Nightmares and Hand Grenades: Dreams as A Storytelling Tool

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Nightmares and Hand Grenades: Dreams as a Storytelling Tool

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Digital Production Arts

by
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Accepted by:
Professor Anthony Summey, Committee Co-Chair
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Abstract

Dreams and nightmares feature prominently in art, story, and religious practice and tradition throughout history. In this paper I will discuss their prominence throughout these facets in daily life, and the various ways that we, as humans, have tried to elucidate meaning from them. I will study the nature and definition of dreams and nightmares through a scientific, cultural, and historical approach. I will also discuss folklore and the interpretation of nightmarish imagery in the context of an otherworldly adventure through a nightmare. These topics and themes will be shown, explained, and discussed through the methodology of my project- a concept design package for an animated short.
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Chapter 1

Artist Statement

Dreams are an integral part of the human experience. They give insight to thought and memory, and sometimes even to feelings we attempt to bury. Dreams are ubiquitous across cultures, across geographical distance, and across time. We all dream, and it is common to take inspiration from these subconscious adventures in our everyday lives. People have looked to their dreams for help in making important decisions, have taken nightmares as warnings- as prophecies and guidance for what to avoid, and have interpreted dreams as messages from higher powers- especially in times of confusion or strife [41]. The notion of a message from another world is a Romantic one, and one that was assimilated into the work of Freud, whose views have heavily influenced science and popular culture alike [26].

My own storytelling is an amalgamation of inspirations; from real life events, to nightmares and dreams suffered in direct reaction to those events, to folklore and tales found and studied in an attempt at both finding comfort, and to satisfy a lifelong curiosity on the subject. I utilize my storytelling as the brain is sometimes believed to utilize dreams: as a vehicle for interpreting and understanding the world around me, and my experiences within that world. With this project, I use the dream as a narrative device; as a vehicle to take a look into the mind and psyche of my main character, Evelyn, as she struggles to make sense of her place in the world. I use the metaphor of the dream world as a proxy for her mental state, because it has the potential to make a powerful statement: namely, that even if you are not consciously aware of your struggles, your subconscious is. The fact that those struggles often seep into our dreams is a fairly common experience.

Dreams are likely a way for our minds to process events of the day, or a way to process
concepts and experiences to which our conscious minds may pay little attention. Dreams could be a method for mental preparation, either for future events, or for developing and practicing various cognitive abilities [19]. Theories are wide ranging and vast, and humans have been coming up with new ones all throughout history.

Finding inspiration in dreams is not a new or uncommon idea. Novels have been written on the subject of dreams, as have comics, games, movies, shows- there is a large pool of media- both modern and historical- to draw inspiration from on the topic. Examples in art history abound of painters, illustrators, and others using dreams and dream-like imagery to convey a deeper meaning behind the human condition. On its own, dreams are a fascinating topic of research. As with many functions concerning the mind and brain, the act of dreaming is not yet completely understood. To me, this makes the experience all the more intriguing as a vehicle for storytelling.

It is common for negative experiences to manifest as nightmares, or even as “anxiety dreams”, as I like to call them. Times of stress can increase the frequency of these nightmares [10]. I pull inspiration from these dreams and nightmares in both an attempt to mitigate the distress they cause, and to give them a voice- as I often interpret my nightmares to be evidence of unaddressed anxiety and fear in my own life- just as they are meant to be interpreted as such in my main character Evelyn’s. This project is a combination of experience, nightmare, and a call to emotionally process the struggles that negatively impact us in our daily lives. And on top of that, it is a reminder to take care of ourselves. A reminder that pushing past our breaking point does nothing for anyone. It is a warning through the guise of a nightmare, because what are our nightmares if not our brains trying to tell us that something is wrong?
Chapter 2

Overall Story Summary

2.1 Starting in the Real World

The story begins with Evelyn hard at work at her desk. Her main goal is to become a published writer, and she works on her manuscript at night after long, draining days of working an unfulfilling job to pay the bills.

We cut to various points of interest around her small, studio apartment: a pile of books on the floor, clothes strewn about, dead plants on the windowsill. And notably, the camera lingers on a table, on which are displayed a couple of photos including a family portrait of Evelyn, her mother, and their dog (as a puppy), as well as a framed photograph on the wall of Evelyn’s childhood home. This table is also where Evelyn tosses her keys and the name tag from her day job, and upon which are a few letters of rejection from publishers.

The environment is dull and desaturated, low contrast in both color, value, and line work.

However, Evelyn refuses to give up. Her passion lies with writing, and so she pushes herself to improve, even at the neglect and detriment to herself as is illustrated visually by both her messy apartment, and her own exhausted physical appearance.

As Evelyn works hard typing away at her small desk, she is startled by her dog’s whine. The puppy wants attention. Evelyn spares a moment to deliberate. She herself is tired, and worn out, but she can’t stop! If she stops now, then her dreams of becoming a published author go up in smoke!

As much as she wants to spend time with her best friend, she can’t spare the attention. She
regretfully turns back toward her work, and her dog sulks off-screen to her doggy bed at the foot of Evelyn’s bed.

2.2 Wake Up?

Some time later, we fade into a similar view of Evelyn sitting at her desk asleep, though things are not quite the same.

The previously dead plants on her windowsill have revived and spread dramatically—ivy climbs around the window frame; and marigolds, foxglove, and various types of mushrooms sprout out of the other pots, as well as the windowsill itself. The color palette has shifted toward a greenish hue to match with the now overgrowing plant life in the window.

Evelyn has entered the underworld of sleep.

It is clear to the audience that the world has changed; that Evelyn has accidentally and inadvertently entered a new world, similar to the ‘real’ one, but entirely distinct. This will be reflected in color and stylistic changes designed to create unease, and inspired by historical works of art, folklore, and modern media that create suitable feelings and effects. These exact inspirations and design choices will be discussed in later chapters.

For each scene change in the nightmare, there will be a strong single-color focus. This is inspired by silent films like The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, and Nosferatu. These films are in black and white, but a single-color tint was added to scenes to create dramatic effects. As mentioned above, the color focus for the wake-up scene will be green.

Evelyn rouses slowly as a shadow watches from outside her window. Suddenly, the sound of a dog barking wakes her the rest of the way, and as Evelyn turns toward the sound (toward the window), the shadow vanishes. Evelyn leans to try to see where the barking was coming from, but she is unsure exactly what is going on; until she turns and sees that the dog bed is empty.

In a panic, Evelyn realizes that the barking from outside is her own dog, who somehow escaped. She races off frame.
2.3 Run

We cut as Evelyn bursts out of her front door. She is notably on a porch, no longer in her apartment. The color shifts again, more toward a yellow-orange hue, as Evelyn acts with increasing desperation to yank her shoes on.

She sprints off the porch and finds herself confronted with a busy street. She searches frantically for her dog, and after a moment we catch sight of a shadowy dog-like figure across the road. With the passing of another car, it vanishes. With the building of further tension and anxiety, the color trends closer to red.

2.4 Crumble and Fall

In a panic, Evelyn rushes to cross the road to get to what she believes to be her beloved dog. As she moves into the street, we see a car heading right for her! Evelyn also notices, but too late. She flinches and braces for the inevitable impact.

Which never comes.

There is a loud screech, as the car slams on its brakes, and as it screeches to an almost unnaturally quick stop, Evelyn blinks her eyes open to find the car floating up and away from her. Both her gaze and the camera follow its trajectory, and we find the entire street and roadway crumbling apart and floating away.

It’s as both the audience and Evelyn are studying the surreal scene that we get our first interaction with the manifestation of Evelyn’s anxiety and stress: a large, black dog, which appears from a smoky miasma.

This nightmare dog is rooted in and based on Black Dog folklore from around the world. It vanishes and reappears in a smoky haze, and in the style of many British encounters, it is unclear whether or not its presence is threatening [7].

It has burning red eyes, and swirling knotted fur.

The pair stare each other down for a long, tense moment before the nightmare prepares to pounce.

Evelyn flinches as the creature lunges for her, only to pass through her like smoke and vanish.
Evelyn stares at the remaining smoke, confused, until a loud cracking noise startles her and grabs her attention. She turns back to the roadway to find the rest of her surroundings breaking apart even further.

The ground beneath her grows unsteady and cracks, and Evelyn runs, rushing to escape.

At this point I reference the boards of Jonathan Gesinski from their work on *The Jungle Book (2016)* with a worm’s eye view of the tree-lined street. Evelyn’s feet come into view as she steps over the camera and sprints straight ahead, the pavement cracking at her heels [20].

![Figure 2.1: Jonathan Gesinski story board panels from *The Jungle Book (2016)* (top) and my own sketched thumbnails in reference (bottom).](image)

We then cut to a side view as Evelyn continues running for her life, but she eventually falls into the ether, as her dream crumbles apart completely around her: a metaphor for her fragile and overly stressed mental state.

### 2.5 Plunge

Evelyn tumbles through the void, as floating rocks and platforms move past. Eventually, she manages to grab onto the edge of one such platform.

She fights to pull herself up, and comes face to face once more with the Black Dog, who is counterbalancing the rocky platform.

