


The Nightmare by Henry Füssli: a review of its association with sleep paralysis through the idea of the sublime (1)

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EN Abstract. In this article, we closely examine the pre-Romantic artist Henry Füssli's version of *The Nightmare* (1781), observing how he not only accurately depicted the described and identified characteristics of the sleep disorder known as sleep paralysis, but also personified the affected sleeper's own sensations through his work. We undertake a comprehensive review of his work in order to explore the motivations behind Füssli's interest in depicting parasomnia, and attempt to understand the pictorial corporeality inspired by this phenomenon. To achieve the latter aim, we examined the different determining factors belonging to the Burkean aesthetic categories of beauty and the sublime. This approach highlights how Füssli managed to capture parasomnia in his work under a misogynistic gaze through the idea of the sublime, and the importance of its iconic and repeated representation in art. Through this, we can observe, understand, and precisely interpret the psychophysical effects of this experience on the viewer and detect the pleasure of scopophilia in Füssli's male gaze.

Keywords: Henry Füssli; Sleep paralysis; Nightmare; The pleasure of the scopophilia; Sublime and the construction of the female body

ES La pesadilla de Henry Füssli: una revisión de su asociación con la parálisis del sueño a través de la idea de lo sublime

ES Resumen. En este artículo examinamos de cerca la versión de *La pesadilla* (1781) del artista prerromántico Henry Füssli, observando cómo no sólo representó con precisión las características descritas e identificadas del trastorno del sueño conocido como parálisis del sueño, sino que también personificó a través de su obra las propias sensaciones del durmiente afectado. Realizamos una revisión exhaustiva de su obra con el fin de explorar las motivaciones que subyacen al interés de Füssli por representar la parasomnia, e intentamos comprender la corporeidad pictórica inspirada por este fenómeno. Para alcanzar este último objetivo, examinamos los distintos condicionantes pertenecientes a las categorías estéticas burkeanas de lo bello y lo sublime. Este enfoque pone de relieve cómo Füssli consiguió plasmar en su obra la parasomnia bajo una mirada misógina a través de la idea de lo sublime, y la importancia de su representación icónica y repetida en el arte. De este modo, podemos observar, comprender e interpretar con precisión los efectos psicofísicos de esta experiencia en el espectador y detectar el placer de la escopofilia en la mirada masculina de Füssli.

Palabras clave: Henry Füssli; Parálisis del sueño; Pesadilla; El placer de escopofilia; Lo sublime y la construcción del cuerpo femenino

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The title as evidence. 3. Possible reasons for representing parasomnia. 4. The sublime personified: The setting for sleep paralysis. 5. Conclusions. References.

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1. Introduction

The Nightmare (1781) by Henry Fuselli² has become the quintessential visualisation of the nightmare within our collective imagination. It is considered to be one of the most interpreted paintings in art history³ and has become an icon for the visual representation of night terrors ever since the early 19th century. According to John Knowles, one of the writers who studied Fuselli's life and writings the most, "The Nightmare was naturally a moving picture, which aroused an uncommon degree of interest, and became his most popular work" (Knowles, 1831, pp. 64-65). Despite its broad dissemination, the situation that is being perceived, ensured, and suffered by the woman in the painting has been insufficiently interpreted. For this reason, we offer a comprehensive review of scientific and art historical literature which examined this painting, and we provide a synthetic and up-to-date perspective. Following a review of the ways in which *The Nightmare* has been interpreted through the lens of sleep paralysis we expand on this concept. We highlight the key connections between the dual structure of the painting (its front and reverse) and the unconscious and conscious mind, in relation to the aesthetic categories of the sublime. Likewise, we also examined the construction of the patriarchal gaze towards the female body and the prevailing repetitive prototype of depiction that exists based on Fuselli's painting.

Jerome M. Schneck's was the first to interpret *The Nightmare* (1781) as a representation of the sleep disorder known as sleep paralysis (Schneck, 1969, p. 725). From a medical viewpoint, sleep paralysis is classified as a sleep disorder in the category known as parasomnias⁴. Parasomnias are sleep disorders that generate dissociated sleep states with partial awakenings and benign disturbances between the transition from NREM and REM phases. Night terrors, sleepwalking, nightmares, and isolated sleep paralysis are the most common parasomnias, commonly appearing during childhood and adolescence. According to The International Classification of Sleep Disorders (2001, p.166) from the American Sleep Disorders Association, sleep paralysis induces a state in which one is unable to make voluntary movements as they fall asleep (hypnagogic or predormital sleep paralysis) or when waking up –whether in the middle of the night or in the morning (hypnopompic or postdormital sleep paralysis). That is, a person presenting with this brief episodic condition is unable to perform voluntary movements with their arms, legs, torso, and head, and, on occasion, experiences hallucinations (visual, audible, or tactile presences) along with a sensation of pressure on the chest and breathlessness. These sensations, clearly depicted in Fuselli's painting, invade the sleeper with anxiety and terror. In the subsequent section we will demonstrate how all the typical symptoms of sleep paralysis are reflected in Fuselli's work and his interest in the dream world based on pre-romantic literature.

Due to the success of *The Nightmare*, Fuselli made different engraved copies producing variations of his pictorial work, such as *The nightmare* (1791) and *The incubus leaving two sleeping young women* (1793), and he authorized others to be reproduced, for example, *The nightmare after Henry Fuseli* (1783) by Thomas Burke, *A woman fast asleep with devil on stomach* (1783) by M.J. Schmidt or *The Nightmare after Henry Fuseli* (1791) by Thomas Holloway. In his multiple variations, such as *The Night-Hag visiting Lapland Witches* (1796) Fuselli continues to treat the nightmare subject but not from the point of view adopted with sleep paralysis. Considering the characteristics and symptomologies of sleep paralysis described previously, we believe that his first version from 1791 is the most representative in accordance with the descriptions.

