre, is not much different from the death of Lucy Westenra, for example, in *Dracula*. And even though these patriarchal ideas would seem appalling to a feminist, the slasher overcame this

obstacle and presented a solution by letting a female be the only survivor, the final girl, as Carol Clover named her.



The final girl is the virgin woman who fights the monster and either defeats it or at least manages to survive. The fact that Nancy, as the final girl of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, remains a virgin is emphasised in the film every time she has to turn down Glen's sex-related suggestions. This sets her apart from the rest of the group and makes her more independent. The slasher brought a change to the theme of the weak heroine who needed the intervention of a man. This was a gradual change, which took place even as the genre developed. Isabel Cristina Pinedo observes "a shift" in the role of men, from the early films of the 70s to later films of the 80s, like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, when the woman becomes more self-reliant (77). The woman in these films takes the matter into her own hands and according to John Crossen, she becomes the one to fear, with "no more heroes [and] no more maidens. Only wonderment at who might be the one to avoid, or run from" (3). Her virginity is presented as a weapon against the killer, while at the same time it is meant to promote the idea of abstinence in the minds of the teenage viewers.

Another element that distinguishes the final girl from the rest of the group is that she is usually the only one, other than the monster, to use violence effectively and fight her attacker on the same level. Pinedo points out that

Characters who survive must come to terms not only with the irrationality of the situation but also with their own ability to be as single-mindedly destructive as the monster. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Nancy learns . . . that she too is capable of wielding violence to defend herself. (24-25)

Pinedo, however, goes on to defend this use of violence, since the choice is between killing or dying, and “[h]aving chosen to live, [the woman] is forced to use extreme violence not once but repeatedly against a killer who will not stay dead” (84). The subjective shots from the girl’s point of view are increased and the viewers identify with her fear and determination as she “encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril” (Clover 35). At the same time, they have the opportunity to feel that their craving for violence is, in such a case, justified.



Nevertheless, what finally saves Nancy is not the fact that



she returns the violence of the monster but that she takes control of her nightmares, turning her back on Freddy. The problem for her is that the killer is already dead, so her elaborate traps help in nothing more

than to slow him down. Nancy is very careful not to underestimate Freddy and manages to survive mainly because she "rejects the rational belief that dreams are not real" (Pinedo 24). Before setting out to fight him she brings to her mind her discussion with Glen about the Balinese “dream-skills” and their defence against dream-monsters. Therefore, when the time comes, Nancy turns her back on Freddy, robbing him of his power. As Linda Badley suggests, “to fight Freddy, the



woman ha[s] to . . . confront, and talk back to him, to prevent his taking control” as well as “initiate ‘dream mastery’” (167).

Dreams are the essence of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The more general plot of the film revolves around a very common structure, since, according to Linda Badley again, "plot in the usual sense was unnecessary" in the slasher film (102). The only reason why *A Nightmare on Elm Street* deserves some special attention is probably the fact that, as the title suggests, the film deals with nightmares and all the horror springs from the victims' dreams. This also explains why viewers never cease to be disturbed but at the same time attracted by this film, since people always have scary dreams of their own and this makes it easier for



them to identify with the characters in the film. As Kelly Bulkeley points out, "*A Nightmare on Elm Street* does everything it can to recreate the sensation of being trapped within a recurrent nightmare" (2).

Furthermore, *Nightmare* does not simply contain a few scary dream sequences. Instead, every part of the film is presented in the form of dreams, which are fused into the characters' "reality" to the point where distinction becomes impossible. The film assumes many of the characteristics of dreams while the audience can recognise a great number of dream images and surreal sequences. A theory, therefore, on what dreams are and how they work, would be extremely valuable for *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Dreams are a complicated phenomenon in direct contact with the human unconscious. Many aspects of their nature remain a mystery to science. The doctor at the dream institute where Nancy's mother seeks help tries to give an answer to what dreams are, calling them "mysteries.



