

W.D. Dowsett

"Dream"

Fall- spring semester, 2020-21

Melanie Stevens

Thesis Instructor's name

Seth Nehil

Thesis Mentor's Name

## **thesis proposal**

Dreams are a cornerstone of human experiences; it is through their esoteric nature that stories and spirituality can spring forth into the waking world. It is my wish to explore this relationship between humankind and dreams, and how this relationship has created a long tradition of narrative and mysticism spliced together. Tradition, ancestry, and identity have often been the core of my work as an artist, and I wish to place myself in the long line of bards and storytellers that history has given us, and whom I admire. It is my belief that the exploration of dreams can help me achieve an understanding that will bring me closer to the skalds of the past.

I wish to start this exploration with my spirituality. In the past, dreams have been a comfort for me; I have often seen them as visions of another world. This aligns with the thoughts the people of ancient Northern Europe, the druids and pagan Celts, to whom I identify. They saw dreams as excursions to the other world, a place of prophecy inhabited by the Sidhe as well as great heroes of the past. Flights of birds, terrifying beasts, and even the appearance of clouds or water, were viewed as signs

of things yet to come when seen in nighttime visions. Bards often sung of prophetic dreams in their songs, and even kings held to the words they told with their lyre.

The tradition of using dreams for narrative and prophecy continued through time. Many writers, artists, and musicians used dreams to tell stories and to describe the worlds in their minds. Tolkien is the first I think of, whose Dream-like imagery describes the reality of Middle-Earth as a fantastical place filled with influences of Northern European folk tales. According to Tolkien, dreaming played a big part in his writing and lifestyle. It contributed to his descriptions giving them a unique and mystical feel.

Shakespeare is another artist who comes to mind. The narratives of plays like "A Midsummer Nights Dream" and "The Tempest" have obvious ties to dreams in their Tales. Shakespeare's Sonnet 43 also describes dreamlike imagery, as the nights' dreams of his love become more real, for the writer, than day. This idea of Shakespeare and his connection to dreams has been carried forward in works of other artists. Neil Gaiman's "Sandman", portrays Shakespeare as a young playwright in the graphic novel about the relationship between life, death, dreams, and the experiences of artist when subjected to such ideas.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood also took these ideas of Shakespearean imagery and dreamlike descriptions and used it in their own poetry and painting efforts, continuing the traditions of bards into the pre-modern age. To bring memory to life, the Pre-Raphaelites created paintings inspired by music, dreams, and past life experience. In doing so, they created vivid paintings that showed Imaginative imagery and psychological narratives.

My project will be, a three to three-and-a-half-minute animation about a young woman awakening in the world of dreams. Using imagery inspired by the works of the artists mentioned previously, I will add to the long tradition of bards using dreams as a narrative guide. It will contain ideas of seasons, nature, omens, and creatures from Northern European folklore. The journey of the young woman will be through an otherworldly forest; as she moves through the forest, the seasons will change from spring to summer to fall to winter. As the seasons shift the colors will also change from pastel to deep greens and yellows to bright reds and oranges and then to dark blues and whites. The piece will start with a fade in from black and will end with a fade out to represent the circular nature of the sleep cycle.

As is with the tradition of bards, the animation will be accompanied by music and poetry that I have composed and written. As the music moves, so does the imagery. The music has

motifs within its own narrative that are also of a circular nature; using this as a tool, I intend to re-contextualize these motifs as different imagery aligns with familiar musical rhythms.

The young woman in the animation is a reflection of myself. Her design is inspired by the designs of women in Pre-Raphaelite paintings and, as such, she has Victorian style that is modest at one point and extravagant in another. Dreams are a reflection of our life, our fears, and our futures, and I hope to bring a piece of my dreams to the world through this character and her journey.

### **Artist Statement**

W.D. Dowsett is a Chicago artist based in Portland Oregon. Working in the fields of illustration, animation, and music production he seek to create both entertaining media as well as to explore the field of human emotions. His current project 'dream' seeks to continue this exploration through the medium of animation. During the course of the short film he explores ideas around narrative, grief, and escapism in an attempt to understand the importance of stories and family.