If we analyse the 1781 version of *The Nightmare* (Fig. 1) we can observe that Fuselli not only accurately represented the characteristics of sleep paralysis, but he also personified the feelings described by the actual sleeper who was affected by them. The incubus embodies the pressure on the chest, as well as the anxiety that materialises in the victim caused by the presence of the diminutive monster (incubus) and the sight of the bolting horse peering around the curtain. *The Nightmare* sets the precedent for a new way of artistically representing sleep paralysis. The characters – the incubus, the sleeping woman, and the ghostly horse – depicted in the scene embody the sleep paralysis symptoms, thereby producing significant hyperbole through different representative archetypes and prototypes that endure today (Salazar, 2021).

In this way, Fuselli's painting depicts a woman asleep and defenceless, completely still in a supine position that reveals a paralysis of the body and an inability to voluntarily move her muscles. An incubus on her chest impedes her breathing and causes her a strong feeling of oppression. The anxiousness, the lack of air, and even hallucination – feeling and seeing the incubus on the chest – are the typical symptoms of sleep paralysis. The dark figure of the incubus has a threatening presence as it is described by those suffering from sleep paralysis⁵. It is evident that Fuselli's work mirrors the symptoms and apparitions defined in sleep paralysis (Cheyne, 2002; 2001), an opinion that will be described in more detail below.

² He is also known as Johann Heinrich Füssli in Switzerland or Henry Fuseli in England.

³ In 2006 an exhibition was held at the Tate Britain in London (United Kingdom), entitled *Gothic Nightmares, Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* (Tate, 2006), provided a complete review of his. It was one of the most extensive exhibitions of Füssli seen since 1975 in England, as he was long forgotten despite having been rescued by the surrealist imaginary at the beginning of the 20th century. The curator of the exhibition, Martin Myrone, mentions that *The Nightmare* took on an iconic power that curiously did not emanate from his artistic qualities, as he had a weak technical command, but from being able to connect with the viewer's sensibility, there being a great difference between what he intended to say and how he actually told it (Myrone, 2006).

⁴ For further information, we recommend reading: (Hublin et al., 2001; Iriarte et al., 2005; Laberge et al., 2000; Thorpy, 2012; Wing et al., 1999).

⁵ As an example, see some testimonies collected in Salazar's (2021), such as the testimony 23 (2021, pp. 105) and 16 (2021, pp. 98).



Figure 1. *The Nightmare* (1781) de John Henry Füssli. Detroit Institute of Arts Museum (Detroit, Michigan, USA). 121 × 147.3 × 8.9 cm

This discussion will also explore the collective imagination of his time through the hallucinations and fantasies described in the painting, where the characteristics of the receptive and voluptuous sexual posture of the sleeper are repeated. We argue that the personification of the sensations of sleep paralysis acts as a catalyst for the development of a cultural tradition. In the case of *The Nightmare*, the cultural tradition reinforces a patriarchal symbolism⁶, thereby perpetuating an imagined order in which the woman is ambivalently treated as a victim who suffers at the same time as she seems feeling pleasure by offering herself to what “is oppressing her”. In our opinion, the distinctive appeal of the terror and the sublime in this image established a prominent iconographic pattern which employs patriarchal features to describe the anguished feelings suffered during sleep paralysis.

2. The title as evidence

We begin by analysing the title that Füssli gave to his work: *The Nightmare*. To understand it, we need to delve into its etymology. The word night needs no explanation, whereas *mare* may have two distinct meanings that are often confused with each other. According to Sharpless & Doghramji (2015), the word *mare*, may refer to a female horse, and a literal translation would be understood as “the night-mare”. The second definition of *mare* refers to “a bad dream”, whose origin can be traced to the Indo-European *mer* (which signifies putting pressure on something), and its meaning is unrelated to that of a horse (Sharpless & Doghramji, 2015). The authors said that the title of the painting makes the situation and representation confusing and, as a result, the etymology of nightmare may be erroneously attributed to “the night-mare”. We may ask ourselves if, by doing this, Füssli has used the horse (*mare*) symbolically in his representation as a play on words, because of the confusing etymology of the word nightmare (Sharpless & Doghramji, 2015). Or perhaps he may also have wanted to apply a deep and universal significance to the representation of the incubus as a nightmare or hallucination, as the incubus sometimes “rode” its victim or even took the form of a mare (Jason, 1963, p.26). A third option to consider would be that Füssli simply believed that the word *mare* (like bad dream) as well as *mare* (a female horse) had the same origin. This may have occurred as a consequence of a popular/folk (par)etymology associated with a linguistic shift where two different meanings were merged into one.

Some 18th century researchers and scholars believed that Füssli included the horse in the scene as a play on the double significance of *mare*, with the mare being the real nightmare and not the incubus (Frayling, 2006, p. 11). Others, however, mention that the incubus (the real nightmare) arrived at the woman’s house on the horse, the latter serving only as his means of transport (Andrus, 1995, p. 246), as we could see in his version *The incubus leaving two sleeping young women* (1793), where the incubus escapes through the

⁶ The presence of the monstrous figure is represented by sexual demons of the European medieval folklore called *incubus* (male demon) and *succubus* (female demon). Depending on the sex of the sleeper (victim), these demonic presences will change their gender assaulting them as a sexual threat during the night (Carus, 2012, p. 286; Feingold, 1982, p. 54). In this article, we will focus on the symbolism and the attack of the incubus on the female figure, since the great majority of representations allude to this pattern (incubus and woman as sleeper). Nevertheless, we take into account that the opposite representation (succubus and male as sleeper) can be present, as we can appreciate at the *Cauchemar* (1871) by Édouard de Beaumont.

window on the horse's back. As can be observed, there are numerous interpretations. Christopher Frayling (2006, p.8) picks up on the etymological confusion in the title of the painting by referring to *mara*, the spirit that haunts sleepers in Scandinavian and Germanic folklore and causes them nightmares. We also find the definition of *mara* in Samuel Johnson's Dictionary (the first complete English dictionary) which mentions that *mara* "was related to the torment or anguish of sleepers. A morbid, nocturnal pressure which resembles the pressure of a weight on the chest" (Johnson & Lynch, 2002). Therefore, in this case, one has to appreciate that the title, *The Nightmare*, may hide a double-meaning and not solely refer to the horror of nightmares, but the definition of a symptom.