Incredible body hocus-pocus". In the field of psychoanalysis, on

the other hand, Freud was able to provide more specific answers. In his lectures on psychoanalysis he talks extensively about the matter of dreams and draws the distinction between what we see in a dream and what is behind those images. He explains that, “what has been called the dream we shall describe as the text of the dream or the *manifest* dream, and what we are looking for, what we suspect so to say, of lying behind the dream, we shall describe as the *latent* dream-thoughts” (PF 2: 38). What appears to us in the manifest dream is not always as revealing of our subconscious thoughts because the dream is subject to the processes of dream-work, “the transformation of thoughts into a hallucinatory experience” (PF 1: 250). Symbolism and other means of distortion are employed to transform the dream-thought into images that often bear no resemblance to their source. Based on this, Freud supported perhaps the most famous idea in his theory of dreams, that, even when this doesn’t seem to be the case, the dream presents the fulfilment of a wish.

This element of wish-fulfilment in dreams exists even in the horror and anxiety of nightmares. In Freud’s theory, the wish in case of anxiety dreams



is not an acceptable one; consequently, the dream-censorship intervenes to distort it (PF 1: 251). He also thinks that while dreaming “the ego [is] freed from all ethical bonds [and] finds itself at one with all the demands of sexual desire . . .” adding that “the desire for pleasure – the ‘libido’, as we call it – chooses its objects without inhibition, and by preference, indeed, the forbidden ones” (PF 1: 175). In other words, it is taken for granted that people have all these repressed desires, which return in their dreams and it is then up to the dream-work to manipulate the images in such a way that the dreamer will not feel guilty for having such wishes in the first place. The repulsive images of a

nightmare serve, therefore, to present wish-fulfilment and at the same time satisfy the need to censor these forbidden wishes. With regard to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, wish-fulfilment appears on two different ontological levels, both without and within the fiction.

On one level, the film itself presents the fulfilment of the viewers' sexual desires. Based on Ernest Jones' theory about nightmare, Noël Carroll speaks of horror fiction in relation to nightmares and points out that the images of both are equally horrifying and equally pleasurable (170). In fact, he states that for the audience of horror, even though they might claim to find discomfort in what they see,



“this repulsion is the ticket that allows the pleasurable wish-fulfilment to be enacted” (170). This means that, like a nightmare, every horror film provides wish-fulfilment for the audience. It is only *A*

Nightmare on Elm Street, though, that combines both, by presenting horror on the screen in the form of a nightmare. Moreover, Freud explains that

. . . [although] the anxiety is the direct opposite of the wish, . . . opposites are especially close to one another in associations and . . . in the unconscious they coalesce; and further, that the punishment is also the fulfilment of a wish – of the wish of the other, censoring person. (PF 1: 257)

That “other, censoring person,” in the case of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, is the viewers. The teenage characters, who are awakening to sexual desire, are themselves a wish-fulfilment but, at the same time, there is also the wish for censorship, which is satisfied by great anxiety. In other words, it is primarily the viewers' wish that is being fulfilled in the lethal dreams of the teenagers.

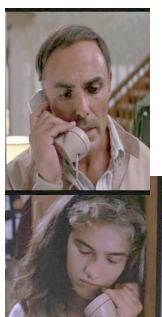
On a second level, wish-fulfilment also works within the film. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, the dreams are mainly presented from Nancy's point of view, supporting, thus, the idea that these dreams must be a wish fulfilment for her as well. After all, according to Freud, "in every dream an instinctual wish has to be represented as fulfilled" and since Nancy is dreaming, there's no reason why her wishes should be disregarded (PF 2: 47). The sexual aspect of Freddy's character has already been analysed so there's no doubt that he comes to Nancy's dreams as the obvious fulfilment of her repressed sexual desire. As for his repulsive appearance, Ernest Jones writes that

The reason why the object seen in a nightmare is frightful or hideous is simply that the representation of the underlying wish is not permitted in its naked form so that the dream is a compromise of the wish on the one hand and on the other of the intense fear belonging to inhibition. (78)



The horrific images that surround Freddy are, therefore, explained as the dream-work's distortion of the original wish.