The pair share yet another tense look, and after a long moment the dog turns and walks away, turning to smoke once more.
It takes only a moment for the rock to tilt, then flip: sending Evelyn plunging downward yet again into a murky abyssal river, or lake.

Evelyn sinks into the inky black, and as the darkness threatens to overtake her completely, there is movement.

Quickly, almost out of nowhere, a streak of white swoops past Evelyn, who grabs for it frantically-

She gets a hold of the end of it- a fluffy tail, and is dragged back up to the surface, to the riverbank.

To relative safety.

The color change to white is an important shift, and is a direct reference to el cadejo blanco: a figure in Latin American folklore that is in direct contrast to el cadejo negro. It fits into a category of Black Dog folklore. El cadejo negro is a menacing (and often dangerous) supernatural black dog, while el cadejo blanco is a kind and protective figure that guides and guards travelers against various perils [11].

2.6 Home

Evelyn and the nightmare- now a smoky grey, or white dog- share a moment as Evelyn realizes that the dog, at first threatening and frightening, is now helping her. That they were possibly trying to help her the entire time.

The dog turns away once more toward the water, upon which are floating more rocky platforms up to the very edge, at which point the water falls off the edge in a long, cascading waterfall.

More floating platforms lead off into the void, creating a pathway toward a house: Evelyn’s childhood home.

The dog hops onto the first platform and turns back. It bobs in the water as the dog’s head tilts; waiting.

Evelyn steels herself with a breath.

Then she follows.

As we move through discussions surrounding narrative structures, dreams, and history, it is my goal to make my own experiences clear, as well as the facets of my research that most influenced
my storytelling practice.

The story is, at its core, a circle. Evelyn begins where she ends, and ends where she begins; thus challenging the notion that the hero can never go home. In this story the hero must go home. Evelyn has to rediscover who she is, and what she is truly working for, before her own nightmares and demons consume her; metaphorically within the dream, and literally in the form of depression and burnout.
Chapter 3

Otherworldly Story Structures

This project is, in many ways, following a long tradition of the trope of the ‘otherworld’. There are many famous examples of this, but first I’ll explain exactly what I mean.

The entire arc of Evelyn’s story revolves around her falling asleep, thereby falling into another world- just as real as the ‘real’ world, but altogether terrifying and fantastical in comparison. This fits well with certain psychological and philosophical theories surrounding dreams and dreaming, but that discussion will follow.

First, it is important to discuss the rich history of similar storytelling structures.

One that quickly comes to mind is Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The story goes that while bored and sitting on a riverbank, young Alice catches sight of a rabbit wearing a waistcoat and hurrying along. She decides to follow, and finds herself in a strange world, where logic is often flipped on its head.

Alice falls into the depths underground through the rabbit hole and into an astonishing and nonsensical fairy tale world. She meets many colorful creatures and anthropomorphic animals like the smoking caterpillar, and the Queen of Hearts- whose entire court is comprised of sentient playing cards. Through all of this, Alice goes on numerous adventures, many of which lack sense and/or operate by their own twisted sort of logic. The tea party is a famous scene, in which it is always teatime; a punishment imposed upon the Mad Hatter. He tried to kill time, and so now for him time is entirely stopped.

In the end, it is all revealed to be a dream, as Alice’s sister wakes her on the riverbank where the story first began [8].
It is not coincidental that Alice “falls” into wonderland as one would fall asleep (As Alice herself, as it turned out, fell asleep), or even as Dante wandered downward in his famous *Inferno*.

Dante Alighieri’s narrative poem *The Divine Comedy* is a classic in Italian literature, and is considered by many to be one of the greatest works in all world literature. The poem begins with *Inferno*, which is the first in a set of three parts, and is a guided descent into hell. The story as a whole is less explicitly framed as a dream than *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, however it is implied that the main character, who shares a name with the author, quite possibly fell asleep, and that it is in fact his dream-self that has descended into the underworld to explore the afterlife. In lines 10 through 12 Dante says this:

> “I cannot well repeat how there I entered,  
> So full was I of slumber at the moment  
> In which I had abandoned the true way [1].”

This implies a dream-state but does not wholly confirm it. All we know is that Dante himself does not know in what manner he arrived on the edge of the underworld, though it is confirmed numerous times that the man is not in fact, dead.

It is soon after this point that Dante is set upon by three violent creatures: a panther, a lion, and a she-wolf. Dante flees, and as he is nearly done-in by the she-wolf, he is saved by the figure who will be his guide through the rest of the adventure: the poet Virgil, who was a significant source of inspiration and awe for the real-life Dante [1].

Virgil leads Dante deeper into and ultimately through the depths of hell; revealing truths, and secrets, and the fates of many figures Dante knew in life. Moral judgements are made, often of real-life people, and equally as often of mythological and biblical figures. Dante (the author) crafts moral judgements based both on his own beliefs about the egregiousness of various sins, and of the character of these figures by placing certain sins (and by extension, sinners) in certain circles of hell; closer or further from the center based on how evil Dante believed their acts to be.

At the very middle, the lowest point of hell, the devil is imprisoned. He is frozen in place, trapped in all of his terrifying, ghoulish glory, with three faces, and large bat-like wings.

From Canto 34, lines 28-49:

> “The Emperor of the Kingdom dolorous  
> From his mid-breast forth issued from the ice;
... 

O, what a marvel it appeared to me,
When I beheld three faces on his head!
The one in front, and that vermilion was;

... 

Underneath each came forth two mighty wings,
Such as befitting were so great a bird;
Sails of the sea I never saw so large.
No feathers had they, but as of a bat [1]."

Dante’s *Inferno* is an excellent example of a character being forced into another world; especially against their desire and/or will. The structure lends itself well to Alighieri’s ultimate goal of criticizing the waking world in which he existed: full of backstabbing, betrayal, and war.

Subterranean adventures are a common theme throughout my research—both into dreams, the entire concept of the underworld (both for the dead and for the half-dead dream-self), and in other research into folklore. Ties between death and dreaming are common and should not be ignored in terms of cultural importance. In myths of the Black Dog, for example, the entity is often shown guarding buried treasure [4]. This is possibly another nod, or perhaps simply a coincidental similarity to Pluto; the Roman Lord of the Underworld and the god of gems and treasure.

The Black Dog, across its varied forms (both in geography and in appearance and purpose) is often associated with borders and border crossings. It lingers in the wilds, and approaches travelers along rivers, crossroads, and other boundaries; occasionally mundane, but often supernatural.

It is a denizen, or possibly an envoy of the underworld, and it is no wonder that many cultures associate the figure of the Black Dog with death and bad luck [35].

In many ways, it is similar to the fae creatures of Ireland and Scotland, who also traverse the boundaries between the real and the unreal, and whose kingdom is as beautiful and fantastic as it is treacherous.

In one Scottish ballad from the medieval period, “Thomas the Rhymer”, as a young man, Thomas de Ercildoun (who was a real person, and likely lived from 1220 - 1298) is whisked away into the Fairyland by a supernatural being.

In their meeting, the supernatural being states:
“I'm not the Queen of Heaven, Thomas,
That name does not belong to me;
I am but the Queen of fair Elphame
Come out to hunt in my follie [31]."

Thus, the woman identifies herself as the Queen of the Fairies (as the ‘Queen of Elphame’ is known in Scottish and Northern British folklore), and invites him into her realm.

The pair journey together for a time, and in their crossing into the Queen’s supernatural world, they ford a subterranean river, another common trope in stories of this type. At the end of his adventures, Thomas is returned to the surface world of man, and given the gift of prophecy, but is also cursed with the inability to tell a lie [9].

In the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus strikes a deal with Hades after venturing quite literally into the underworld. In this instance, he goes of his own free will to save and resurrect his love. He is nearly successful, but as it is one of the most famous tragedies in Greek mythology, he looks back, and in so doing loses his love [45].

Many other mythological figures have also ventured downward: Heracles, who fought his way in [18]; Orpheus, who used his wiles; Theseus, who attempted to kidnap a god; and Roman Aeneas, who went to hear his and his people’s destiny. All very different men, with very different purposes and goals.
Chapter 4

The Dream as a Dive into the Underworld

If dreams are a tapestry, then our everyday thoughts and experiences, as well as our memories, could be considered the thread from which they are woven. Memories generally make up a good deal of the source material for dreams. This is supported by studies that show the rapid-eye movement, or REM stage of sleep to be connected to both vivid dreams, and the brain’s processing of recent memories [15].

For me and this project, the dream/nightmare is simply a narrative device for transporting my main character into an alternate and surreal world. This, as discussed above, is a common trope in media. As a modern example, the movie Inception (2010) does something extremely similar, and also deals with dreams, nightmares, and the human psyche; though in a very direct way that implies an 1:1 translation of dream-language to day-language (which, as we will discuss momentarily, is a complicated, difficult, and possibly impossible task in real life). From the previous chapter, Dante ventures quite literally into Hell in a sort of nightmare/dream-state: neither alive nor truly dead. And we cannot forget Alice, one of the most famous examples of a dream adventurer. There are many more as well; examples of this sort of tale are plentiful.