## **Thesis Abstract**

"dream" is a short two and a half minute animation i intend to create in the near future. It involves ideas revolving around subjects of dreams, storytelling, and their use in processing grief and trauma. In a search to understand one of my uncle's last wishes, I started a journey that began in grief and empathy, and ended with me understanding myself and the family I hold dear.

To begin this search I started my research with the world of junying dream structures that may indicate why humans use specific linear story structures. I then ventured into the worlds of tolkien and ghibli to see how their influences on me could further my understanding of using storytelling to cope with trauma, as well as how I may use the innocuous nature of fantasy to tell complex themes through simple narratives that can be understood by all.

By using these influences I was able to take my own dreams and pair them with ideas from my cultural heritage of northern european folklore. In doing so, I created a unique story using characters I have met through dreams throughout my life. I was

then able to take these characters and this world I had created and create a story I feel is both personal and relatable. Using this story I could formulate a project, one I decided would be a music video. I chose a music video in order to achieve a broader audience as well as to more strongly relate to specific themes my piece revolved around. In the end i was able to make a trailer for my short film named "dream", and intend to finish the piece when given a chance in the future.



## **Thesis Defense Speech**

Hello my name is W. D. Dowsett, I'm a Chicago artist based in Portland working toward A.A. Degree in animation. and this is a trailer for my new short "Dream". I have a big family, I mean really big. 10 aunts and uncles, 16 cousins, my dad, brother and my mother. Every single one of them has a big heart, a pocket full of good advice, and a thousand tales to tell. And amongst them my whole i have never felt alone, even if like right now they're thousands of miles away. I've learned alot from my family, but perhaps the most important lesson I've learned is the power and importance of storytelling and how even in the darkest of times a good story can help you move forward. You see, a while back my uncle died of the degenerative disease ALS, slowly we had to watch this strong and charismatic man be chained to a bed, but even still he'd smile and hug you as you came to visit. And the day before he passed there was only one thing he asked of us, he wanted each of us to tell a story about him that we loved, and so we did each cousin and uncle and family friend sat around in a circle as day turned to night telling stories about a man we loved. And the next day he was gone.

As I searched for a topic for my thesis it was that night that kept passing through my head, how it helped me with my

grief, how it helped my uncle pass in peace, and how grateful I was to be there and tell my own story. We're more than a year now into this pandemic, and it has dealt some mighty blows to us all. I feel that at times like this, stories are a glimmer of hope.

it's when i thought about the pain and trouble people have gone through during this epidemic that i felt empathy through my own experiences with loss and lack of control. I wanted to create something that would utilize this empathy through a medium of storytelling. And so there is where my journey into storytelling, dreams, and trauma began.

I decided to write a story about dreams and their ability to influence their lives through suggestion. Dreams have always been a driving force in my work and I wanted to show that by mixing them with my familial tradition sharing stories from generation to generation. And also how my distant ancestors may have done the same in their traditions of storytelling.

I began my research with trying to understand the process of dreaming and how this process may inform how humans have structured their stories since memoria. In Carl Jung's book "on the nature of dreams" he talks about the story structure that dreams contain, In this section he describes four phases. The first is the phase of exposition, this phase contains information about place, action, and characters. The second

phase is the phase where the plot of the dream is laid out. The third phase is a phase of upheaval that leads to a radical shift in the circumstance of the dream. The fourth is a phase of solution and result where things settle a bit. The phases of these dreams relate quite closely to the structure of linear storytelling the most tales have, That being introduction, conflict, climax, and resolution. Jung wondered if this was an effect of storytelling on the mind or alternatively the mind's effect of storytelling. Jung's work is often about the power of the unconscious mind and its power on the conscious one. His work also described dreams as a sort of gateway tying the conscious to the unconscious, specifically the collective unconscious. He thought that by analyzing these dreams one can begin to understand one's neurosis and trauma, once this understanding is formed one can begin to restore the balance in their unbalanced psyche.

