

## Mentorial Dreams in S. F. Said's Novel for Children, *Varjak Paw*

Coralline Dupuy  
National University of Ireland, Galway

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### Abstract:

**This article appraises the importance of dreams in *Varjak Paw*, a 2003 novel for children which received the Smarties prize Gold Award. The seven dreams featured in the narrative are evaluated in terms of their didactic content. The relevance of the dream-episodes is then assessed from a Jungian psychoanalytical perspective. Their significance for the global organisation of the novel is analysed with a Structuralist approach. The objective of this discussion is to appreciate how the dreams and the mentor-disciple relationship are intertwined in the novel.**

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In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), the folklorist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung states: "One thing we ought never to forget: almost half of our lives is passed in a more or less unconscious state."<sup>1</sup> In the following article, Jung's wise comment is going to be applied to S. F. Said's novel for children, *Varjak Paw*. The novel was the recipient for the 2003 Smarties prize, a literary award for writers of children's fiction. The peculiarity of this award is that the winners are designated by the young readers. In Said's case, this prestigious award points to the quality of his style and the virtuosity with which he reflects on the correlation between conscious life and dreams in his fiction.

The plot follows the adventures of a kitten called Varjak. At the beginning of the novel, Varjak lives with his family of Mesopotamian Blue cats in a remote house. He feels isolated in this conformist setting and flees the house when a mysterious gentleman moves in. Alone, he discovers the Outside World that his family fears so much. In the course of his journey, he makes friends and mistakes. His ancestor, Jalal, comes to him in his dreams when Varjak is helpless and defenceless, in order to teach him a valuable lesson every time. The dream episodes in the novel therefore constitute a key element of the narrative and deserve our critical attention

In Said's novel, dreams provide vivid sensory experiences. The seven dreams are located in Mesopotamia, the geographical cradle of mankind and the place where the Mesopotamian cats originate from ("Whatever happened in the real world, there was always Mesopotamia in his dreams" Said 2003:177). In the course of these dreams, Jalal teaches the Seven Ways to Varjak.

Varjak belongs to a long tradition of inexperienced protagonists in voyages of self-discovery. One might mention the eponymous character in Voltaire's *Candide* or the miller's third son in Charles Perrault's fairy tale *Puss in Boots*: they are naïve young people on a perilous journey, deprived of parental guidance ("There was no way back. He was truly on his own" Said 2003:50).

The lack of a caring parent creates a psychological deficiency in these young characters. This void becomes acute when they find themselves in a situation they cannot solve by their own means, owing to their deficient upbringing. The mentor therefore functions as a substitute for parents or other authority figures during the phase of the young protagonist's personal quest towards self-development.

The literary tradition of the mentor goes back as far as the character called Mentos in Homer's *Odyssey*. Mentos is goddess Athena in disguise. She selflessly guides young Telemachus through his search for his father. Modern instances of mentors are numerous, both in children's fiction and in films

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1933, 11.

addressed to a young audience: to mention but two of the most famous; the wizard Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series, and Ioda in George Lucas' Star Wars trilogy. In several interviews, Said has acknowledged his admiration for Lucas' work.

The mentor is strikingly similar to his equivalent in fairy tales, the old man whom the hero meets during the most bewildering phase of his quest. In his analysis of the quest narrative, Northrop Frye delineates three stages in the plot. They include the perilous journey that the hero undertakes after leaving the family home, the crucial struggle with the forces of chaos, and finally the exaltation of the hero once he has proved his valour.<sup>2</sup> If one follows Frye's division of the narrative, the mentor intervenes between the first and the second stages, and his help is crucial for the hero to make it to the last stage.

The mentor Jalal works in an emotional dynamic with his pupil, Varjak. The authority of the instructor is put into relief by the disciple's helplessness and ignorance. Through the lessons he teaches Varjak in his dreams, the mentor helps him to address and resolve his helplessness. In his dreams, Varjak is taught valuable lessons, but it is up to him to understand them and put them into practice in his conscious life.