Sleep and death are siblings, and the comparison of the world of dreams to the underworld; or the world of the dead; are quite common throughout various cultures. In Greek mythology, the godly personifications of sleep and death; Hypnos and Thanatos, respectively; are literal siblings.
This further tightens the bonds of the perception of dreams as an almost pseudo-underworld; a deathlike place where our waking reality holds only partial sway.

4.1 (A Sampling of) The Science and Philosophy of Dreams

Dreams have long been believed to hold meaning. They were often thought to hold premonitory denotations—meaning they give some hint as to what will happen in the future.

Other schools of thought held that dreams were glimpses into the past—the brain’s own way of interpreting and reliving events. This is supported in studies that show activation of theta waves in the brain during REM sleep. This activation is closely associated with emotional memories [15]. Personal testament can vouch for this as an at least partial truth: I have had plenty of dreams centered around my past. Often when I’m anxious, I will have dreams involving situations I have already lived through: I cannot even try to count how many times I have woken up in a cold sweat after dreaming that I was back in high school, and was either running late for class, forgot my homework, or failed some test or another. Medically, high levels of stress, as well as more serious disorders like depression, anxiety, and PTSD can increase the emotional processing that takes place during dreams; thereby causing nightmares [10].

Another theory, known as the activation-synthesis theory suggests that dreams are random. That they are the result of the cerebral cortex attempting to make sense of a random influx of physiological brain activity received during REM sleep [25]. The theory was first proposed by John Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley in 1977 [27].

The first part of the theory; activation, refers to when the brain appears active during REM sleep despite being cut off from motor and sensory stimuli (a process caused by REM atonia, which is the paralysis of muscles during sleep, along with another process: sensory blockade).

The second part; synthesis, posits that the cerebral cortex is then prompted by the brain stem to make sense of the activity and information that it is receiving. The cortex compares these impulses to our memories, and this comparison is how dreams are created [46, 27].

This theory of course, makes no mention of the definition or interpretation of specific dream content. It is solely focused on introducing a measurable, evidence-based theorem as to why we dream. This holds considerable value on its own, but forces us to look elsewhere if we wish to ascribe any sort of meaning to these dreams.
Dreams are difficult to record outside of direct interviews with those having them, and with the lens of the individual’s experience in the way, the data is anecdotal at best [43]. Additionally, there has yet to be developed a consistent method for ‘interpreting’ these dreams with scientific and reproducible methods that is free of bias; both from the subject and researcher. Regardless, many have tried, and it remains a popular area of intrigue in culture outside of strict academia.

In his book *The Oracle of Night: The History and Science of Dreams*, Sidarta Ribeiro references past and modern science, as well as cultural, folkloric, and personal experience to posit that the modern “general theory of sleep and dreaming” allows for, and even depends on both reinterpretations of the past, and predictions of the future. He states that dreams are a way for our brains to reconcile the past and the future, and therefore function as a crucial survival mechanism, and are likely not simply random [41].

But let’s back up a bit.

It is difficult to discuss dreams and especially their interpretation through (mostly western) history without discussing Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and a few important contemporaries that followed on and branched away from his work in both the study of dreams themselves and in the broader scope of psychoanalysis. It is Freud’s work in dream study and interpretation that he is arguably most known for, and by extension most criticized for. However, his impact on both the field of psychology, and on popular culture more generally is undeniable.

There were three main mindsets that pre-dated Freud and his work, and he pulled from all of them: Romanticism, which often held that dreams contained messages from another world; Rationalism, which held that dream language itself was largely nonsense; and Somaticism, which related the dream-state to the body and reflected its physiological processes while therein. Where rationalism is concerned, Freud proposed his own system(s) by which he believed he could pull sense from the nonsense; he implied some measure of authority in being somehow capable of interpreting dreams where others fail [26].

On the whole, Sigmund Freud is one of the most famous figures in modern history to take a crack at analyzing, categorizing, and then interpreting dreams. He is considered the father of psychoanalysis but made a number of contributions to other sub fields in psychology and neuroscience.

Freud was a trained neurologist, and he proposed in his unfinished *Project for a Scientific Psychology* a naturalistic approach to psychology that had firm roots in measurable phenomena; in the physiology of the brain that operated independent of consciousness [54]. Part of this work
included the theory that the frequent repeated movement of electrical impulses through the same neural pathway in the brain would lead to a strengthening of that particular pathway; thereby producing memories. This phenomenon was not shown empirically until 1970, while Freud wrote this particular theory in 1895 [41].

After the death of his father, Freud began having highly symbolic dreams that revealed memories that he’d previously forgotten, and ideas that had not before occurred to him. This experience drove him further into the study of the unconscious in the context of dreams. Two important takeaways in Freud’s theories of dream interpretation are as follows:

1. The conscious and subconscious mind are separate: they exist in parallel systems that allow the dreamer to be unaware of the meaning behind their dreams [41].

2. Dreams are, at their core, a reaction to the past and the everyday world around the dreamer, and they serve as wish fulfillment- often hidden and indirect when they involve something socially taboo like repressed sexual desires [55].

He came up with a system by which he defined and essentially translated various dream symbols into a waking world context. To give a few examples: an emperor, or other strong male figure often stood for the dreamer’s father; an empress, queen, or other female authority stood likewise for the dreamer’s mother; and symbolism for water often signified birth or rebirth depending on the context [33].

Overall, Freud’s work and conclusions have garnered significant criticism for having a limited sample size- both in regard to numbers, and because Freud only truly tested his theories on patients already suffering various psychological disorders. Additionally, a lot of his findings were not testable or reproducible scientifically [21].

Carl Jung (1875-1961), by contrast, was a contemporary of Freud’s (the pair actually collaborated in the early 1910s) whose viewpoints both generally and in specific regard to dreams varied.

A lot of Jung’s work involved his theory of the collective unconscious, which is the idea that parts of the mind containing unconscious memories and impulses are shared across humanity due to some inherited structure(s) within the brain. The concept of archetypes- shared images, ideas, and ideals- also arises from the idea of the collective unconscious [2].

In regard to dreams, Jung believed that they were a way for the psyche to communicate with the dreaming individual. Like Freud, Jung also believed that dreams were highly symbolic.
However, unlike Freud, Jung considered dreams to be more about communicating something openly that the conscious ego doesn’t understand, rather than a form of wish fulfillment [52].

Like Freud, many of Jung’s theories, especially those pertaining to archetypes and the collective unconscious garnered (and continue to garner) criticism for not being firmly rooted in a scientific basis. Symbols that appear and reappear within a person’s dreams and general thoughts depend much more on social and cultural context than on anything inherited biologically. Jung’s archetypes were too vague, while at the same time too absolute to be tested or studied systematically [13].

Another important figure in psychoanalysis was Alfred Adler (1870-1937). He originally worked somewhat closely with Freud, but Adler later broke from Freudian theories to develop his own theory of Individual Psychology, which focuses on individual wellbeing in the context of community and feelings of belonging within that community [38].

Adler thought of dreams as more of a fulfillment of thwarted self-assertion in the waking world. This allows dreamers to find success in dreams where they did not find it in the waking world, and also supports the mastery motive. By this I mean that dreams can at times serve as a sort of practice for real life events, and can reinforce thoughts and goals that the dreamer may have in the waking world [19]. Unlike in Freud’s view, these thwarted self-assertions do not need to be repressed: the dreamer is often consciously aware of what they want, or wish had gone better in the waking world. Adler held that dream imagery is expressive; they aim to show underlying thoughts and emotions, not hide or disguise them [19]. Adler especially stood opposed to many of Freud’s ideas about sexuality and its connections to both dreams and mental illness, as did Carl Jung, it is important to note [34].

Even now, the concept of dream interpretation holds strong in terms of popularity, and resources abound (some based on research, some not) to help people to understand and interpret their dreams.

Through all of this, from Freud’s work, into the work of Carl Jung, and on into popular interpretation of their research, the common conclusion is that dreams, while important and meaningful, are secondary to the waking world and waking experiences.

In ‘The Dream and the Underworld’ (the book to which the title of this chapter is a reference), James Hillman (1926-2011) pulls quite a bit from both Freudian and Jungian theory- especially in reference to archetypes, symbols, and the idea and concept of the collective unconscious, but then argues that the ‘night world’ of dreams and sleep is of equal importance; and is therefore equally
as ‘real’ as the waking ‘day world’. This is in contrast to both Freud and Jung, who place greater importance and status of ‘reality’ on the waking day world; often framing dreams and the night world as being solely referential to the former.

Hillman worked closely with Carl Jung’s concepts and theories of archetypes and pioneered the sub-field of archetypal psychology, which prioritizes metaphors and imagination over a literal material worldview in the interpretation of life and experience. Like both Jung and Freud, it relies heavily on symbolism [12]. Though, it is important to note, that Hillman’s archetypes are not the same as Jung’s. He does not claim any racial inheritance of archetypal symbols, but that archetypes are an inherently individual concept; what is important to the individual and their conception of and interaction with the world, is what determines their own personal archetypes [53].

Hillman supports his thesis with analogies and references all throughout to mythology; specifically Greek mythology, and argues that dreams and the world of sleep are a shared, yet wholly individual underworld (shared in that everyone has one), largely along the lines of Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious.