Furthermore, apart from the mere sexual wish behind Freddy's appearance in her nightmares, there seems to be more forbidden desire in Nancy's subconscious. The viewers may also identify with Nancy's incestuous desire. Freud lists incest as one of the primal instincts with many laws designed to protect societies against it. It is not strange, then, that Nancy's conscious wish that her father were closer to her seems to correspond with a subconscious wish for incest. In the film she



continuously asks for his help, which only accentuates his absence from her side. He only appears after the first murder and even then his role is that of the police lieutenant and not of



Nancy's father. Until the very end he fails to believe or understand his daughter. When in the end Nancy sends her father downstairs and beats Freddy by turning her back and refusing to give him any more power over her, it is as if she

decides that in order to survive she has to disentangle herself from the patriarchal power once and for all. This provides even further excuse for Freddy's disfigurement and the fact that he's out to kill her, since, as Freud says, "the worse the wish that has to be censored", the greater the dream-distortion (PF 1: 176). After all, it may be something more than coincidence that the monster in this film is called Freddy, a name that sounds so much like the word "daddy".



The fact that Freddy could represent Nancy's wish for her father in her dream, introduces the theme of the double. The *döppelgänger*, as it is called, is a theme that appears with great frequency both in dreams and in fiction. Freud talks about "displacement" as a tool for dream-work and explains that sometimes "a latent element is replaced not by a component part of itself but by something more remote – that is, by an allusion" (PF 1: 208). In Nancy's dreams it seems that her father is replaced by Freddy and in this way the two characters become the double of one another. Apart from the fact that they both have power over Nancy, most of their characteristics are diametrically opposed. Lieutenant Thompson is an upholder of the law, a man of reason and fact who will not believe his daughter's testimony of the supernatural and is constantly distant from her. On the contrary, Freddy is not bound by any laws and even during his

life had found a way to evade justice. His condition as a sort of a ghost makes him by definition a supernatural creature, while, far from being away, he is always haunting Nancy and her friends. As we know, in the unconscious opposite ideas coincide; thus, the dissimilar traits Freddy demonstrates seem to be an allusion to those of Nancy's father.

Meanwhile, the doubling in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* continues and Robert Rogers, who reviews Freud's ideas, agrees with him that the self "can achieve multiple representation either directly or by virtue of its identifications with other personages in the dream" (11). In this sense, the couple of Tina and Rod is a double for the couple of Nancy and Glen. Again, the elements that characterise



the two couples are poles apart from each other. Nancy refuses her boyfriend's sexual advances and her dressing code is also quite modest, while Tina is a lot more provocative and spends the greatest part of her film-time in revealing clothes. In fact, they're not so different from Mina and Lucy respectively, who are their gothic predecessors in *Dracula*. The two girls also differ in their attitude towards horror. While Nancy gets to be the final girl of the movie, Tina runs and screams without ever actually defending herself. Moreover, the fact that, as doubles for each other, the girls are interchangeable seems to justify Tina's dreams. Otherwise, it would be awkward to witness Tina's nightmares when it is Nancy's wish-fulfilment that is being enacted. This identification is stressed by the common condition that the two girls seem to live in. They are both teenagers, growing inside a broken family where the paternal element is visibly absent.



Similarly, when it comes to the boys, Glen is the “good guy” and although in this genre he doesn’t get to save the girl, he is much like the gothic hero, always respectful towards her wishes, even if that makes him think that “morality sucks.” Rod, on the other hand, resembles the villain of the



gothic, who is aggressive and his advances towards the heroine seem more like rape. As Tina describes it, he’s the “jungle man” who “fix[es] Jane.” In this sense, Rod is a lot more like Freddy, even threatening to kill Glen in the scene outside Tina’s house. It seems, then, that censorship distorts Nancy’s repressed wish for a sexually active relationship by displacing it on the other couple.

At the same time, the most prominent of these couplings is that of Nancy with her evil counterpart, Freddy. It is a rule of the genre that the monster in the slasher meets his match in the final girl, so the battle between good and evil usually takes place between the two. The fact that Freddy appears in dreams after his death makes him more of a ghost than any other kind of monster. Robert Rogers says about ghosts that they are similar to primitive soul-doubles, with the only difference that the latter were “merely second selves and not antagonists” (9). Freud agrees that “the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death,’” which later became “a vision of terror” (“Uncanny” 82-83). It is Nancy’s own self, her desire and wish-fulfilment that is really haunting her. It is not unusual that the battle of good and evil in fiction takes place inside the protagonist’s psyche, but in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* the battleground is literally inside Nancy, since it is in her dreams.