3. Possible reasons for representing parasomnia

None of the biographies and personal letters (Bircher & Guthke, 1973; Lentzsch et al., 2005; Mason, 1944; Muschg, 1942) that Füssli wrote to his colleagues and family contain any evidence that he may have suffered from sleep paralysis or narcolepsy, nor even hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucinations. Neither did he mention a need to sleep or of suffering from sleepiness, but quite the opposite. In a letter to his friend Lavater, he describes his addiction to writing, and because of this, his scant need for sleep, as he prefers to write "sweet nonsense to his good colleague rather than dedicating time to dreaming" (Baumann et al., 2007, p. 230). However, despite not indicating that he had suffered from sleep paralysis, some researchers suggest his avid interest in dreams might have introduced him to the phenomenon of parasomnia and inspired this representation (Baumann et al., 2007, p. 234).

If, presumably, Füssli did not experience sleep paralysis (although he could have been aware of its symptoms), we could ask ourselves what triggered his interest in representing this parasomnia. Many debates have been generated throughout different articles and studies, which fall under four different hypotheses that we describe and comment on below.

Some experts indicate that the majority of his works were inspired by historical sources or texts of the so-called "dark literature", which is characterised by descriptions dominated by darkness, tragedy and passion. As Füssli often represented scenes from William Shakespeare, it is thought that he may have been inspired by the discourse between Mercutio and Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* (1591)⁷. In the work by Shakespeare, the relevance of dreams is mentioned, as is the existence of a queen called Mab. She visits sleepers at night in a carriage drawn by horses "light like atomies" (mare?), "tangling the hair of the spirits" (possibly incubi?) and causing "impure" thoughts in the beautiful female virgin. This hypothesis is directly linked to Shakespeare's work, and has received support by some experts (Frayling, 2006, p. 11), while being refuted by others (Davison, 2007, p. 7). In support of Frayling's opinion, we provide for comparison a later work by Füssli, *Queen Mab* (1814), which was created 33 years later. This work reminds us of, and has great similarity to, *The Nightmare*, due to its scene of a sleeping figure and because of the atmosphere it creates, as can be seen in Fig. 2, even though it appears to represent more of a daydream than a symptom connected to a parasomnia. In any case, we can interpret the representation of *The Nightmare* as a combination of folklore, mythology (Hecuba, as we will see below) and literature (Shakespeare).



Figure 2. *Queen Mab* (1814) from *Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* de Henry Füssli. Museum zu Allerheiligen (Schaffhausen, Switzerland). 71.5 × 91.5 cm.

⁷ "MERCUTIO: (...) Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck, And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats, Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades, Of healths five fathom deep, and then anon Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes And, being thus frighted, swears a prayer or two And sleeps again. This is that very Mab. That plats the manes of horses in the night. And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs, Which once untangled much misfortune bodes. This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs, That presses them and learns them first to bear, Making them women of good carriage. This is she—
ROMEO: Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace. Thou talk'st of nothing
MERCUTIO: True, I talk of dreams, Which are the children of an idle brain, Begot of nothing but vain fantasy, Which is as thin of substance as the air. And more inconstant than the wind, who woos (...) (Shakespeare, W., 2011, Act 1. Sec. 4, p. 49)

It is also known that Füssli was particularly interested in the work of William Hogarth (Andrus, 1995, p. 122), the English engraver and painter with satirical touches – who, like Füssli, had also emigrated at one point in his life from Switzerland to England. Nevertheless, although Füssli felt a certain affinity towards his work, he disagreed with Hogarth's views on gender and marriage. Hogarth was a vocal critic for *The Spectator*, a magazine dealing with visual and literary art. His series of six paintings *Marriage-à-la-Mode* (1743-1745) reflected the satirical drama of using the woman as a “material for exchange” or patrimonial transaction in the agreed act of matrimony. Far from ennobling the link through mythology or classic literary authors, Hogarth describes a grotesque domestic life full of social critique (Raquejo, 1991, p. 21). With his pictorial series, and beyond the existing economic conventions of his time, Hogarth expressed his support for the campaign promoted by *The Spectator* which defended the right to education for women as a means of ending the abuse of the “commerce of matrimony” (Raquejo, 1991, p. 22).

This struggle for gender equality did not seem to appeal to Füssli. According to a comment that he anecdotally made when he was conversing with a female friend: “I hate intelligent women, all they are problems” (Baumann et al., 2007, p. 232). This negative opinion charged with patriarchal values made him worthy of his misogynistic reputation, as is evident in his paintings –most of which depict women as fragile figures, playing the victim role before dominant, naked and muscular male figures that are sometimes macabre. The hypothesis has been offered as an alternative explanation to the denigrating and passive representation of the female figure in his work, as well as his animosity towards the women who, according to his biography, played a marginal role in his life (Aldrich & Wotherspoon, 2001, pp. 172-173). These attitudes contrast with the development of close friendships such as his relationship with Johann Caspar Lavater (Aldrich & Wotherspoon, 2001). However, as we will show with the third hypothesis below, the theory regarding his homosexuality is unlikely to be accurate.