According to Hillman, in sleep the soul enters a dream-state, and essentially dies in a way, wandering away from its body. You are at once separate, but the same as your dreaming self. Your dreaming self is your ghost. It is who you will become when you die [18]. Hillman essentially proposes that dreams are a self-existent underworld of sorts, and that your dream-self along with the dream-world are as real as the waking world: they are not just referential to it [26].

On the whole, Hillman is not fond of the Freudian concept of dream interpretation, as might be surmised by his thesis of the dream world being as real as the “real” world. In his work, Hillman heavily implies that interpreting dreams holds as much value as interpreting a day of experience in the waking world, and that in many ways interpreting and trying to define dreams actually destroys their value [26].

Hillman’s perspective can almost be likened to an aesthetic perspective as found in the art world. As some push “Art for Art’s sake”, Hillman seems to imply that dreams have value for their own sake [18]. And as Hades, or Pluto is the god of the true underworld and of treasure, dreams might be considered a similar sort of valuable taken from each of our own personal underworlds as our souls go wandering each night. Dreams are a treasure that we should sit with, that we should consider, but that we should not necessarily pretend to understand.
4.2 Dreams and their Importance in Art and Culture

Now on to an art history approach. It will be brief, and will focus on just a few figures for whom dreams featured prominently in their work, that I found to be of particular note.

The first is the Polish artist known commonly as the “Nightmare Artist”; Zdzisław Beksiński (1929-2005).

Much of Beksiński’s work is surmised (and often assumed) to be inspired by and referential to the horrors of war, especially in relation to World War Two, which he lived through and saw the effects of firsthand. As stated previously, he is also sometimes called ”The Nightmare Artist”; as much of his work involved dreamlike imagery that is both haunting, and occasionally grotesque [39]. Some of the interpretations of his work regarding war and senseless death make sense from a viewer’s perspective, such as the two examples shown in Figure 4.1. There is a clear reference to what is almost certainly a soldier’s helmet, along with scenery involving death and suffering [29].

Figure 4.1: Two of Beksiński’s paintings involving what could be interpreted as war imagery.

Other works are a little more difficult to interpret, such as the piece shown in Figure 4.2.
The first thing that comes to mind when I study this painting is a death mask; lost and floating in a void and framed by the life it once lived, or represented, rather.

Zdzisław Beksiński’s work is creepy, it’s dark, and it often features sallow and skeletal figures. It often feels as if his focus is more on death and decay than on the realm of sleep or dreams, however unsweet.

Figure 4.2: Beksiński painting from 1978 depicting a mask-like visage in a dark doorway.

However, western culture has a long history of tying together death and sleep- they are brothers in the Greek pantheon. There are innumerable references to death as a form of sleep, or as the final sleep. The connection runs deep through the collective human psyche. It makes sense in a lot of ways, for imagery so close to death and ruin, however undefined and nonspecific, to also end up associated irrevocably with dreams and nightmares. Beksiński himself once said that he, “wishes to paint in such a manner as if [he] were photographing dreams [29].”

Beyond this statement, Beksiński generally resisted any solid meaning being given to his
work. He never actually titled any of his drawings or paintings, and he almost never gave his own interpretations of his work. He claimed that he himself did not know what they were about while simultaneously rejecting interpretations by others [51]. His mindset in regard to the meaning of his imagery is somewhat reminiscent of Hillman’s mindset in regard to dreams: that they should not be interpreted so as to protect their value and integrity.

Another artist whose work I want to discuss is Francisco Goya. Especially his piece *The sleep of reason produces monsters*: a drypoint etching from 1799, along with his series *The Disasters of War*—an extremely poignant and well-known series of protest art depicting the horrors of war.

Don Francisco de Goya was a Spanish painter and printmaker who lived from 1746 to 1828. He was born in Fuendetodos, Spain. Goya was an official artist for the Spanish crown as court painter, and he did considerable work painting portraits and creating tapestries and etchings [24, 16]. The work he is most known for, however, tends to be political in nature, and often portrays the fallout of various political, social, and violent upheavals. His etching series, *The Disasters of War* are one such example of this, and they depict the Napoleonic conflicts between France and Spain, and are often viewed by historians to be a protest of those conflicts [16].

It is in this realm of social criticism that *The sleep of reason produces monsters* also resides. Like The Disasters, The sleep of reason is a drypoint etching that was done as part of Goya’s *Los Caprichos* series; in English *The Caprices*, or *Follies*. The series contained eighty prints and was published in 1799—long before his poignant *Disasters*, which were created during and just following the Napoleonic occupation from 1807 to 1814 (though they were not published until 1863) [24].

It is in this stage of Francisco de Goya’s career that he truly began to develop his own style and voice, especially in terms of social commentary and critique, where before he was focused on tapestry cartoons for Spanish royal residences, as well as portraits, and religious ceiling murals [42].

*Los Caprichos* are considered some of Goya’s sharpest work in terms of social critique, with *The Sleep of Reason* taking center stage as a succinct summary of Goya’s beliefs at the time.

Shown in Figure 4.3, *The Sleep of Reason* depicts an artist slumped over their desk, asleep. Behind him owls and cats loom and threaten; all are creatures associated in Spanish folk tradition with evil and mystery [42].
In the original caption for the piece Goya states, “Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with her, she is the mother of the arts and source of their wonders.” This implies a need for balance between creativity, imagination, and rational thought and logic; with dreams representing the first two, and the monsters representing the consequences of inconsiderate action [42].

The dream in this case, acts as a metaphor for a dangerous and complacent mindset, while the scratchy, hatched quality of the line work and the hazy dream-like quality to the atmosphere of the piece serve to create a palpable feeling of anxiety and danger. This is an interesting and somewhat novel take on the subject, since dreams (especially nowadays) are often taken to symbolize change,
and a desire to improve the world around us. It is a fascinating juxtaposition, that fits well into an overall body of work that is at once critical and traumatic while addressing and reacting to the world as it was.
Chapter 5

Other Influences and Inspiration: Where to Begin?

Dreams are the starting point of this project, but they are not necessarily the end goal in terms of interpretation and portrayal. My main character’s nightmare serves as a storytelling tool to express an environment, and a feeling of anxiety, paranoia, and helplessness that my main character Evelyn must overcome.

Through living and reliving her fears, as well as failing on her own before receiving assistance, Evelyn eventually stops running away from her own past (her own insecurities) both metaphorically and figuratively in the way she eventually circles back and is led home.

So much of life is cyclical and repetitive, and by mirroring that repetition in story, and also through the lens of a dream, I hope to create something that is relatable and empowering in the face of a terrifying and often nonsensical world.

5.1 The Saga of Freya, the Flight Risk Pooch

The initial seed for this story comes from personal real-life experience.

I personally have a lot of anxiety surrounding my dog escaping- she’s quite good at it and has gotten out of the yard on multiple occasions. On one such occasion she ran down a busy road, weaving between cars and giving me a heart attack in the process. In the end, she wound up in the
yard of an abandoned house, and it was not fun wandering around that property searching for her.

I wandered that property for a solid twenty minutes. It was fenced, and I could see the entrance, so I knew that she had not left. When I went to ring the doorbell (in an attempt to avoid accusations of trespassing), not only was no one home, but the entire front door was covered in a thick layer of spiderwebs. I could literally see dozens of spiders. It is unsurprising that I still have nightmares about this experience.

After giving up on making contact with my neighbors (who I was fairly certain by this point did not exist) I went back to searching, this time growing bolder and moving into the backyard.

There were two dilapidated sheds. One was completely collapsed on its side. The other was still standing (barely) and was filled with miscellaneous yard tools and equipment. As well as my dog.

She came trotting over, happy as could be when she caught sight of me; having clearly enjoyed her little adventure.

Since this experience I’ve personally had plenty of nightmares of her running off and leading me on a wild goose chase, or worse- not coming home at all. Stress and overwork only make these nightmares more frequent, so the initial inspiration for this story is somewhat autobiographical.

That said, this initial inspiration is just that: inspiration and a starting point. Much of this project developed organically over time as I played with ideas, concepts, and visual options for things. Since the initial spark, so to speak, I have also read many books, seen many movies, and played games that inspired me, and that I found had similar motifs, cadence, and themes that I found delightfully inspiring.

5.2 Classic Influences: Folklore, Story Structure, and the Sisyphean Nature of Making and Remaking Ourselves

There are plenty of concepts, ideas, and influences present in my work that fall outside the confines of sleep and dreams specifically. As stated previously, creating a nightmare environment (as opposed to a similar story taking place in a supernatural world/setting) was a conscious choice, which I made in an attempt to add something of a layer of safety for the character. Once it is clear that Evelyn is dreaming, the stakes shift. She is not in true physical danger, rather, the adventure is psychological in nature.
Setting aside discussion of the setting and all of its inherent assumptions and ramifications, there are certain folkloric and mythological tropes that I pulled from in my work. Themes of mental health are prevalent and are intended to be at the forefront of my storytelling. Anxiety and feelings of inadequacy pervade Evelyn’s current life, and her refusal to stop pushing and take time to breathe, reassess, and treasure her surroundings lead to an obvious case of burnout.