Just like the *döppelgänger*, surrealist images are characteristic of dreams and at the same time a popular trait in art. A reason why people seem to enjoy surrealism is that, without necessarily being supernatural, it presents “reality” from a different, distorted and at the same time fresh point of view, demolishing the austere and restraining constructs of “normal” perception. Dreamlike images find their representation in art through the paintings of Dali and Magritte, for example, but at the same time, through films such as Burton’s *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands*, or even Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Linda Badley describes Freddy Krueger as “the contemporary ghost par excellence, [who] turned life into dream, the body into surrealistic image, and culture and history into special effects” (52). Freddy’s body is surrealistic in the sense that it is not confined by a permanent shape. His hand can stretch out to cover the width of a road while he can spring out of a



telephone to kiss Nancy. What is more, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, like a dream that it is, has no respect for time or space. For example, in order to get to the boiler room Nancy goes through the basement of her house and keeps descending stairs, as if the boiler room was situated below her basement. A while later, she jumps from the same boiler room and falls right outside her house. As for the time it takes her to prepare the traps for Freddy, it would be surreal even to think that it all happens within ten minutes as is indicated in the film. Isabel Cristina Pinedo remarks that in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* “time is unhinged, and this adds to the dreamlike texture of

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the film” (26). In fact, this surreal element brings the film so much closer to dream imagery that the audience may begin to disregard some of these discrepancies as they are already used to encountering them in actual dreams.

A quality of dreams that is very relevant to surrealism is the fact that the line of distinction between reality and fantasy is a very hazy one. On the one hand this has a significant effect on the viewers. Suspension of disbelief is a common practice while watching a fantasy film. All this time though, the viewers know that the supernatural images they come across in a



film do not hold true in their own everyday world, to which they will return soon after the end credits. Nightmares, however, have an uncanny advantage, since they are part of the viewers' own “reality” and the fact that it is not impossible for people to die in their sleep, turns the supernatural horror of the film into a possibility. Besides, Wes Craven claims that he wrote *A Nightmare on Elm Street* based on real stories he had read in the newspapers



about people who had died while having a nightmare and science was unable to determine the cause (Brottman 21). A statement like this brings on further confusion about whether the images in the film are fiction or “reality” and the

originality of this confusion becomes very appealing to the viewers. According to Brottman,

[t]his fusion of film and dream seems particularly significant in relation to the horror genre and its effects, since, as David Edelstein points out in his review of *Elm Street* in the *Village Voice*, ‘there’s an implicit contract between a horror film and its director that dreams don’t kill.’ (22)

Wes Craven broke this contract and denied his audience the relief of seeing the victims wake up to safety. As a result he was rewarded with great success. The fans of the film enjoy this state of uncertainty and yearn for more.

Furthermore, as if the situation was not complicated enough, the end of the film comes to “dislocate the spectator’s frames of reference” once again (Badley 52). At a point when the viewers think they can finally tell the difference between dreaming and being awake, Nancy shouts “the whole thing



is just a dream” and immediately afterwards beats Freddy and walks out of the door and into a bright new day as if the previous part of the film had been one extensive nightmare.

However, this new “reality” Nancy walks into is far more unbelievable than all the dreams she's had so far. She seems to be in a place where the sun is shining, her mother feels like "a million bucks" and decides to quit drinking, while her friends seem not only well, but also unaware of the horror that preceded. For a while there, Nancy resembles Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* returning to Kansas. This place is too good to be true and one cannot help but wonder which situation is the dream. Soon, though, the perfect world is shattered as Freddy appears again and no one can tell for sure if the nightmare has ended or if another one has just began.