The effects of hallucinogens also attempt to explain the content of the painting. Many artists took these substances to stimulate their dreams, nightmares, and terrifying visions, in order to explore the trend of the time, that is, the fascination with the unconscious. It is rumoured that Füssli took opium when he was creating *The Nightmare* (Myrone, 2001, p. 47). This could explain the uncommon characteristics of the image, such as the horse's eyes, which appear to come out of their sockets (Stone, 2008). Keeping in mind that in the 16th century, a prosperous opium trade had already been consolidated (from Turkey, passing through Persia, India, China, and Europe), as well as hashish, whose consumption in England during the 17th century was widespread (Hodgson, 2004), this hypothesis has sufficient grounds to be given consideration. Furthermore, studies show that most of the intellectual generation of English Romanticism literary-cultural circles consumed various hallucinogenic substances such as the abovementioned opium, hashish, and absinthe. In 18th century England, many doctors recommended the consumption of opium for its medicinal remedies. It was precisely Coleridge, together with the English essayist Thomas De Quincey, who promoted the relationship between art and drugs as sources of inspiration and a direct shortcut to creativity. This hypothesis was later supported by Baudelaire (Castoldi, 1997), who confessed that he was particularly attracted to opium, as it allowed him to dilate space and time in his hallucinations. To further these experiences, some resorted to more “natural” means, such as eating raw meat. As De Quincey states in the following text, Füssli also took raw meat to provoke nightmares that would open the door to the sublime in order to explore the images in his dreams or hallucinations:

We hear it reported of Dryden, and in later times of Fuseli, that they ate raw meat for the sake of obtaining splendid dreams: how much better, for such a purpose, to have eaten opium (...); and in ancient days, Homer is, I think, rightly reputed to have known the virtues of opium as a Φάρμακον νηπιενθές — i.e., as an anodyne (De Quincey, 2000, p. 69).

Nevertheless, studies have shown that there is no evidence that consumption of narcotics or drugs directly increase a person's creativity (Iszák et al., 2017). Rather, individuals who were naturally highly creative, tended to consume these substances more than the average person. In this way, they suggested that drugs may have the ability to “substantially change a person's artistic focus, but not to increase their creativity or the intensity of their creative production” (Iszák et al., 2017). Therefore, in the context of Füssli's inspiration, we could conclude that he may have consumed opium and other narcotics while creating *The Nightmare*, but it is unlikely that they affected his aesthetic focus.

The third hypothesis revolves around rumours of unrequited love. It is said that the unfinished story can be found on the reverse side of *The Nightmare*, which depicts a portrait of Anna Landolt (Schiff, 1975, p.122), the niece of his friend Lavater. This work, titled as *Portrait of a Lady* (1781) (Figure 3), is hidden from the public eye, since it is the back of *The Nightmare*.

On the reverse of the canvas, Anna is awake and standing up, but is connected to the scene of her nightmare by the curtain, which makes us think that this is the same space where the other scene is taking place. Furthermore, if we focus halfway up the curtain, we can observe two small whitish spheres melting into the dark background, which can be identified as the eyes of the horse which appears on the front of *The Nightmare*. It seems that Füssli represented the front and reverse of Anna's life in the same painting, that is, her diurnal and nocturnal experiences, with the day being represented in her standing portrait, where she is awake and conscious (on the back side), and by the nocturnal nightmare (on the front). Perhaps, the *Portrait of a Lady* can best be described as a prequel to *The Nightmare*. The contrast in colour and lighting that deliberately highlight the woman's figure, make us ask ourselves who Anna was and why Füssli was interested in painting her in this dual and opposing manner.

According to historians, Füssli and Anna met in Zurich in 1778 during one of his trips to Italy. Füssli felt a great attraction towards her, but Anna declined his advances and married another man (Moffitt, 2002). In order to ease his sadness, Füssli wrote about his unfulfilled love, where he described how he dreamed of being with her in his own bed, a fragment of which can be read in the following text:

Last night I had her in bed with me - tossed my bedclothes huggermuger- wound my hot and tight-clasped hands about her-fused her body and her soul together with my own-poured into her my spirit, breath and strength. Anyone who touches her now commits adultery and incest! She is mine, and I am hers. And have her I will. I will enforce my first right to her, or else die in the attempt- and perhaps kill somebody too. What God or nature hath joined, let no man-let no business man sunder (Mason, 1951, p. 155; Moffitt, 2002, p. 195)



Figure 3. *Portrait of a Lady* (1781) de Henry Füssli. Reverse of *The Nightmare* (alternate title). Detroit Institute of Arts Museum (Detroit, Michigan, USA) / With Frame: 121 × 147.3 × 8.9 cm

That the portrait of the young woman appears on the reverse of *The Nightmare* is not a mere coincidence. Nicolas Powell (1972, p. 60) maintains that, in this case, the woman that appears in Füssli's painting may be a projection of Anna (as she has a striking likeness to her) and that the figure of the incubus is actually Füssli in his imagination. If we pause to analyse the text quoted above, we can observe dominant attitudes of patriarchal behaviour with hints of gender violence in Füssli's own words. In his text, the aggression is made clear ("I embraced, I assaulted, I hurt my hands that were hot and pressing against her"), so is jealousy ("Anyone who touches her now will commit adultery and incest!"), the concept of possession ("She is mine and I am hers") and of violence ("or I will die trying and perhaps I will kill someone as well"). Füssli expresses himself like the monster who, having lost his mind through imagination, seeks to appear on the breast of his "beloved", causing her torment, a nightmare: her rape or murder. Clearly, and as we will see below under the concept of the sublime, these passions are a result of a sort of pain combined with 'negative pleasure' triggered by the image.