5.2.1 El Cadejo, and Other Tales of the Black Dog

There were a number of reasons why I wanted this project to center around a dog/dog-like figure. For starters, animals are common story drivers in general, and I take quite a lot of inspiration from my own dogs, whom I love dearly. Additionally, there are a number of folkloric and mythological ties between dogs and mental health.

One of the main sources of inspiration in this particular regard involve stories and legends of black dogs. Black Dogs generally are associated with travel; haunting mainly rural streets and roads, rivers, and other boundaries: both literal and supernatural [35]. This ‘otherworldly’ aspect is another reason why the Black Dog mythos fits really well in my work: Evelyn has crossed over into a dreamscape; she has crossed the border into the domain of the Black Dog.

El cadejo is one such figure that appears across Latin America and parts of the Caribbean. The name has a number of possible origins. Some posit that it is a play on the Spanish, ‘cadena’- for the chains around the creatures neck. Another possible meaning for ‘cadejo’ is the shaggy knotted fur of its coat. This definition may also be a reference to the same word, which can also be translated to rope or string, along with the aforementioned ‘chain’ [28, 4].

El cadejo in particular was a considerable source of inspiration for me in both a design and story sense, as the creature can behave as a protector and a guide, or as a threat. Its behavior and reaction to an individual can depend on a number of factors, not the least of which includes exactly which legend is being told. In some versions of the tale, there are two cadejos that are in constant conflict with one another: el cadejo blanco and el cadejo negro. The white dog is a guardian angel of sorts, while the black dog is evil and generally wants little more than to cause pain and suffering [17]. Clashes between these two spirits are said to cause natural disasters like earthquakes [11].

In other tales, the dogs are one and the same, and it is their judgment of the individual whom they face that determines whether they will assume the aspect of the protector, or the tormentor.

One legend in particular states that el cadejo was actually a young man at first. This story
originates from Costa Rica, and this particular retelling is based on the story told by Cristina and MJ from the Espooky Tales podcast, which was in turn pulled from *Birds Have No Boundaries* by Edna Iturralde, which is a collection of myths and legends from across Latin America.

This telling of the tale begins with a boy living with his mother and father. His father is a drunkard, and is abusive to the boy and his mother. One night the boy decides that he’s had enough. He gathers up a costume and dresses as a wolf-like creature, with a gnarled cloak, and chains that he can rattle for effect. He hides in the bushes along his father’s path and waits.

When his father finally approaches, drunk as can be, the boy jumps out, scaring him badly. In reaction the father runs home and swears off drinking. The boy relishes in his success.

However, it is short lived, and after only a short time the father returns to his old ways of drinking and generally being unpleasant to live with. So the boy dresses up once more, and in the middle of the night, as his father is stumbling home wasted, he gives him another fright.

Once more the father stops drinking, but only for a short while.

The cycle continues, but eventually it is the father who has had enough.

The man angrily grabs a knife and goes out to drink once again with his friends. On his trek home (as he’s come to expect), the monstrous dog jumps out at him from behind a boulder. However this time, the man jumps back, and threatens the creature. He begins to chase it, not realizing that it is his son.

After a moment, the boy rips off his cloak in terror, and pleads with his father to recognize him.

The father does recognize his son, and the boy desperately tries to explain himself. However, the man is livid. He curses his son, stating that if the boy wishes to dress as a dog, then he should become one!

The drunkard leaves his son in the woods, and the boy transforms into a large black dog: wrapped in chains and with goat hooves for feet: his punishment for disrespecting his father.

The father’s punishment, in turn, is the loss of his son. When the man realizes what he has done, he searches and calls out to his son day in and day out. He even stops drinking entirely, but it does not bring his child home.

In this and other versions of the legend, el cadejo negro mainly targets drunkards; especially those out late at night, wandering in the wilderness alone [4, 11]. In Iturralde’s telling specifically, el cadejo takes on somewhat of a protective role, going after scoundrels and thieves; those with ill
Generally speaking, el cadejo (both the black and white aspects) is described as a large, shaggy dog with glowing red eyes, hooves for feet, and chains around its neck. You hear the hoofbeats before you ever see the creature.

There are a multitude of interpretations of el cadejo, and there have been many sightings all across the Americas. Some of these stories share strong similarities with sightings in Europe and other places of similar creatures. The Black Dog of Scotland is one such example.

Winston Churchill often referred to what is now surmised to be bouts of depression as his “black dog”. The metaphor of the black dog signifying and embodying mental illness is a common one, and though the phrase and concept are often attributed to Churchill, many others have used the symbol of the Black Dog to refer to mental illness before him, and with no relation to him. Across various cultures the Black Dog has been considered an omen of death and negativity-sometimes they are even characterized as the devil itself.

In some tellings of the legend of el cadejo, it is said that turning your back on the beast can induce madness. In another, the cadejo never bites its victims. It instead kicks and hits them. The person is said to have been ‘handled’ by the cadejo (Lo jugó el cadejo), and consequently goes insane and dies soon after.

Not all stories of the Black Dog are inherently negative. Many anecdotes exist that paint the Black Dog as a protector- of nature, of treasure, and especially of travelers.

The most obvious from previous discussion is the ‘white’ aspect of El Cadejo; which actively protects and guides those out late at night to safety. Other specific stories include anecdotes of a Black Dog fighting off thieves and attackers, and guarding men who pass out drunk on the side of the road. Similar tales exist across Britain as well. Sometimes these tales of protection are spun, and the twist is revealed that the dog only protected these men to later kill them or steal their soul, but there do exist stories of the Black Dog protecting travelers for seemingly altruistic reasons.

One such tale involves two sisters in Guatemala in 1975. The story goes that the two young women were sent out on an errand. It was dark, and as they came to a crossroads a strange, dark, dog-like animal appeared and blocked their path. The women decided to walk backwards the way they had come so that they could keep an eye on it. However, one of the girls fell, and when she next stood up the dog was gone- replaced with a white mass that walked next to them and guided
them safely home. The young woman who fell claims not to remember the entire walk home [11].

Another tale, recounted by folklorist Theo Brown as a conversation with a personal correspondent, involved a young girl returning home through a dense forest. Along her trip two intimidating men appeared, scaring her badly. However, as she walked, a large black dog appeared in front of her, guiding her past the men who did not dare cause trouble while the girl had such a large guard dog with her. The dog then vanished as she approached the safety of her home [7].

As the Black Dog is often associated with travel, roads, crossroads, and boundaries, they are often also associated with water. In many Latin American countries, some indigenous beliefs posit these supernatural figures in an entirely positive light, and the dog is integral in helping people pass safely into the afterlife, acting as a guide and companion [4]. The dog aids specifically in Maya, Mixe, Chinanteco, and Aztec culture, by helping the deceased to cross the river of the dead, acting as a guide through the underworld in a literal sense, filling a similar role to Charon in Greek mythology. In many stories, the deceased must take hold of the dog’s tail as they swim across.

Among the Quechua people of the Andes, two black dogs wait along the River of Blood (their version of the River of the Dead) and help ferry the souls of good people across [4].

There exists yet another connection between the Black Dog to the earth, gold, gems, and other valuables. It is an interesting connection to death and the underworld that goes beyond being simply a bad omen, or a guide. The Roman god Pluto is also the god of gems and treasure, as in certain tales from South America posit that the Black Dog is a guardian of such treasure [4]. This further solidifies the Black Dog’s reputation as an envoy of death, though the connection is tertiary in this particular case. The Black Dog is connected to the depths of the earth- to the chthonic gods, but that does not make them a true harbinger of death, necessarily.

For my purposes, the Black and White Dogs serve as a psychopomp to Evelyn: a guide through death, the underworld, and the unknown.

5.2.2 Cyclical Storytelling

Life as we know it is full of cycles and repetition: everything often seems to come back around to eat its own tail like an ouroboros.

The Hero’s Journey, as compiled and presented by Joseph Campbell, is a very popular way of organizing and presenting an individual character’s narrative. It consists of twelve total steps: the ordinary world, the call to adventure, refusal of the call, meeting with the mentor, crossing
the threshold, test allies and enemies, the approach, the ordeal, reward/rebirth, the road back, the resurrection, and the return with the elixir. These steps are laid out in Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* [5].

While useful and certainly popular, the Hero’s Journey as laid out by Campbell has its limitations. Many myths and stories fit imperfectly, or do not fit at all. And the structure allows little if any room at all for the narratives of the women throughout mythology and storytelling history. Said women are often relegated to the roles of mother and protector—never destined to be the ‘Hero’ in their own right [50]. That is not to say that these women and their roles are not heroic, or that stories centered around women cannot find themselves fitting within Campbell’s framework. This is simply a shortcoming in Campbell’s own work that I feel should at least be addressed: he looked solely at the male figures as ‘Heroes’. The Heroines were almost entirely neglected.

Campbell was approached in his last year of teaching by a student asking “... what about the women?”, and his response is telling.

He said, in no uncertain terms: “The woman’s the mother of the hero; she’s the goal of the hero’s achieving; she’s the protectress of the hero; she is this, she is that. What more do you want?”

The student replied that she herself, wanted to be the hero [50].