On the other hand, it is also the characters within the film who find it hard to distinguish between dream and “reality” when it is actually a matter of vital importance to them. They seem to have a problem accepting the supernatural in their life until it’s too late. Pinedo argues that “characters who insist upon rational explanations in the face of evidence that does not lend itself to rationality are destined to become victims of the monster” and this is the case with all the victims in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

who have seen that there is something at least strange about their dreams and yet go back to sleep (24). Pinedo brings the example of Glen, who

lulls himself into a false sense of security. After all, he is home in bed, his parents are downstairs, and he is surrounded by stereo and television. His complacency, despite Nancy's repeated warnings allows him to fall asleep, with fatal consequences. (24)



In fact, even Nancy, who is the only one to take her dreams seriously, at one point stands in front of her mirror shouting, "it's just a dream! It's not real!" Fortunately for her, she soon realises that not only are her dreams real, but she can also grab a piece of them and bring it into what she thinks is the waking world. For characters and audience alike, the supernatural leaks into "reality" and forces them to accept it.



Another element of the dream-work that attracts the viewers is symbolism. Symbols in the film, just like in dreams, help the spectator sense ideas that could not be expressed in words. Moreover, symbols are, according to Freud, "stable translations" so there is no fear that they may vary from film to film and there are very few chances of misinterpretation (PF 1: 184). For example, one cannot help but notice the white clothes of the little children playing, or the lamb in the title



sequence of the film, both of which generate instant anxiety in the minds of the viewers because they are famous symbols of innocence. The horror audience knows that whatever the evil power in this film is, it is certainly going to be after innocence.

Much like in dreams, a great majority of the symbols in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* are sex related. An example of this could



be based on Freud's lecture on the "symbolism in dreams." There, Freud lists the house as a "typical . . . representation of the human figure as a whole" (PF 1: 186), adding that "the houses with smooth walls are men, the ones with projections and

balconies that one can hold on to are women" (PF 1: 186). Later on he continues that "*ladders, steps and staircases*, or more precisely, walking on them, are clear symbols of sexual intercourse" (PF 1: 191), and even later, that "*blossoms and flowers* indicate women's genitals, or, in particular, virginity" (PF 1: 192). All of these

symbols make a lot more sense when one recalls the scene in which Glen climbs up the rose trellis to Nancy's room. The house with the places to "hold on to" is Nancy's body, the roses symbolise her genitals as well as the fact that she's a virgin, and when Glen is climbing up the rose trellis, which is the equivalent of the ladder, it symbolises the act of sex (PF 1: 186). Even when the viewers do



not consciously have these symbols in mind, the very fact that they register these images passes on to their subconscious where it is put to better use towards understanding and enjoying the film.

If symbolism is an element of dreams and art that attracts the spectators, abjection is one that repels them. It is common for filmmakers to illustrate the abject, so as to shock the audience

and thus create an atmosphere of horror. Images like Tina's dead body being filled with worms and bugs, which, incidentally, is similar to the body of the title character in *Candyman*, make a number of people turn their heads away from the screen in



disgust. Julia Kristeva's theory says that everything that breaks or threatens to break some kind of boundaries, as well as everything that resembles the womb, engulfing a body and thus robbing it of its separate identity, produces

a feeling of abjection. The slasher is actually counting on this effect and the proof is the numerous scenes filled with gore. Pinedo describes gore as "the explicit depiction of dismemberment, evisceration, putrefaction, and myriad other forms of boundary violations with copious amounts of blood" (18). Despite the disgust it produces in them, people keep watching and even seem to enjoy such scenes. Barbara Creed believes that horror leads to "a confrontation with the abject" (14), while abject images "may invoke pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth . . . and a pleasure in returning to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in 'playing' with the body and its wastes" (13). Therefore, the spectators find pleasure in facing abjection and being repelled so they keep coming for more. Wes Craven seemed to have realised this fact when he filled *A Nightmare on Elm Street* with scenes of abjection.



One example of abjection in the film is that with Nancy in the bathroom, only this time a different part of it. Right after Freddy's sexually charged threat comes the attack. Freddy pulls Nancy into the bathtub, which turns into a deep pool. The

camera position at this point is mostly underwater showing Nancy as she struggles to get out of the pool from the narrow opening on the top. The dark, watery, enclosed space of the pool is an obvious substitute for the womb, complete with amniotic fluid. It seems then, that Nancy is not only in danger of drowning but also of being swallowed back into the mother's womb.