The absence of the mare figure in the first sketch of *The Nightmare* that Füssli created (Lanthyony, 1995; Powell, 1972, p. 58) demonstrates that the woman and the incubus were the central and most important characters of his visual account, leaving the representation of the mare until the final stage of his composition. Füssli clearly focussed his attention on the victim and her suffering, which was usual in the pre-Romantic literary and cultural *Sturm und Drang* movement, as Peter Tomory (1972, pp. 10-11) and Gert Schiff (1975, p. 122) note. They maintain that the painting is a visualisation of the frustration caused by the rejection of the affection he showed towards Anna. It has been indicated that this lack of affection may have been the cause of certain impulsive behaviours, turning him into a person with an eccentric personality, who lacked respect towards

higher authority or persons that he was close to⁸. However, it would be difficult for us to know exactly whether Füssli's behaviour in relation to the description and visualisation of the painting (as well as his imagination empowered by domination) resulted from his frustration due to the rejection –that is, his experience– or if it was implicitly innate in his personality.

A fourth explanation for the celebrated painting stems from its sexual content. During the 18th century, legal sanctions against minor perversions increased due to the belief that sexual irregularity was linked to mental illness (Foucault, 1976, pp. 24 y 83). An example of this connection can be found in the medical affliction that developed during the 17th and 18th centuries known as female hysteria (Carter, 2014). This “diagnosed illness” (as the doctors and scholars of that era referred to it) was associated with sexual frustration, an emotional temperament, nervousness, chronic stress, and irritability in women. Some authors argue that Füssli's *The Nightmare* depicts this relationship between sexuality and mental illness (Ellis, 2000, p. 5), going as far as suggesting that the representation of Anna's supine position links this posture with the concepts of nymphomania and hysteria (Faber, 2007, p. 329). It has been noted that artists interested in psychoanalysis have represented the tortured and repressed feelings about the sexuality of female hysteria, expressing the emotional and psychological wounds through the supine and arched position of the body. An exceptional example is Louise Bourgeois's *Arc of Hysteria* (1993), showing us a sculpture suspended in the air and bathed in bronze that conveys the idea of fragility in the face of trauma and psycho-sexual repression through the tensioned arch of the female body.

Despite the attempts of the four abovementioned hypotheses to explain Henry Füssli's possible interest in representing sleep paralysis, the root causes that led to the creation of *The Nightmare* are still open to debate today. We should emphasise that these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive and should all be kept in mind when trying to gain an understanding of the artist and his creation.

4. The sublime personified: The setting for sleep paralysis

The Nightmare (1781) illustrates the aesthetic ideas of the beautiful and the sublime as Joseph Addison first explored them in his work *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712), and later, on Edmund Burke in his treatise *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (1757). Füssli's work is an excellent catalyst for the qualities that correspond to several aesthetic categories. Because of this, the representation within *The Nightmare* created an aesthetic prototype and a symbolic archetype which would be reiterated throughout the following centuries among different artists (Table 1). It is even debated whether Goya's works such as *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1799) or Picasso's *Faune dévoilant une dormeuse*⁹ (1936) (Fig. 4) are related to the *Nightmare* or not (Salazar, 2021). However, it should be noted that Picasso's work –inspired by Rembrandt's *Jupiter and Antiopé* (1659) (Fig. 5)– represent a similar archetype to Füssli's *Nightmare*, where the faun (as a voyeur) observes the sleeper with certain sexual intentions. Paying attention to the figure of the faun portrayed as a divinity in Roman antiquity (Faunus Lupercus), he also represented male sexuality. The faun tries to seduce the nymphs playing his flute, although due to his ugliness, all of them rejected him (Rojas, 1984). This is an influential feature in the representation of the nightmare as that which is ugly, monstrous, or grotesque. However, the symbolism of the faun should not be confused with the representative figure of the incubus (or succubus) as a nocturnal sexual demon in medieval times.

Approaching the end avant-garde, the body posture adopted by the woman in bed and the voyeuristic gaze is also observed at some works such as *Une semaine de Bonté* (1934) (Fig. 6) de Max Ernst or at the scene of the film *Frankenstein* (1931) (Fig. 7) directed by James Whale. The construction of the male gaze is captivated by the beauty and fragility of the woman, with the desire to caress and possess her at the same time. Mary Shelly was familiar with the work *The Nightmare* (1781) by her good friend Füssli. In fact, the nightmares – besides being the origin of her novel *Frankenstein* (1831) – were also part of the narrative, alluding to a literalisation that can be compared with the image created describing a monster and a weak woman fainting on the bed (Shelley, 1831 [ed. 1980], p. 15 and p. 36). Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the scenes of the film *Frankenstein* (1931) present similar characteristics to Füssli's work and the prototype of the body posture adopted by the fainting woman in bed.

⁸ Following Nettle's proposal about the evident predisposition of associating divergent thinking of people who dedicate themselves to the creative field, together with certain mental illnesses or impulsive personalities (Nettle, 2006). We can come to think that Füssli could have behavior in that way with the people around him, as Muschg emphasizes in his writings on Füssli (Muschg, 1942).

⁹ In this case, we observe how the faun seems like being hypnotized by the feminine beauty. For more information on Picasso's *Minotaure* and the depiction of the personification of monstrosity, we recommend reading: (Goepfert, S. & Goepfert-Frank, H.C., 1987, p. 52)

