

One of Freud's main themes was the amount of activity that goes on in our minds without our awareness. This resulted in his proposing the now famous model of Ego, SuperEgo, ID. Freud thus distinguished between the "manifest content" of dreams (what we actually dream) and the "latent content" of dreams (the unfulfilled wish that the dream represents).

Dream content is rarely presented by the mind in a simple and direct fashion. Instead a complex dream is constructed from the basic elements. The raw dream symbols are distorted via condensation (compression, conflation and omission of dream elements) and "displacement" (shifting emphasis). This is followed by a process of "secondary revision" that takes all these (distorted) elements and assembles them into some more or less coherent narrative structure.

Freud went further and suggested that very often our conscious mind actively tries to reject the messages of our dreams; we "repress" this knowledge. Dreams are often an expression of a repressed wish that we would rather not admit to – they thus indicate psychic conflict that can in turn be at the core of mental disturbance.

Freud spent a distinct portion of his professional life investigating paranormal phenomena. The occult phenomena that Freud described in his personal communications and published papers can be divided into two broad groups: phenomena that are associated with dreams and those that occur during waking hours. These categories can be further subdivided into prophetic and telepathic occurrences. Freud also spent some time examining superstitions, beliefs that seemingly chance events actually have a hidden meaning and can predict the future. While superstitions are not strictly occult phenomena, they deserve

mention because a belief in the supernatural is connected with them.

Freud never made any secret of his bias towards a scientific explanation of mental phenomena. He had, after all, first been trained as a medical doctor. He described psychoanalysts as having fundamentally materialistic and mechanistic attitudes, even though they were willing to search for undetected qualities of the mind and soul. This inclination towards rational definitions extended to the occult. .

Additional evidence for Freud's belief in this physical basis for the occult can be found in a letter of his to Ferenczi, in which he describes his opinion of a soothsayer whom they had both visited. Freud thought that she had a "physiological gift" that allowed her access to the thoughts of others. (a "psychic"?)

A substantial portion of one of Freud's papers was devoted to an examination of superstitions. In this paper, called "Determinism, Belief in Chance and Superstition — Some Points of View," Freud described the phenomenology of superstitious beliefs. According to him, the average person knows very little about psychoanalytic theory. Because of this, the person will be unaware of the significance of his own chance actions. However, these chance actions will possess unconscious motivations which will attempt to find conscious representations. Since the person has no other way to express his hidden desires, he will project them onto the external world and will view external chance events as having the ability to reveal things that would otherwise be hidden from him. Occult phenomena tend to be linked with dreams for the additional reason that both seem very mysterious. In one of his papers, Freud remarked that dreams were

frequently regarded as “portals to the world of mysticism” and were seen by the uneducated as occult phenomena in their own right. However, as Freud would so often repeat, both dreams and their subject matter — occult or mundane — could only be understood by scientific investigation. Mysticism had no place in the study of dreams. Telepathic dreams were the more common type of “occult” dreams investigated by Freud; he very rarely analyzed prophetic dreams. Naturally, he was quick to state that the only reason for mentioning the connection between telepathy and dreams was that sleep seemed to be conducive for the reception of telepathic communications. Telepathic messages, he claimed, would not be treated any differently by the mind than any other material used in dreams. Furthermore, telepathic dreams should in all ways adhere strictly to the accepted view of dreams, since telepathy in no way altered the fundamental character of the dream.