Nevertheless, Nancy finally manages to pull herself out of the engulfing bathtub, which unfortunately is not the case with Glen.

For many of the viewers, Glen's death is one of the most memorable scenes in the film, as his bed swallows him and spits out gore. Glen's body boundaries are being shattered and, as a result, his blood is forcefully expelled until it drenches the ceiling. Brottman believes that "Glen is the victim of a succubus," mythological creatures who had sex with sleeping young men and drained them of their body fluids (24). She goes on to suggest a symbolic castration but Glen could not have been a victim of castration, since it was his whole body that was engulfed in the bed, not just a member of it. Kristeva agrees that the maternal threat to the subject is "that of being



swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being" (64). The scene brings to mind images of birth. In this case, though, the birth is reversed and instead of the doctor's hand pulling a baby out, there is Freddy's hand pulling Glen back inside. Scenes like

these, appeal to the viewers' own need to keep their body clean and separated from the mother and this is why the effect they have on people does not cease to exist even as the special effects become obsolete.

With regard to the death of the other couple of teenagers, abjection is represented only in Tina's case. Her body is being slashed on camera while Rod's death is bloodless. When Freddy is killing Tina he remains invisible for the most part and it is only the flesh as he cuts it that the viewers see, as well as the blood that flows. With Rod, on the other hand, no boundaries are violated nor are there any abject images, apart, of course, from the fact that since he dies he becomes a corpse. It is almost always the case, says Carol Clover, that the death of the boys is much quicker, without even giving them time to fight or be scared, while the women's death is "filmed at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length" (35). This is not accidental, since, the woman's body reveals what Kristeva calls, "its debt to nature" (102), making it imperative that the woman is punished for this impurity (Creed 11). The fact that Glen is also slashed does not contradict this theory. On the contrary, it supports it, since, even though he is slashed, the only thing the viewers see is his blood coming out and at no time is the mutilated body visible. Tina's body, on the other hand, is also visible after her death, as a corpse in a plastic bag.



Speaking of a corpse as an image of abjection, no one in the film can embody this notion better than the king of corpses, Freddy Krueger. Freddy's nails tear the thin veil that separates all those opposites that society holds sacred, like good and evil,

reality and fantasy, subject and object, order and chaos, death and life. The fact that he appears as a ghost brings him right in the



the middle of these distinctions, while being a dream-monster causes fantasy and dream to leak into reality. What is more, Freddy is not only a corpse, the principal icon of abjection (Kristeva 3), but his body is also severely burnt.

Instead of blood there is a green slime flowing when he cuts his own flesh to shock both Nancy and the viewers. His body respects no boundaries or shape and it is easily metamorphosed into other people, like the girl at Nancy's school, or into inanimate things, like Nancy's telephone and the sticky substance on the stairs.



Moreover, Freddy's body becomes even more abject when it is considered as mechanised due to his metal fingernails. The weapon of the killer in the slasher is regarded as an extension of his body (Clover 32).



The notion of the organic body is disturbed and this brings him again on the boundary between animate and inanimate. The monster from *Edward Scissorhands* is at first sight in the same situation. However, the effect of Edward's mechanical parts is exactly the opposite from

Freddy's. In a similar setting of a suburban town, in *Scissorhands* it is the townspeople who become really frightening. Where Edward uses his scissors to create, Freddy's nails destroy and make the mechanised body a sight of terror. In this sense, Freddy

is more like the car in *Christine*. In fact, in the final sequence of *Nightmare*, Freddy takes the form of a car that takes control and kills the passengers, thus, becoming exactly like Christine. Therefore, the theme of the mechanised body finds both negative and positive representation in film. What remains stable is the feeling of abjection that is caused whenever the boundaries are blurred and a machine has anthropomorphic features or a human has mechanical parts.