He addressed this mindset again from another angle. He claimed that he had initially wanted to include stories of female heroism, but that he could only find them in fairy tales which were, “... told by women to children, you know, and you get a different perspective [50].”

By this he mean’s a woman’s perspective.

His “Monomyth” (as The Hero’s Journey is often referred to), right from the start excludes half of the population; both in terms of the voice telling the story, and in terms of representation within those stories.

There are other criticisms of his methods as well that go beyond just gender inequity.

One positive outcome of Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* was his inclusion of non-Western mythology in his main thesis, thereby elevating a wide range of cultures into the public view. However, even this has its drawbacks as he essentially flattens large swaths of rich cultures of storytelling to fit into his framework, which erases a lot of the nuance found in different cultural perspectives [3].

Myths and legends, by their nature, exist in a wide range of contexts and interpretations, and in order to make them all fit his model, Campbell had to essentially cherry-pick which stories
and further, which specific versions of those stories, fit into his already-established narrative [3].

He created a framework that was primarily read by a white, mid-century audience, and then actively decontextualized myths and legends from other cultures so that they that fit neatly into the worldview of that audience. The stated framework also has an unbalanced focus on heroic individualism without any sort of tether to history or community (two things that are invariably essential to most if not all myths, legends, and folktales), and does not account for differences in interpretation across cultures [30, 44]. Additionally, to create his “monomyth”, he pulled heavily from Carl Jung’s concept of archetypes, which raises concerns (as we discussed previously), because Jung’s archetypes are fraught with scientific inaccuracy and flawed interpretations of the human condition [13]. He used Jung’s theories to push the concept that stories and common symbols are somehow inherent to disparate cultures and communities and develop in parallel, while most professional folklorists agree that similarities between myths, legends, and folklore are largely due to those stories simply spreading across borders and cultures [14].

The differences between stories and their specific versions are important, and to imply that there is “one true” version is simply anthropologically and sociologically incorrect, and to say otherwise runs the risk of completely erasing many beautiful and important forms of storytelling from public view.

There are other frameworks that exist and allow for the telling of different types of narratives, and Maria Tatar does the interesting work of dissecting Campbell’s shortcomings specifically in regard to gender, while simultaneously offering a look at the Heroines in classic mythology and literature. These stories tend to center around (often quietly) fixing social ills, discovering truth despite adversity, and using cunning, wiles, and occasional violence to institute beneficial change within society [50].

It is simultaneously an interesting read, and an interesting alternative to what has become somewhat of a standard framework in storytelling across film, television, and modern literature.

Other frameworks exist, such as the Dan Harmon story circle, or the three-act structure, but regardless of your chosen framework or philosophy, humans like stories. We create beginnings, middles, and ends for ourselves even when none are truly present in everyday life. We like tidy and comfortable cycles, and the concept of ‘beginning again’.

There is no hard or fast rule for an all encompassing and perfect story structure. Different cultures have different takes on the concept, and all vary widely and in fascinating ways [44].
I am not opposed to or in favor of any one storytelling structure over another, and I quite like Neil Gaiman’s take on the issue. In an interview with the Wild River Review he is quoted as having said, “I think I got about half way through The Hero with a Thousand Faces and found myself thinking if this is true — I don’t want to know. I really would rather not know this stuff. I’d rather do it because it’s true and because I accidentally wind up creating something that falls into this pattern than be told what the pattern is [40].”

I personally like to approach my storytelling in cycles. Beginnings make endings, concepts once visited are revisited, and we are all afforded multiple opportunities to begin again.

“The whole world is a circle. All of these circular images reflect the psyche [6].” - A page from the Winchester Bible, ca. 1160-1170.

Evelyn starts in her apartment, a home far away from Home. In the journey through her nightmares she is guided by the Black Dog through various fears: losing her dog, car accidents, falling, drowning. These could almost be considered her main trials.

She eventually finds herself at the front porch of her childhood home in a play on the adage ‘the hero returns home’. Evelyn is different. She has changed for better or worse. She can return, but perhaps she comes back wrong? She no longer fits in the box in the same way she used to, which makes the return as painful as it is necessary.

This is further complicated by the fact that the home before her is not her true childhood home. It is a simulacrum: an image. She can go ‘home’ to this unreal version, but she is not truly returning home.

Evelyn’s cycle is incomplete.
Chapter 6

Methodology and Design Process

6.1 Characters

6.1.1 Evelyn

“Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”
- Frank Robinson, quoted by Time magazine in 1973

What reason is there to push ourselves beyond our limits, beyond our means- if not for fear that we will not be accepted and loved for who we are- AS we are? Survival, of course, is one compelling reason- food, shelter, and security are not givens in our society. An added point of pressure to perform- to produce or be left behind.

Evelyn is our overworked main character. She embodies the quote above: close doesn’t count. Evelyn’s main goal is to become a published author, and despite multiple rejections she holds fast to it. She is headstrong and stubborn, and has trouble letting things go once started.

This has become a problem in her life, as she becomes far too focused on her one singular goal and begins to isolate herself and neglect many of the things that are most important to her.

Evelyn’s fear is not just of losing her dog- her best friend- but of being abandoned by that best friend. As she, in some ways, has abandoned her past, and subconsciously herself.

In terms of design, Evelyn is inspired in large part by character designs for Coraline. In particular, I was drawn to the overall silhouette of Coraline: with the bulky coat, thin twig-like legs and large, clunky boots [37].

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I also looked to the game *Little Nightmares* for character design inspiration. Once again, bulky, concealing clothing was emphasized— in the second installment in the series a player-character even wears a bag over his head in addition to the bulky coat [49].

This concept of hiding and finding comfort in baggy clothing was appealing to me. Evelyn is not happy, and it shows in the way she holds herself and seeks comfort and safety in her clothing choices.

Every iteration of Evelyn had a baggy sweatshirt. This decision was made almost from the start, and my visual research helped solidify this decision. I did, however, play with quite a few different color palettes and hair styles. I eventually settled on a half ponytail, and a desaturated color palette of blue, green, and red.
The earliest sketches of Evelyn, and other little characters that inspired her had a bun almost right on top of her head. This was almost the design that I went with. However, I decided to move forward with the half-pony instead, as it gave the opportunity to break up some of her round shapes with contrasting jagged edges.

In terms of color palette, I knew that I wanted her to wear primarily cool colors in order to hint at a more subdued nature. Her boots and hair tie serve as a pop of warmth amidst what is otherwise a very cold and gray color palette. Her eye bags are also important as an indicator for how exhausted she is at this point in her narrative.
Figure 6.3: Color palette tests for Evelyn. Shown in the bottom left is the color palette that I started from and modified.

Figure 6.4: Turnaround for my first full design of Evelyn.

At this point in the process, I actually moved on and worked on designing Evelyn’s dog, as
well as some environments for a while. I needed to let Evelyn’s design sit for a bit before I decided exactly how I felt, and how to progress and improve the design.

When I came back to it, I worked on some expressions and poses. These are shown below.

![Figure 6.5: Expressions and pose studies.](image)

Even at this stage, her design began to morph and change to suit my own shift in aesthetic preferences. Certain shapes became more refined, and her face especially became more of an oval than a proper circle. I also let myself loosen up with the shapes and flow of her hair, and this is where I started trying to figure out exactly how her sweatshirt might sit on her body.

Next, I properly designed her boots. Her previous shoes were too floppy and indistinct, and from my sketches it was unclear if she was wearing slippers or proper shoes.
I ultimately decided on Chelsea-style rainboots. This is both an aesthetic nod to characters like Coraline and Paddington bear, and a decision based on necessity, as she needed a shoe that was practical and could quickly and easily be yanked on.

Below is Evelyn’s next iteration, with the redesigned boots and an attempt at figuring out the folds of her sweatshirt.

The lines and folds in the sweatshirt still weren’t quite right at this point, so I looked at
more references of bulky oversized sweatshirts and tried again. This time I paid more attention to how the fabric would sit and simplified the shapes accordingly. I also got rid of the drawn-on eye bags. They were too prominent, and made Evelyn look much older than I intended her to be.

Figure 6.8: The second iteration of Evelyn.

In addition to the discussed changes, I also changed the shapes and physicality of her face. In my initial designs, the only feature with a visible outline in the profile view was her nose. In these iterations I decided that I want her lips to show in the side view.

At this stage, I was very happy with Evelyn’s overall look and feel, but was still dissatisfied with the way the sweatshirt was sitting. The fabric felt too thin, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about the very rectangular look it gave her torso.

To further improve the design, I did a series of sketches/studies from photos of myself wearing a large, bulky sweater. These are shown below.
From these studies, I had a better idea of how I kind of wanted Evelyn’s sweater to sit, and I also made strides in my own drawing skills in learning how to portray a thicker material.
Figure 6.10: Simplification of my sweater studies, drawing Evelyn in the poses.

Simplifying from my initial studies, Evelyn’s sweater now has more realistic volume. I also adjusted the way it sits around her hips and thighs, so it no longer feels like it’s hanging off of her, and more like she is wearing a real article of clothing.

Finally, I did a few more expressions for Evelyn, which are shown below.
6.1.2 Evelyn’s Mom

Fewer iterations were done on the design of Evelyn’s mom, since she only really appears in the family photo at the start. Her presence is felt, and her absence is an important driver for Evelyn’s struggles, but she is more of a symbol in this narrative than she is a real person.