There are thirty-five chapters in the novel, and the dream-chapters are chapters seven, ten, fourteen, seventeen, twenty-three, twenty-five and thirty-one. Each dream-chapter is devoted to one particular skill that Jalal wants to transmit to his disciple Varjak through their shared dreams: Open mind, Awareness, Hunting, Slow-Time, Moving Circles, Shadow Walking and Trusts Yourself. The dreams start with a ritualistic sentence that clearly indicates to the young reader that it is a dream: "Varjak dreamed" (first sentence of chapters seven, ten, and twenty-two). Chapter fourteen starts with this beautifully alliterative opening sentence: "Down in the darkness, Varjak dreamed." The dental alliterations give this sentence an incantatory quality.

The dreams provide vivid sensory experiences: when he dreams, Varjak finds himself in the birthplace of the Mesopotamian Blue species, Mesopotamia. This location provides multiple dramatic sensory experiences; Varjak can smell cinnamon and dates, marvels at the sight of the river Tigris and hears the sound of crickets. Interestingly, there are no page numbers on the pages narrating the dreams, yet the page number of the following pages take into account the number of pages taken by the dream chapters, which is an innovative way to point to the young reader that dreams matter, even if they differ from one's conscious life, and that they are connected to the conscious side of life.

The first dream (chapter seven) teaches Jalal the Skill of Open Mind. The context of each dream is very specific. Each dream takes place when the young untried protagonist needs guidance. In the case of the first dream, Varjak has just fled his home, and he has fallen from a rotten branch because he hadn't tested it before stepping on it. While Varjak is unconscious after his fall, Jalal appears to him: "An old cat with silver-blue fur like starlight walked beside him. He looked like a Mesopotamian Blue, but he wore no collar and his eyes were amber like the rising sun" (Said 2003:54). The young hero is then informed of the path ahead of him, and of his lack of preparation for the journey: 'I think you know nothing, little kitten' (Said 2003:56). The pattern of the novel is announced during the first dream, informing the reader at the same time as Varjak that the narrative will include dream-chapters: "There are Seven Skills in the Way of Jalal. The First of these is Open Mind, and you have just found its secret. For only when you admit that you know nothing, can you truly know anything" (Said 2003:57-58).

The second dream (chapter ten) deals with Awareness. Varjak has just met two wild cats and is clumsily trying to become their friend. Jalal endeavours to help him to overcome his preconceptions about his fellow creatures: "Assume nothing; be sure of the facts. Open your senses. Spread them wide, like a net. Observe the world: what it looks like, what it sounds like. Even what it tastes like" (Said 2003:77). Varjak proves that he deserves to be taught by Jalal by acknowledging his ignorance and accepting his need for a mentor: "I never knew there was so much in the world" (Said 2003:78). The sequence of dreams mirrors a child's experience of the world from naivety to a growing sense of self-awareness. Jalal uses a deft mixture of theory and practice when teaching Varjak. Crucially, it is up to Varjak to see the relevance of his mentor's precepts to his conscious life and to put these precepts into practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*. 1957. New York: Atheneum, 1966, 187.

A true pedagogue, Jalal lets his disciple learn from his mistakes: “It’s no failure to make a mistake, my son. What matters is whether you can learn from it” (Said 2003:106). Just before this dream, Varjak had almost got himself killed by a car and had also been beaten up by a cat into whose territory he had unknowingly stepped. In the face of adversity, Jalal advocates adaptation to the harshness of the world rather than flight from it: “Remember: you may cause harm only when there is no alternative, only when your life is at stake; you take enough, and no more. That is the way the world is made” (Said 2003:110). Jalal’s teachings are instrumental to developing Varjak’s sense of self-confidence: “Believe something is impossible,” said his ancestor calmly, “and you will surely fail. But believe in your self and you can do anything” (Said 2003:179).

Varjak’s progress depends on his ability to overcome his prejudices about the outside world, others, and especially himself: “You must know yourself, be sure of yourself, before you can let go of yourself. Do you know who you are?” (Said 2003:180). Appropriately, the last and seventh Skill is Trust Yourself: “Trusting Yourself is a Skill, like Open Mind,” said Jalal. “But where the First Skill looks outwards, the Seventh looks inwards. This is the hardest Skill of all. For someone who thinks he is not worthy even to be himself, it could be impossible” (Said 2003:218). At the end of his journey, Varjak has learned and put into practice Jalal’s last comment about identity: ‘Who you are and where you come from count for nothing with me. The only thing that counts is what you do’ (Said 2003:218). Said has therefore shaped his novel along the lines of a philosophical dialogue between a more experienced teacher and his young disciple.