Among these features that more or less dominate dreams and fiction, there is the ever-present element of the uncanny. Freud describes this complicated notion as “what was once *heimisch*, home-like, familiar” and at the same time “whatever excites dread” (“Uncanny” 76,86). The setting is one of the aspects that lend an uncanny feeling to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Part of this setting is the boiler room where the film begins



with Freddy making his razor-blade glove and where Tina finds herself immediately afterwards. Like the subterranean chambers of the Gothic, of which it is the exact equivalent, the boiler room represents the subconscious where the heroine descends and gets lost. These passages combined at once the hidden danger and the familiar territory, which made them typical images of the uncanny. Freddy’s boiler room shares those features but it has a further advantage, since it is not only familiar as a representation of the subconscious but also because it

reminds horror fans of the gothic tradition in subterranean passages, such as the ones in *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Phantom of the Opera*. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Tina appears only once in the boiler room and there is no indication of how she might have got there. Nancy, on the other hand, is led there twice and each time she has to go down a number of staircases, as if she needs to go really deep into her subconscious in order to find Freddy's hideout.



The other important part of the setting regarding the uncanny is Nancy's house. As a parallel to the gothic castle, it is what Rosemary Jackson calls "*enclosure*, where the fantastic has become the norm. . . . a space of maximum transformation and terror" (46,47). It is exactly because the house in almost every culture is supposed to be a familiar sanctuary that Nancy's house becomes an uncanny image. Instead of providing safety it incarcerates Nancy, especially after her mother bars the windows



and locks her in to keep her safe. Carol Clover identifies this classic situation, pointing out that "the house or tunnel may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once

the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in" (31). Of course, Freddy does not need to penetrate any walls, since it is from her mind that he launches his attack against her. The uncanny site begins to represent Freddy's horror in the viewers' subconscious and this is why the sight of the house features in all of the sequels, most of the time as the ruined house, haunted by

all of Freddy's victims. Regarding a relevant incident Freud had experienced in Italy, when as much as he would walk



he kept returning to the same place, he writes that "it is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough" ("Uncanny" 84). The repetition-compulsion in

the viewers' psyche makes this uncanny image horrifying and at the same time attractive.

However, it's not just the setting that is presented as uncanny in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, but also Freddy Krueger, a notorious bogeyman. Freddy acts as a bogeyman inside people's dreams, occupying a land that belongs neither to him nor to the dreamer and is, thus, a familiar but also alien place. Badley calls Freddy "a descendant of the title character in E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'" (49). Indeed, like the Sandman, Freddy is familiar as a legend, the protagonist of a children's song, who comes to invade "reality" in a terrifying and unfamiliar form. Right after Tina's first nightmare the film cuts to children in white clothes playing and singing about Freddy, the bogeyman:



One, two, Freddy's coming for you
 Three, four, better lock your door
 Five, six, grab your crucifix
 Seven, eight, better stay up late
 Nine, ten, never sleep again.

This song seems to delineate the frame of Freddy's existence and is repeated by Nancy, as well as by most characters of the sequels and always, of course, the little children. Freud believes that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced . . . when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality" ("Uncanny" 85). The stories of some kind of bogeyman appear in the tradition of many cultures and many kids grow up hearing about them and inevitably internalising them. When the viewers see this creature of popular imagination appearing in a material form, repressed fears re-emerge and demand to be confronted.



That uncanny fear in the form of the bogeyman that terrorises suburbia is actually nothing more than a projection of people's fears and desires onto a convenient Other. The monsters in the horror film are "usually mistaken to appear to come from outside the realms of reality" (Schlobin 8), while in fact, like Freddy, "spirits and demons . . . are only projections of man's own emotional impulses" (Freud, PF 13: 150). Since



Freddy is a dream monster, Freud's theory of dreams is always relevant, especially when he talks about "condensation," an "achievement of the dream-work," taking place when "latent elements which have something in common [are] being combined and fused into a single unity in the manifest dream" (PF 1: 205). Freddy takes on all the sexual desires, all the evil, criminal impulses of the people of Elm Street and becomes a scapegoat whom they can fear and condemn. In fact, Linda Badley claims that "[l]ike the ghosts in *The Shining*, *Poltergeist* and *Ghostbusters*, Freddy was another overdetermined metaphor for social, domestic, psychosexual, and biological problems of the 1980s" (50). The problems of the society in the film seem to

appear with the first nightmare, which is where the narrative begins. This is not so, however. Even before Freddy, Nancy's mother was an alcoholic, Tina's was neglecting her daughter, Rod was an aggressive "delinquent," Lieutenant Thompson was away from his family, and the teenagers were looking for every chance they could get to have sex. Problems did not enter the scene with Freddy's appearance but they were all projected onto Freddy so, inevitably, he ended up representing them.