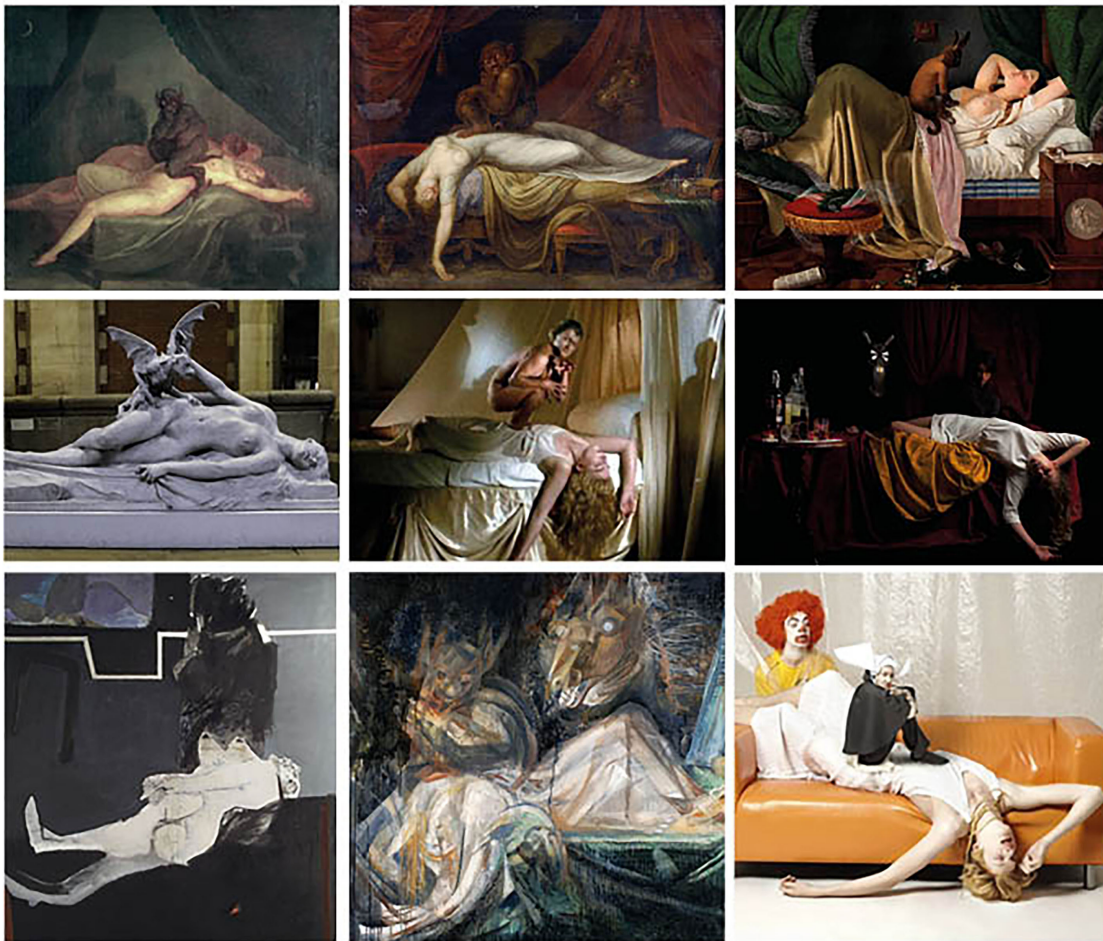


Table 1. Examples of the prototype and archetype of representation generated from Füssli's *Nightmare* (Salazar, 2021) –from top to bottom and from left to right: *The nightmare* (1800) by Nikolai Abraham Abildgaard, *Der Altraum* (end of 18th century) by unknown author, *Mareidit (Nightmare)* (1846) by Ditlev Conrad Blunck, *The Nightmare* (1894) by Eugène Thivier, film *Gothic* (1986) by Ken Russell, *La pesadilla* (2012) by Sara Álvarez, *Wyzwanie* (Mid 20th century) by Teresa Pałowska, *The Nightmare* (2011) by Tom Stella and *The nightmare from Füssli* (2013) by François Harray, among others.

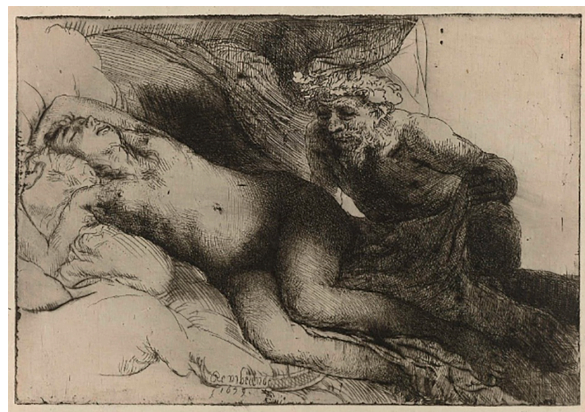
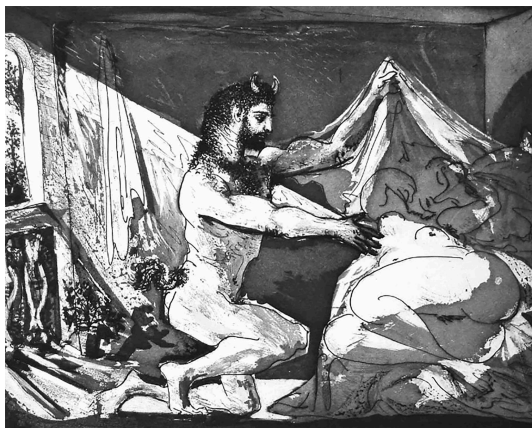


Figura 4. (Left): *Faune dévoilant une dormeuse* (1936) by Pablo Picasso - Collection Bancaja
Figura 5. (Right): *Jupiter y Antiope* (1659) by Rembrandt van Rijn Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 6. (left): Screenshot of the film *Frankenstein* (1931) by Director James Whale
Figure 7. (right): Image from *Une semaine de Bonté* (1934) by Max Ernst

Ever since Füssli's *Nightmare* was first exhibited at the London Royal Academy (1782), it made a strong impact on the public. In the words of William Hazlitt, the work became "a nightmare in the chest of British art" (Hazlitt, 1996, p. 138). This nightmare dramatized the sensations of sleep paralysis under an aesthetic that, from the first third of the 18th century, was imposing itself in accordance with the qualities of the beautiful and the sublime. For Burke¹⁰, the sublime was, among other things, a beauty so superior, so elevated that it became "terrible" having transcended into itself. This psychological burden popularised by Burke was sought out by artists, poets, and writers throughout the 18th century, as we shall see below.

