When first approached, *The Nightmare* confronts the viewer with a dark beauty. Those who are not acquainted with the work are often surprised that it was painted in 1781, a century and a half before the Surrealists began to explore the world of dreams and the unconscious mind. The painting caused an uproar when it was first presented at the Royal Academy in London and almost immediately spread the fame of its maker, Henry Fuseli. Fuseli, a Swiss painter who spent most of his career in England, was unique among 18th-century artists in that he was known for his scholastic accomplishments as well as his artistic skill. He was part of a circle society of intellectuals, which included botanists and medical physicians to poets, who are said to have influenced his work. A professor of painting, Fuseli edited Matthew Pilkington’s *Dictionary of Painters*, which became arguably the most widely read reference text of art history in the English-speaking world at the time. Fuseli showed his love of literature through contributing 9 paintings to John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery and creating his own Milton Gallery with an astounding 40 works.

*The Nightmare* remains a shocking and strange sight to even today’s viewers. The work is actually a culmination of classical motifs. Fuseli is known to have said that he was a “classicist in spite of himself.” *The Nightmare*, upon close inspection, reveals many qualities of classical Greek art. Nicolas Powell compares the woman in the painting to the *Sleeping Ariadne* statue in the Vatican and the creature crouched on her chest to Hellenistic depictions of hunchbacked beggars. Miles Chappell connects the painting to the Bacchanalian scene carved on a sarcophagus in Naples. In these classical depictions of Dionysus-worshipping revelry, sleeping women were often featured as objects of sexual desire, as well as evidence of the end of a drunken night of debauchery. These women were called *maenads* and have a complex and strange history in Greek mythology, entwined with strange sexual, violent, and possibly psychot-ic behavior. The hallucinations that are often attributed to the maenads (literally translated into “mad women”) could be related to the strange creatures visiting the woman in the painting.

Fuseli’s close relationships and interactions with scientists may have caused him to incorporate medical phenomena into his works. In 1969, Dr Jerome Schneck compared the painting to sleep paralysis, an experience of anxiety-provoking loss of muscle tone, caused by the REM state in the brain throughout which the individual is conscious enough to register and remember the entire event. Such events are often associated with frightening hypnagogic hallucinations. These hallucinations sometimes consist of creatures sitting upon the individual’s chest, increasing the feeling of suffocation. Although such visions are frightening, they are now understood, diagnosable, and treatable. The 18th-century definition of nightmare, in fact, included the description of a hallucination of “someone or something sitting on the chest.” Sleep paralysis as we know it today was separated from nightmares more than a century later by SW Mitchell, who referred to them as “night palseys.” The dark undertones of mental instability associated with hallucinations, however benign as those associated with sleep paralysis, add to a darker layer of the painting.

Fuseli not only was known as “one of the most well-read painters of all time” but was also infamous for his tempestuous nature and emotional instability. Some have postulated, quite convincingly, that he painted *The Nightmare* as an expression of his torturously unrequited love for Anna Landoldt, niece of his close friend Johann Kaspar Lavater. A controversial article by Marcia Allentuck argued that the painting depicts the female sexual experience using Freudian ideas of psychoanalysis. Although the arch of the woman’s back has been associated with a need for movement to be freed from paralysis, it has also been noted as a depiction of a more sensual nature. The creature sitting on her chest, now associated with common hypnagogic hallucinations, stems from myths about incubi and succubae, distinctly sexual creatures, that would, like s—tys to maenads, sexually violate the paralyzed individual. This motif has been found throughout every cultural region of the world.
world. Peter Tomory suggests that the painting is an expression of Fuseli’s sexual fantasies about Anna; indeed, on the back of the canvas is a portrait of her. Udo Kultermann has even suggested that the creature on the chest and appearance of the horse in the corner are evidence of “unconscious bestiality.” The painting’s inky and strange nature has caused this wide array of interpretations in its wake.

Sleep, alongside mythology and renowned literature, was Fuseli’s favorite subject. He also depicted Danaë and Perseus sleeping after being rescued and Lady Macbeth sleep walking through her castle. He spoke of his work in this subject, saying that “one of the most unexplored regions of art are dreams, and what may be called the personification of sentiment.” Fuseli explored the peaceful nature of sleep, the agitation and pain of sleep disorders, and even the analysis of dreams as a window into the inner self. His visual voyages into the world of the subconscious mind mark him as a pioneer of both art and of the human mind.

Disclosures

Authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

References