Consequently, since problems like these don't just disappear, nor could Freddy's defeat be permanent. Kelly Bulkeley observes that "everybody in the audience knows that Freddy is going to come back--it's simply the nature of recurrent nightmares, and of the low-budget horror movies patterned after them, that the evil fiend will come back" (4). The last sequence of the film is bewildering



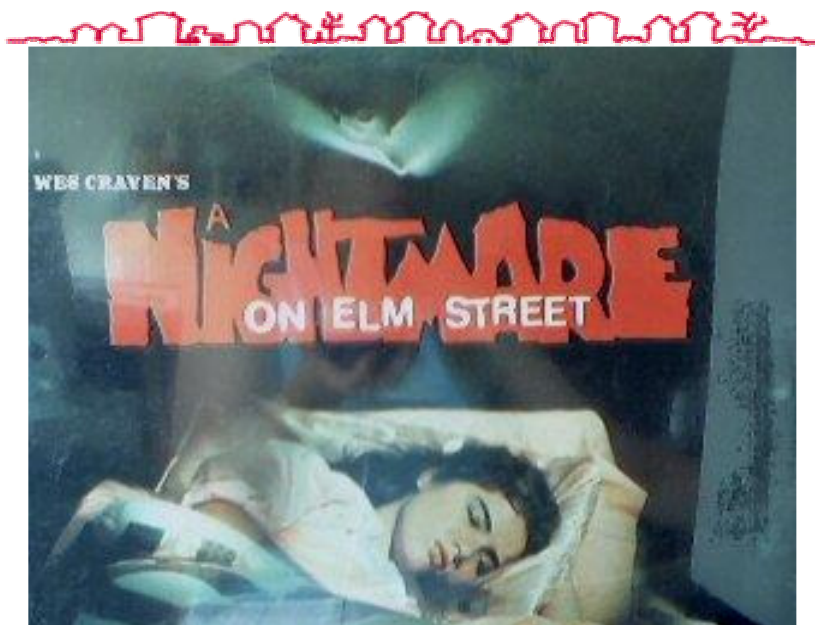
enough to create ambiguity over the outcome and as Pinedo writes, "... the film concludes with signs of a new unleashing; the apparent triumph over the monster is temporary at best" (31,32). She explains that, while classic horror would offer a "narrative closure" where order is restored, postmodern horror chooses




uncertainty, where "we only know that we do not know" (29). Impulses and desires like the ones Freddy represented are an integral part of the human psyche and cannot be effaced from one minute to the next. Nancy may have

conquered the demon but this was a battle, not the war itself. This war was to continue in the sequels of the film with different teens fighting for their life and sanity, but not just there either. Freddy satisfies the need of a society to create Others who will carry the weight of everything wrong. Hence, this kind of war keeps taking place in every "real" community around the world.

Freddy's defeat in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was not "for real." What is "for real" is Freddy's popularity. Linda Badley talks about Freddy's mythical power suggesting that "[s]eparated from the villain and associated with the dream work itself, Freddy began to function as a collective fantasy and coping mechanism" (51), while Kelly Bulkeley points out that *A Nightmare on Elm Street* helps teenagers "experience lucid dreams" and understand "what dreams are and what is possible within them" (3). It seems that Freddy did not invade the dreams only of the Elm Street teenagers, but acquired the status of a bogeyman in international mythology. Like the "Balinese dream-skills," *Nightmare* offers its fans the confidence that they can take control over their demons. Given that teenagers are the largest part of this movie's audience, the psychological issues that *Nightmare* touches upon are always contemporary. The idea was repeated in the sequels but none of them had the magic of the original *Nightmare*. The fans, however, were asking for more Freddy. Two decades later, it seems that they still are.



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