That said, I did create a quick turnaround for her, with two separate color tests. It was important that the shape language be similar, but for the mom to appear more mature, and older, of course.

At first I gave the mom a cooler color palette to match Evelyn, but found that the designs were similar enough that she could easily be confused as an older version of Evelyn herself. This is shown below in Figure 6.12.
So, I went back and gave her a warmer color palette. This warmer color palette is shown in Figure 6.13.

Figure 6.12: Initial turnaround for Evelyn’s mom.

Figure 6.13: Evelyn’s mom with a warmer color palette.
6.1.3 Doggo, the Dog

Evelyn’s dog, at her core, was inspired by my own dog. She is rambunctious, playful, and a free spirit. Visually, Evelyn’s dog is based on a husky. I attempted to keep the legs somewhat lanky, and the paws large to give her a more youthful appearance. She is young and maintains a puppy-like look and demeanor. Her eyes and face are friendly and expressive.

But most importantly, Evelyn’s dog is a bit of a troublemaker.

Figure 6.14: Character interaction between Evelyn and her dog. A walk in the park turns decidedly stressful for Evelyn as her dog somehow manages to get loose.

The most important factor in designing Evelyn’s dog was ensuring that the shape language matched between the two characters, while allowing the pup to remain distinct personality-wise. Initial designs had long ears more in line with my own dog Freya as shown below.
Initially, I used the dog’s long ears to match up with and act as a call back to the pieces of hair on either side of Evelyn’s face. Along the same vein, the dog’s tail is jagged and curled to match Evelyn’s ponytail.

However, moving forward in story design, I found that most descriptions of folkloric dogs...
like el cadejo, the black dog of Scotland, etc often gave off more sinister vibes [7].

The dog in the nightmare was initially meant to match closely with Evelyn’s dog. My initial thought process was that the two are not necessarily the same, but they needed to be similar in order to create/imply the connection for the audience. I wanted the nightmare dog to be somewhat intimidating, and therefore decided that a more wolf-like appearance for both animals would better serve the narrative. Making floppy ears seem scary and unnerving was a tall order that I couldn’t quite overcome. Namely for this reason, I decided to redesign Evelyn’s dog as a husky, with pointed ears, and scruffier fur in key spots along the face, neck, chest, and legs. The redesign is shown below.

I later went in an entirely different direction in designing the dream dog, and the two are no longer similar. Those decisions will be discussed in a later section.

![Figure 6.17: Refined turnaround of Evelyn’s dog- version 1.](image)

I went through a number of color iterations, but shown above is what I settled on: mostly white body with navy markings along the head, back and tail. The shape and curl of the tail maintains the callback to Evelyn’s ponytail, while the dark markings and red collar match Evelyn’s hair and boots/hair tie color, respectively. I also added scruffy hair on either side of the pup’s face as an additional connection to the shapes found in Evelyn’s hair.

After further iteration, I continued to refine the shapes of Evelyn’s dog. The color palette remained the same, but I widened the end of the snout, and generally made the dog a bit lankier and stockier. The final turnaround for Evelyn’s dog is shown below.
Figure 6.18: Refined turnaround of Evelyn’s dog, version 2.

Figure 6.19 below shows Evelyn and her dog side by side. This further illustrates the similarities in color and shape language, and gives an idea of the size relationship between the two.
6.1.4 Dream!Doggo, the Dream Dog

Modifying Evelyn’s dog into a husky made its nightmare counterpart a bit easier to design at the start. As was discussed previously, the dream dog was initially inspired by Latin American folklore as well as various other cultural references to black dogs—especially in regard to mental health.

From the start, I wanted the nightmare dog to be very wolf-like. Initial designs leaned heavily into a horror vibe with sharp teeth and an almost eerily human smile. These sketches are shown below.
After further refining, the nightmare dog’s overall shape and silhouette came closer to Eve-lyn’s dog as I tried to hone in on exactly how I wanted it to look. I kept the round eyes from initial concept work, shaped the fur on its cheeks similarly to the regular dog, and otherwise gave it a somewhat haunted look in this round of sketches, shown in Figure 6.21.

The wolf designs in Wolfwalkers were a significant source of inspiration. Early wolf studies and sketches are shown below in Figure 6.22, while more refined sketches (much closer to the final wolf design from the movie) are shown in Figure 6.23 [47].
As I continued refining my sketches and ideas, I looked at monster designs from various sources. I looked at the monster designs in Castlevania, as well as the bold shadow creatures from the game Don’t Starve, which have strong silhouettes with aesthetic scratchiness to the linework, as is evident in Jeff Agala’s concept art shown below in Figure 6.24. The scratchiness to the line work helps to emphasize the feelings of anxiety and danger, which is an effect that could benefit my own design work for the nightmare dog. The bold black and white shapes also remind me of linoleum or woodblock printing, which will become especially relevant in later iterations of the design.
I also looked at the art of Natalie Hall. Her work includes what appear to be pencil and ink sketches, and she works both traditionally and digitally. She is also known for tattoo design. I primarily looked at the way she designs and draws various animals and creatures. Her work is expressive, and often has an ethereal quality that I greatly admire [23].

Figure 6.24: Wolf designs and sketches by by Jeff Agala from Cartoon Saloon’s Don’t Starve, made by Klei Entertainment.

Figure 6.25: Tiger and wolf-like creature designs by Natalie Hall.
I personally enjoy the almost smoky quality to the fur of the wolf on the right in Figure 6.25, as well as the circular eyes, which is already a common motif within my own work. Looking at Hall’s drawings made me start to think of giving the nightmare wolf a more ghostly appearance.

As I considered making the wolf more monstrous, I went through a period where I also considered keeping the nightmare dog’s overall features indistinct. The thought process was to keep a recognizable outline for the nightmare dog, but to then create an either scribbly or smokey texture over/on it, and to have the only recognizable features be its glowing red eyes.

This led to the following sketch in Figure 6.26, which is part of a walk cycle that I created in order to both test the scribble texture and as an animation study to get a feel for the way canids move.

![Scribbled wolf sketch](image)

Figure 6.26: Scribbled wolf sketch.

This, however, is not the final silhouette. After playing with this design for a while, I decided that I wanted the nightmare dog to have a scruffier chest and neck, as well as fluffy cheeks similar to Evelyn’s dog.

I continued refining the shapes of the wolf, and the next iteration is shown below in Figure 6.27.
As shown above, I went back to the wide, unnatural smile. The expression would not be permanent, nor would it be present regularly, but having the nightmare dog make such an expression at a key moment could create an extremely unsettling mood. This would be emphasized by the wolf generally not having a visible mouth otherwise, and it could further call into question whether or not this dog is to be trusted. With this iteration of designs I wanted the audience at times to truly wonder whether this dog is present to guide and help Evelyn, or to lead her astray. This thought process was meant to build tension until the dog ultimately saves Evelyn, cementing them as a benevolent entity.

Upon further iteration, the following design was reached, with a compromise between the overall shapes in Figure 6.27, and the scratchy line work in select locations from Figure 6.26.
This iteration was meant to match the shape language of both Evelyn and her actual dog. With this design, the nightmare dog could almost simply be a normal wolf in this universe—any nightmarish feeling would be entirely dependent on context and the environment around both them and Evelyn.

Additionally, the story takes place in a nightmare. The world and the creatures in it can be as strange and unreal as possible, and I was beginning to feel as if the more realistic designs were taking away from the concept of the otherworldly environment.

For these reasons, I went back to my visual research and inspiration, and started iterating on a more monstrous, fantastical approach.

Pulling even more from previously mentioned sources, I leaned further into the monstrosity of the Black Dog. I looked back at Francisco de Goya’s etchings; the haziness of the atmosphere, and the scratchiness of the line work inherent to the medium (especially in the *Sleep of Reason* and *The Disasters* do well to convey danger, unease, and hopelessness.

I also looked at the style and feel of other forms of printmaking, and the current iteration of the nightmare dog was born. I pulled more directly from my sources of inspiration and put special interest in highlighting the monstrosity and otherworldliness of the creature.

Figure 6.29: Sixth iteration of the nightmare dog— in black.
Both of these designs serve the narrative much better in the ethereality of their existence, and the threatening nature of their presence. They are both smoky and indistinct; at times blending in with their bold environment, while also remaining solid by nature of the printmaking influences in the design.

In addition, the design of the background in these mockups also gave further inspiration to the dream-world designs. This will be discussed in further depth below.

Moving forward from these concept pieces, I worked on solidifying the new nightmare dog design further. Their current iterations are shown in the figure below.
As in the concept pieces, the final nightmare dog will be smokey and somewhat incorporeal. Body parts are disconnected, and at times the creature will turn to smoke. Overall, the texture of the dog will be scratchy and jittery to match with the environment and to further emphasize its nightmarish nature. The eyes will be large and glowing a bright red as a nod to its inspiration rooted in Black Dog folklore, and its fur will be a dark gray- almost black.
6.2 Environment Design

6.2.1 In the Real World

Evelyn’s apartment is the main environment in the ‘real’ world. In this world, flat, desaturated colors along with low contrast will contribute to an overall feeling of depression, disuse, and neglect. The lighting will be dim and unrealistic to create a subdued feeling.