Both beauty and the sublime were viewed as two aesthetic categories that emerged with the psychophysical subjective effects produced in the onlooker. It is worth remembering that aesthetics, a branch of philosophy that had made a recent debut at that time¹¹, introduced two factors which are present in Füssli's work. On the one hand, we find the relative value of beauty as aesthetics supersede the study of beauty forms. On the other hand, the theological objective of art does not reside in creating a beautiful object, but to engender subjective feelings, the stronger and more powerful these are, the better. Füssli's work provokes intense and powerful feelings through its images. These feelings have not arisen by qualities such as proportion, harmony, and symmetry of the forms. Leaving off the Classical manners, forms became now distorted and deformed in order to increase feelings of fear and vulnerability, with Füssli's *Nightmare* being one of the works that most provoked them.

According to Burke's work, the ideas of beauty and the sublime awoke emotions in the human being beyond reason and intellectual control. The contemplation of beauty arouses the passions of love, as it is a pleasant emotion that provokes a desire of attraction in a sociable way, pursues communication and agreeableness. On the contrary the sublime is an individualistic emotion related to selfish passions that is activated when we feel threatened physically or psychologically by something we see. Beauty provokes a "positive pleasure" and makes us feel attracted towards what we contemplate arousing the desire of possession. That is why one feels instinctively attracted by something or someone. The sublime, on the other hand, is brought about by menacing creatures from other worlds, as it is the case of the incubus that appears in Füssli's painting. The feeling of threat aroused by the sublime has to comply with two conditions in order to absorb our attention in a "pleasant" manner. The experience of the sublime requires taking an *aesthetic distance*¹², as Daniel Scheck explains, to gain a sense of contemplation by removing oneself from all moral judgement (Scheck, 2013, p. 14) and all danger (Carroll, 1995, p.12); therefore, this effect is possible while contemplating fiction since there must be a sufficiently protective distance so that the viewer feels safe. This safety feeling emerges when

¹⁰ Milton's poetry and Shakespeare's literary tragedy prepared the ground in 18th century Britain for the re-reading of *On the sublime*, a Greek text attributed to the writer Longinus (1st century AD) and translated into French by Nicolas Boileau in 1674. It was to occupy a relevant place as an essay on aesthetics and literary criticism, which, of course, would be extrapolated to the world of art, becoming an aesthetic category, thus distancing itself from classicist ideas (Raquero, 1991, "Introduction", in J. Addison's *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp. 37-38).

¹¹ We refer to Baumgarten and his *Aesthetica* (2 vols), published in 1750 and 1758, just a few years before Burke published his treatise *On the beautiful and the sublime*.

¹² We recommend reading: (Oroño, 2015), on aesthetic thought and the incursion of the sublime into ethics according to the pre-critical approach taken by Kant on this subject.

that which threatens our integrity occurs on a fantastic-symbolic world, as happen in dreams, or in fictional representations. That is the case of *The Nightmare*, where the sublime scene takes place in a fictional domain, but it is contemplated from the reliable territory of reality.

Since Addison wrote about the feelings emerging from the perception of something sublime, this aesthetic category has been defined as a “pleasant horror”. The apparent contradiction in such definition –a “pleasure” cannot match up naturally with “horror”– brings us to consider the contrast principle which defines the sublime effect. By this principle two opposing emotions are experienced by one individual at the same time. The viewer could feel attracted by the grandeur, the astonishment and the strangeness of what they are contemplating, while at the same time feeling rejection and uneasiness towards the same thing as it could also be interpreted as a threat. This combination of two simultaneously opposite forces –attraction and, repulsion– affecting the observer is difficult to bear. It provokes an emotional state that is similar to a head-on collision by two cars that are travelling in opposite directions. The result is paralysis and shock resulting from two opposing energies that collide, and which generate the “negative pleasure” that is recognised in Füssli’s picture: we feel attracted to look at what is taking place in the scene, but we also reel back from the incubus that looks straight at us in a threatening manner.

Füssli also applied this contrast principle of the sublime effect in the way he painted the scene. The light in the picture is recognized as “chiaroscuro”, a technique that, according to Richardson’s *An Essay on The Theory of Painting*, enhanced the sublimity of any work (Richardson, 1725). The focus of light and clarity emanates from the female body, while the background is dark and uncertain. In this obscure space we can distinguish precisely what has been imagined, that which the mind of the dreamer is projecting: the monstrous entities, the incubus and the bolting horse that erupt onto the scene of the young woman’s sleep paralysis. In other words, in the darkness we see what is inside the sleeper’s mind, while in the light her lifeless female body collapses. The contrast between fiction and reality is also increases by combining two complete differences worlds on the settings: the characters that emanate from the dream are imaginary but not the place. The bedroom appears to be real since the furniture and objects are recognizable and historically documented. According to Powell, the bed and the dressing table appear to be inspired by belongings found in Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy (Powell, 1972, p. 67). The bed furniture is shown as a divan or as an ancient piece of furniture used by Greeks, Etruscans and Romans known as Kliné which they used for symposia (celebratory banquets) (Richter, 1966). This type of furniture was common in wealthy families of the time, with sensational textures, colours and cushions, and can be seen in representations such as *The Dream of Hecuba* (15th-16th century) by Giulio Romano, the *Venus of Urbino* (1538) by Titian, *Olympia* (1863) by Manet, *Woman on a Black Divan* (1865) by Jean-Jacques Henner, *Le Divan Gris* (1908) by Jacques Majorelle, to mention but a few examples of the many that exist. It is curious to note the inclination and interest in depicting individual half-naked women in this type of furniture, when it was a piece of furniture used by both genders. The idea of representing the lady or “artist’s muse” increased and encouraged the idea of having to represent the woman in a horizontal position showing a certain eroticism in an atmosphere of intimacy, thus creating a new prototype of representation.