With this insight on dreams on their relation to story structure I began to understand a bit more about why we may tell stories. If we see dreams as a form of the unconscious mind interacting with the conscious mind to help restore balance, then perhaps stories perform the same purpose in the social consciousness. This revelation led me to many of the influences I used for my piece. Among these influences were titans of storytelling like J.R.R. Tolkein, and studio ghibli, but also

amongst them were more vague or unknown guides like my own unconscious or the folklores of Scandinavia and Albion. I will start with Tolkien. Ever since I read the hobbit as a child, Tolkien's stories have been an influence on me. The idea of elves and dwarves living in hidden societies each with their own struggles, goals, and histories always enchanted me and provided a world for my imagination to thrive. Much to my surprise I found in the course of my research that these worlds were created out of the same drive that powered my own work. Tolkien was a signaling officer in WW1, and fought in the battle of Somme, one of the largest and bloodiest battles in the war. Luckily for him right before his battalion was destroyed Tolkien came down with trench fever and was forced to hospitalize for the remainder of the war. It was during this time that Tolkien spent his days formulating and outlining the war of the ring which eventually turned into the books and movies I enjoyed as a kid. Tolkien said it was his boredom and fear that drove him to write, and he used his writing to help him cope with the stresses and grief he had from the war. As a child Tolkien read the icelandic sagas of norse paganism, that included books such as the prose and poetic edda, as well as the Völsunga. It's from these sources that the tales of elves, dwarves, and wizards sprung from. In this way Tolkien was able to take stories told

from the past and bring them into the modern fold using ideas he gained from his own experiences.

Another influence on my work is studio ghibli, ghibli over the course of its 20 films has explored many recurring themes from multiple angles and circumstances. Among these are environmentalism, family and relationships, and most importantly for my piece, escapism and reality. From totoro to spirited away the lines between reality and imagination are thin, the themes of fantasy mixed with real world troubles. By using fantasy in a way that is innocuous to the viewer ghibli films provide entertainment to a vast range of audiences, both young and old, as well as those foreign to japanese cultural ideas. while still maintaining themes that may revolve around ideas society may find troubling and evasive. It said that miyazaki was once told by an elder "children need to see something incomprehensible and they'll understand it later". By using this ethos in their films ghibli has created a style of dreamlike appeal that still has a dialogue with its audience. It is through this dialogue that ghibli expresses a human reaction to trauma, grief, and stress. And by using their distinct style to show us the perceived reality of its titular characters, ghibli shows us how fantasy doesnt need to be literal to be understood, loved, and respected. Rather it is through their use of recognizable spirits and social symbols, from the japanese

cultural traditions, that they are able to maintain their adult themes while still being approachable youths by using that recognizability to veil their more complex concepts. This approach makes ghibli films not only feel dreamlike in aesthetic but also make the language of their films approachable to multiple demographics, whether old or young, or japanese or not.

The final influences on me were my own dreams and their ties to northern european folklore. Ever since I can remember I've had extremely vivid dreams. stories of adventure and terror would often visit me in these nighttime jaunts and I would see wondrous and at times horrific creatures as I journeyed through. Among this creatures were tomte, fairies, sylphs, gnomes, vargs, giant spiders, etc, etc. but amongst these characters two have stood out the most, in life they never really had a names, but in my film ive called them the elf and the hound-master. These characters always play the same role in my dreams. The elf is always a friend becoming me forward helping me achieve goals and deeper into the narrative of my mind. The hound-master is a more haunting figure looming over giving me thoughts of apprehension, fear, and death. These figures don't always take the same shape in my dreams but even still there is always a recognition. This being the case it was difficult to create a visual form for them that i could animate.

So being the case that Tolkien and Ghibli were already influences I decided to take a page from their respective origins. Both take heavy inspiration from their cultural heritage, Tolkien ties to Scandinavian folklore, with elves, dwarves and dragons all taking prominent positions in his storytelling. Ghibli with their drawing from traditional Japanese yokai or spirits. I decided then to draw from my own culture's stories to help give my world its own visual themes. So I drew from old folklore stories that coincidentally Tolkien drew from as well, the stories of Scandinavia and Albion (known today as Great Britain and Ireland). There I found descriptions of tomte, gnomes, vargs, and many others that I wanted to include in my piece. Alas due to time constraints I was forced to limit this to just my three main characters.