To this effect, I looked at the paintings of William Bailey for inspiration in the real world environments. His still lifes are subdued in a way that is incredibly subtle, but gives each painting a somewhat mysterious and surreal feeling. He lowers contrast by desaturating color, and keeping transitions between objects subtle. He also keeps the texture to a minimum; brush strokes are often missing, or difficult to discern. At times the only obvious texture is found in the background, which further pushes the foreground elements back [22].
Evelyn’s apartment building is drab; almost a box generally speaking, and her apartment as a whole is a small studio apartment.

Figure 6.34 below shows the general layout in a quick sketch.
Figure 6.34: Evelyn’s small studio apartment.

The main living area is essentially one room. The space is messy and unkept. Important points of note will be the small table by the door. As Evelyn enters her apartment, we will see a family portrait.
Figure 6.35: The small table at the entrance to Evelyn’s apartment. On it sits a family portrait, and the bowl where Evelyn keeps her keys.

On the wall above this table a few pictures will be hanging, but the main focus will be a photograph of a house: Evelyn’s childhood home.
Figure 6.36: Evelyn’s childhood home. In the real world a refined version of this image will be hanging on the wall above the table at the entrance to her apartment.

The main point of interest in Evelyn’s apartment is the section that comprises her bedroom and office. Her bed is tucked into the corner with her dog’s bed at its foot. Her desk sits next to the window, and it is small and cluttered with only enough space for a laptop, lamp, and a few cups and papers.

Shown below is a more refined layout and environment for the bedroom and work section of Evelyn’s apartment. From this next concept art, we can see clearly just how messy and cluttered Evelyn’s bedroom truly is. Attempts have been made at decorating with pictures and posters, hinting at interests, but overall the room is drab and in disrepair. Even Evelyn’s attempts at gardening have failed, as her plants sit dead in their pots on her windowsill.
Colors, as discussed previously, will be kept muted and somewhat dark in tone. Below is my first attempt at a color study from a one-point perspective, looking straight at the back wall and window of the living space.
Figure 6.38: My first sketch of Evelyn’s bedroom/work area.

Overall, this color scheme is decently close to what I had in mind for the waking-world apartment, and I am happy with the layout.

I then applied the general color scheme to the isometric layout, and the final design for Evelyn’s bedroom is shown below.
6.2.2 In the Dream World

There are a few main environments to discuss for Evelyn’s dream-world. The first is her bedroom, then the wooded road/street, and finally the riverbank and floating pathway leading to her childhood home.

Each dream environment will have a dominant, or key color. This choice has multiple dimensions: for starters, it will help set a vibe and tone for each scene similarly to how color was used in old silent films to tint an entire shot in a monochrome color and add emotion, and it will also serve to further differentiate the dream world from the waking world, as the main source of color in the dream will be from the overall tint.

This will be achieved by creating washes of watercolor across the entire shot, then drawing the backgrounds on top- with little to no color similarly to how the background for the current wolf designs were done. Those were done with a digital approximation, and after experimenting I have found that physical watercolor paintings scanned in and modified digitally create a much more
aesthetically pleasing product.

This effect is most striking when the background content is nothing but solid black shapes and/or scratchy lines over the watercolor wash. This also offers interesting opportunities to later break these ‘rules’ in order to further jar the audience, and/or to imply that something is more ‘real’, or that Evelyn has a stronger personal connection to it. For example, certain props in her dream bedroom will still have color and dimension, it will mainly be the walls and less important props that do not have this effect. Her desk will be more realistic, as will her dog’s bed. This serves to call extra attention to the two key aspects in Evelyn’s life at the moment, things that are very ‘real’ to her, while everything else fades into the background: her work and her (now missing) dog.

Additionally, the plants on her windowsill will have come back to life, and those will be eerily vibrant- far more so than could possibly be considered realistic.

Figure 6.40: Early sketch and color study of the overgrown plants in Evelyn’s dream. Evelyn’s pose and the placement of the window are meant to call back to and reference Goya’s *The sleep of reason produces monsters.*

When Evelyn first ‘wakes up’ in her bedroom, the dominant color will be green. As a color, it offers a feeling of neutrality, and is a nod to the now vibrant plants on her windowsill. As Evelyn rushes frantically outside, and moves toward the street searching for her dog, the colors will shift toward a yellow-orange wash in the background. In old silent films, yellow was often used to signify that it was day time and/or the character was outside. It also serves as a decent transition color.
toward danger, as when Evelyn is almost hit by a car, the tone will shift suddenly to red.

Figure 6.41: Watercolor wash to be used as a base/background with red as the main focal color.

Figure 6.42: Early concept sketch and watercolor painting of the crumbling roadway.

I wanted to push the nightmare scenery even further by really emphasizing the watercolor wash as the main source of color and intensity. As discussed earlier, the colors are meant to be a
callback to black and white silent films, which were tinted one single shade for effect.

To this end, I decided to draw directly on top of the watercolor wash digitally with a single dark color. The marks are almost black, with some sections formed via erasing the digital ink as opposed to solely drawing lines in. In this way, the environment also visually calls back to various forms of printmaking, like linocuts and woodblock carvings.

Figure 6.43: Final shot of the crumbling roadway. Digital painting over a watercolor wash.

The roadway and scenery- especially the manner in which the dream collapses- was inspired in large part by the eerie paintings of Zdzisław Beksiński, and the mark-making in de Goya’s etchings.

The concept of the crumbling, floating infrastructure is one that I pulled from various environment designs. For starters, I was heavily inspired by the game *Gris*, from Devolver Digital games and Nomada Studio. They also do something similar with watercolor washes moving and swirling through the background as the character moves through the environment. This game also uses color in a masterful way, with individual hues representing different emotions (and therefore abilities) of the main character as she journeys toward acceptance [48].
The red watercolor wash will remain as Evelyn runs and the dream collapses around her. Once she falls the color will shift purple, and when she hits the water and sinks, the background will be an almost swirling black as a visual cue to the growing desperation and futility of the situation. After being rescued by the Black Dog (now more reminiscent of the white cadejo), the background wash will be more of a gray-navy.

For the final environment, I was also inspired by environmental designs of Enkanomiya in Mihoyo’s *Genshin Impact*. The color palette of the area is very aesthetically pleasing, and was also a factor in my choosing a cool, dark blue for the half-destroyed environment of the riverbank and path leading to Evelyn’s childhood home.

Figure 6.44: Screenshot from *Gris* by Nomada Studio showcasing the crumbling environment and striking watercolor washes [48].
Enkanomiya is also apt for environmental inspiration as it is an underground nation set in an otherworldly environment entirely separate from the surface world. It is in the underworld in that it is a cave-like space, but also in that it is only connected to the rest of the world by a magical portal [36]. Like Evelyn in my story, Dante in his *Inferno*, and Alice through Wonderland; the player has to venture downward into the unknown.

The final environment in Evelyn’s story is a return to her childhood home. It is at once recognizable and fantastical, floating in the void on a broken piece of earth. The only pathway to reach it is across broken and disconnected paving stones; also floating in the void. The Black Dog leads her across. It leads her home in a direct, somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference to the concept of the hero’s return as part of the famous ‘Hero’s Journey’ [32].

In Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, as discussed earlier, he defines the Hero’s Journey as follows:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man [5].”

In Evelyn’s story, her ‘home’ IS the “region of supernatural wonder”, and her return is not
the end point, but an abrupt cut off in the very middle of her journey.

Below are some of my initial concept sketches of Evelyn’s childhood home in the ruins of the nightmare. I initially had an important point of interest in a large oak tree with a swing in the back yard. This detail faded into the background a bit in subsequent sketches and paintings.

Figure 6.46: Initial sketches and paintings for Evelyn’s childhood home in the nightmare.

The concept was further refined in a digital drawing, then tonal studies as shown below.
Next I began to test the idea of a digital drawing on top of a physically painted watercolor
wash, as was discussed in previous sections.

Figure 6.49: Digital sketch of Evelyn’s childhood home over a blue and yellow watercolor wash.

In its current iteration, the concept consists of a pure watercolor painting, with line work done in India ink.
Figure 6.50: Watercolor painting of Evelyn’s childhood home in the nightmare.

This visual experience would exist in contrast to other facets of the environment that are largely simply black lines over watercolor wash. This serves to set the house itself apart— to Evelyn it is more real than the other pieces of the dream. This symbolizes her subconscious desire to go home.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

My work is inspired by, and a part of a long tradition of finding meaning and artistry in dreams and nightmares. As a narrative device, dreams are a powerful tool.

In my story, I tried to pull sense out of the nonsense, and meaning out of my character’s fear and insecurity. I made connections between those insecurities and the real world in which Evelyn operates by tying important locations, figures, and occurrences into the nightmare.

I have pulled from themes and tropes found in folklore, and taken my character on a dive into the underworld for which she was not necessarily ready. Through it all she is guided by a Black Dog, a figure that is simultaneously a protector, and a manifestation of Evelyn’s own anxieties and insecurities.
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