At *The Nightmare*, the real scenery contrasts with the fictitious characters, making their presences even more disquieting since they seem to be able to have access to our quotidian reality. Carroll (1990, p. 34) points out how monsters “are not only physically threatening; they are cognitive threatening”. The safe space of our bedroom could be invaded by an unknown threat emerging from the uncanny. Freud¹³ (1919) explains how the uncanny feeling is a direct result of perceiving as unfamiliar and strange that which was familiar and known in our daily life. This disruptiveness in perceptions reveals the unstable reality of subconscious.

If we consider the reverse side of the canvas as part of Füssli’s *Nightmare*, it implies the juxtaposition of two opposing situations represented in the picture, which is very significant indeed. The front face of the picture, as we mentioned, sets the scene of a nightmare: Anna’s portrait (assuming that it is her) is during sleep and not in control of her body. This situation contrasts with the image of the same woman (Anna) on the reverse, who is conscious and stands with a very different body language. According to Burke’s theories, the sublime, produced a much more powerful effect to the observer than the beautiful does. Faced with fear and terror¹⁴, the mind cannot react neither think. Anna sees herself subjugated and exposed by those who gaze at her (the mare, the incubus, and the viewer of the painting). She is presented with the corporality of a possessed subject. She is dominated by the object that is projecting her mind, as a consequence of the bodily sensations experienced in sleep paralysis. Therefore, the sleeper’s ability to react is suppressed by what she is contemplating. It is this emotional situation that makes the sublime a very powerful quality, as it nullifies any reaction from reason (here, clearly absent when describing the scene of a sleeper), which is unable to intervene in the process. It is in this suspension that disables our rational mind during a very small amount of time, that the way to direct communication with our subconscious is opened.

Furthermore, the duality between the portrait of Anna on the reverse – standing up and in control of herself– and the unconscious subjugation in terms of body language –represented on the front– eloquently

¹³ Fuseli’s *Nightmare* resonated among 20th century psychology theorists. Freud reportedly had a reproduction of the painting hanging in his Viennese consulting room (Detroit Institute of Arts, 2019), while Ernest Jones chose another version of Fuseli’s painting as the frontispiece of his book *On the Nightmare* (1931), and Carl Jung included it in his book *Man and His Symbols* (1964). However, both Freud and Jones never spoke about it in their writings.

¹⁴ Terror and fear as the cause of the sublime for Burke: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke, 1757, Section VII - On the sublime, p. 13)

demonstrates the “use” of the female body in terms of a patriarchal culture, where the subjugation of strength (sublime) is clearly connected to the idea of a powerful and imposing masculinity. The unusual and ambiguous posture of the woman’s figure is likely an allusion to the sensuality and eroticism of the passiveness of the helpless female body. Qualities such as softness, fragility, and curviness, described the emotions of the beautiful related to the female body according to Burke; while the strength, power and the angular shapes were related to man¹⁵ (Burke, 1757, p. 101). It seems that Füssli applied Burke’s idea of beauty following the woman’s image constructed under the gaze of a patriarchal culture that extends its power in a sublime male domination. As Mulvey analyses in her *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*: “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (1975, p. 436).

5. Conclusions

As we have shown, Füssli’s *Nightmare* is loaded with sexual implications which give free reign to the interpretation of the picture as an imaginary violation. Sexual assault can become an occasional hallucination experienced by people that suffer of sleep paralysis as the most intensely realistic perceptions during the experience of this parasomnia¹⁶. This may be confirmed not only through the presence of the incubus as a sexual predator (as well as Füssli’s desire to possess Anna), but also through the ghostly figure of the horse, which is projecting out between the curtains on the background, much like a voyeur. This intimate invasion appears suddenly and unexpectedly, in the same way the fearful and unpredictable episodes of parasomnia do. Thus, the sleeper is under the sense of the terrible, the horrific, and the sinister that disturbingly reveals itself despite remaining hidden in the shadows.

We observe how a mental projection prevails over the rational and how the unconscious materialised itself pictorially through corporeality as a consequence of the subjective feelings that the sufferer experiences during sleep paralysis. In addition, certain essential qualities of the Burkean concept of beauty (such as the smoothness shown in the texture of the small items on the dressing table, the bed linen and the woman’s dress), and certain essential qualities of the Burkean concept of sublime (the terrible proportions of the incubus representing faithfulness and the horse’s torso protruding from the curtains, without letting us see its complete body), lead us to a similar description and representation of this mysterious experience. Perhaps it is because our nature invites us to adopt a visibly contemplative distance when faced with the mental threat presented before us, whether in art representation or in our dreams. Its related characteristics, symbolically incorporated into the work by Füssli, enable this study to analyse, associate and discuss *The Nightmare* as a type of inspiration for the most effective representation of sleep paralysis and its terrible hallucinations. This allows us to better understand the reciprocity of meanings that flows between artistic theory and practice, as well as the feelings of horror and pleasure in Fuseli’s painting under a patriarchal scopophilia gaze, to use Mulvey’s terminology (1975). Füssli’s work is the origin of the representative archetype of sleep paralysis as a sublime and terrifying experience in a cognitive way. It seems to illustrate a male unconscious pattern based on the construction of womanhood in the passive beauty of a lifeless body that is far from her own control, exposed to man voyeurism as a mere object. Because *The Nightmare* has become one of the most widely repeated, reproduced, and re-interpreted prototypes in art up today, it is relevant to think why this archetype has perpetuated so strongly along our history of art.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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¹⁵ This connection of the beautiful with the feminine and the sublime with the masculine is developed by Kant, who reads Burke in his youth.

¹⁶ See some examples in: (Salazar, 2021, pp.188)

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