With the characters decided and their visual themes chosen, I decided to work on their individual designs. The elf I gave a more familiar design to, tall and lanky like the elves of Tolkien's world, and a greenish color pattern to invoke the nature she thrives in. Her outfit was inspired by ballet, her dress a variant of a loose romantic tutu, her shoes a typical pointe, and her hair tied up in a sporty ponytail. I designed her this way to reflect her leading nature in the dream, as well as to emphasize her playful and graceful personality. The next design I worked on was the hound-master. I wanted him to invoke

that predatory nature that i felt in my dreams, that feeling of him lurking and chasing in the shadows. To do this I made him a physically shadowy figure, I gave him a mask made from a wolf skull to give him some mystery as well as to harken back to ancient druidic rituals revolving around death and nature. I had him followed by a pack of wolves to hint at his presence as a mastermind like figure that has other dark creatures do his work for him. My final character i've named ann, she is a representation of myself in this piece. A traveler through a realm of dream, I designed her in a way that was meant to feel antiquated, giving her a simple high waisted dress and shawl to give a more conservitive outfit. Her emotion throughout the film is influenced by her interactions with the two opposing figures and are reflective of the junging dream structure I mentioned earlier. Her emotions are also evocative of my own emotions in facing these characters throughout my dreaming experiences. she begins in a state of wonder exploring the world and its facets, until the elf beckons her further into the dream. It then turns into conflict as she faces her tormentor before she finds balance in her sadness and is content to resolve her dream.

Color was another important consideration in my world and its character design, I wanted it to have a more natural feeling so I stuck to greens, browns and blues. I also wanted my main character to feel forreign to this world so i chose the color



red to be her primary color, to sharply stand out from the rest of the world while still being complementary to the piece's overall color scheme. Then I used blue as a secondary color to help tie her in a bit more to that scheme.

(make music more of an equal to the animating) With a story laid out and characters to act in it I was ready to start working on my project. I was unsure in the beginning about how to present a project like this. I felt the ideas I was working with were grander than I could speak to. to incorporate the ideas of entire cultures into a short film and to speak from a position that could be understood by everyone was impossible. So i decided to work with something more personal and in doing so i hoped it would be at the very least relatable. To reach the broadest possible audience I decided to make a music video. music is a language of emotion , and by creating a song in the genre of modern pop i thought i may be able to reach my desired viewers. The actual textural qualities of the music were driven both by the feeling I was trying to achieve as well as the limitations I faced when it came to tools available to me during production. I wanted a feeling of etherealness and fantasy, to achieve this I relied heavily on synth instruments and used effects like reverb and delays to give a sense of lingering. This approach was a good idea I found, as instruments and recording equipment were in short supply with that pandemic

abound which made it hard to use more acoustic instruments and forced me to rely on more digital tools in my music production. I decided to use fl studios, a digital audio workstation gear toward looping audio structures and synthwave music production. I began my experimentation into music by using many of the preset synth sounds available in the Daw, but over time this became too limiting to the sounds I wanted to achieve. That is when I discovered a free synth program called vital with the help of my mentor seth. This is when I felt I really began to understand the software I was using and how to influence the textures this tool could provide to me and my work.

One unfortunate loss to my piece was the lyrical and vocal parts of my song. but Once the music was done I started to explore these lyrical elements that were cut from this presentation. I always felt that poetry could express a multitude of different ideas that words alone could not, and that the specific style of writing that is poetry and lyric created limitations that help to emphasize the meanings they are trying to convey. It also so happens to align with some of my chosen influences. Tolkein was an avid poet and often explored his world through this method of writing. Poems such as beren and luthien and the sorrowful city, express the emotions of the historical figures of middle earth in a way where i can feel and empathize with their tales of love and loss. This also falls in

line with other traditions of poetry I investigated while doing research such as the epics of Mabinogion, the ulster cycle, and the poetic edda. Each contains descriptions of welsh, irish, and, norse mythologies and the ideas of the people at the time of writing them. After researching these examples I was driven to write my own poem in lyric, for my song. I explored my own thoughts about my dreams and interpreted how I felt about them to help drive forward my understanding of my project's dream veiled origins. And though I was unable to include the lyrical elements of my song, the words i wrote nonetheless pushed the aesthetics of both the song and animation forward, and helped me further decide what elements were important in the synthesis of music and video.

Once the music and lyrics were finished I moved to animating. I wanted the animation to have a state of constant motion to make it have this unstoppable force, similar to how dreams don't stop until they finish. In order to do this i gave myself a limitation of no cuts, only screen wipes to transition from scene to scene. I also wanted to show the emotions of my character as the camera moved from place to place. This led to me focusing more on the expressions of my characters over the accuracy of their respective models. This was in my eye a failing on my part, though the emotional power of my animation is present to me, I feel overall if the accuracy of the

characters was better it would have made their impact stronger. However since I did focus on large sweeping motions with a dynamic camera I feel whatever impact I may have lost in this decision was gained in the value of the camera acting as a third party to the narrative. This helped me to give life to the world in a way I could not have done otherwise without the use of more detailed backgrounds or animated fauna.

So overall do i think i was successfully in creating a piece that shows this tie i found between dreams and storytelling. Or Was successful in my search of finding why humans tell these stories to each other and why it seems helps in times of stress and worry. I do think I was able to create a project I'm proud of, I think its narrative also relates to the themes of escapism and coping that I found on my journey creating it. I also think it was successful in helping me learn more about myself and my family that I hold so dear. As for solving some grand mystery to why humans do the things we do, I don't know, and I may never know. But I've gained some insight on my journey and I was able to share that with you. Most of all i learned the best part of any story is to tell one, and i hope to tell many more as this journey of mine continues.

Alright so where do I go from here? My journey to a point has concluded yet I still feel there is much more to explore. The path I've taken has undoubtedly changed me but I feel

there's still more to learn. I want to finish the full short and still intend to and when i do the First thing i want to do is to add the lyrics to my song, and then start animating the full 2 and half minute piece. But for now I feel like my journey might take me elsewhere. I've lately wanted to explore different mediums of storytelling and feel I may be able to apply the knowledge I've gained on this journey to many more tales in my future. I want to take the skills i've learned over this project as well as my schooling to tell tales in the mediums of graphic novels, cinema, music, and animation. I plan to create worlds that others can explore and escape into when they wish and I mean to continue my family's traditions of advice, and storytelling to help as many people as I can for as long as I can.

I would like to end this presentation with some gratitude. I want to thank Seth Nehil who helped guide me through my project with acuity. I want to thank my animation teachers Rose Bond and Laura Heitt for helping me formulate my animation. I want to thank my family and friends for supporting me throughout the ups and downs of this year. And most of all I want to thank my mother for whom I would be lost without. I would also like to quote some of the lyrics to the song that I cut. "Give me everything, every star at night, and i'll give you all i have all i got in life, if the moon in the sky could stop the night,

would this dream be all i need just to feel alive" thank you all  
for being here and i wish you all a good day and the most  
fantastical of dreams.

## **Bibliography**

Buckley, Camille. "How Icelandic Norse Mythology Influenced Tolkien." Culture Trip. The Culture Trip, September 11, 2017. <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/iceland/articles/how-icelandic-norse-mythology-influenced-tolkien/>.

"Dreams and Narrative." Psychology Today. Sussex Publishers. Accessed May 14, 2021. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/dream-catcher/201503/dreams-and-narrative>.

Fisher, Kieran. "The Folklore That Inspired Studio Ghibli's 'Spirited Away'." Film School Rejects, July 17, 2020. <https://filmschoolrejects.com/spirited-away-folklore-inspirations/>.

Fritscher, Lisa. "How the Collective Unconscious Is Tied to Dreams, Beliefs, and Phobias." Verywell Mind. Accessed May 14, 2021. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-collective-unconscious-2671571>.

Hirschberger, Gilad. "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning." Frontiers in psychology. Frontiers

Media S.A., August 10, 2018.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6095989/>.

Hollenitsch, Nikole. "Trauma and the Soul: Psychoanalytic Approaches to the Inner World." Pacifica Graduate Institute's Official Blog. Accessed May 14, 2021.

<https://www.pacificapost.com/trauma-and-the-soul-psychoanalytic-approaches-to-the-inner-world>.

Khodarahimi, Siamak. "Dreams In Jungian Psychology: The Use of Dreams as an Instrument For Research, Diagnosis and Treatment of Social Phobia." The Malaysian journal of medical sciences : MJMS. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, October 2009. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3216128/>.

"Studio Ghibli: Using Fantasy to Cope with Trauma." YouTube. YouTube, May 19, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW-9tUhjn1U>.

Livingston, Michael (2006) "The Shell-shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Ettlinger, E. "Precognitive Dreams in Celtic Legend." *Folklore* 59, no. 3 (1948): 97-117. Accessed May 14, 2021.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1257283>.