The profound psychological dimension of *Varjak Paw* clearly owes a lot to the Jungian perspective on the process of individuation. According to Jung, ‘it is only our deeds that reveal who we are.’<sup>3</sup> Children’s fiction lends itself particularly well to a Jungian analysis because it focuses on the emotional development of a growing individual in search of his or her place in society and especially in search of his or her own identity. Dreams, for Jung, play a crucial part in an individual’s emergent awareness of his or her inner nature. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung makes a clear connection between ongoing personal development and dreams: ‘Natural transformation processes announce themselves mainly in dreams.’<sup>4</sup> The dream “reveals our relationship to that inner friend of the soul into whom Nature herself would like to change us – that other person who we are and yet can never attain to completely” (Jung 1967:131). In Varjak’s dreams, his mentor Jalal guides him on this process of self-discovery. In psychoanalytical terms, Jalal is the equivalent of the old man in fairy tales. In his seminal study, “The phenomenology of the spirit in fairytales,” from *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung defines the role of the old man in fairy tales in the following terms: “Often the old man in fairytales asks questions like who? why? whence? and whither? for the purpose of inducing self-reflection and mobilising the moral forces, and more often still he gives the necessary magical talisman, the unexpected and improbable power to succeed.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the narrative would not proceed without this character because he provides the intellectual qualities that the hero is still in the process of acquiring: “The old man thus represents knowledge, reflection, insight, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help” (Jung 1967:222). Moreover, Jung adds, the old man tests the hero’s moral qualities before he bestows his help and advice upon him: “Apart from his cleverness, wisdom, and insight, the old man, as we have already mentioned, is also notable for his moral qualities; what is more, he even tests the moral qualities of others and makes his gifts dependent on this test” (Jung 1967:225). Jalal keeps challenging Varjak in his dreams, just like the events of the plot challenge him in his conscious life. Psychoanalytical theory greatly helps to appreciate the importance of dreams in Said’s novel.

Regarding the organisation of the novel, the works of Structuralist theorists Vladimir Propp and Tzvetan Todorov highlight Said’s judicious use of the dream-episodes in the story. It might be argued that Jalal plays a quantitatively limited part in the narrative process. Mentors usually appear at quite a late stage of the story. This late apparition comes from a structural necessity. The mentor’s

<sup>3</sup> C. G. Jung, *The Development of Personality*. 1954. Second edition, 1964. Translated R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, 172.

<sup>4</sup> C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Translated R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, 130.

<sup>5</sup> C. G. Jung, ‘The phenomenology of the spirit in fairytales.’ In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Translated R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, 220.

presence is necessary only after the hero has experienced what Tzvetan Todorov calls the disruption of the first equilibrium in a quest narrative: “The supernatural event intervenes to break the median disequilibrium and to provoke the long quest for the second equilibrium.”<sup>6</sup> The untried hero needs guidance after this major disturbance in his daily life. In *Varjak Paw*, the gentleman’s intrusion in the house and the arrival of the two mechanical cats force Varjak out of his home. Consequently, the mentor belongs to the stage of the plot that deals with the restoration of order and the creation of a second equilibrium. The mentor intervenes after the irruption of the uncanny in Varjak’s life and encourages his disciple to neutralise the threatening element of the narrative by teaching him one essential skill per dream.

If one takes a structuralist approach to evaluate the centrality of the mentor figure, Jalal has an essential part to play in the quest for what Todorov describes as the second equilibrium. The second equilibrium represents the new order created at the end of the narrative. Crucially, Todorov stresses that the second equilibrium differs from that of the beginning (Todorov 1970:163). The mentor belongs to neither the first, nor to the second equilibrium. His phase of intervention is the median section of the plot, from the lowest point in the protagonist’s life to the battle against his nemesis: the gentleman and his two cats. Jalal withdraws from the scene when the story reaches its resolution. Vladimir Propp’s itemisation of the functions of each protagonist concurs with Todorov’s seven functions. The mentor Jalal corresponds to what Propp designates as ‘the helper’ in his division of the characters’ functions. The sphere of action of the donor includes the preparation of the hero for the accomplishment of difficult tasks. This process results in the transfiguration of the hero.<sup>7</sup> The mentor, or helper, has a specific function vis-à-vis the hero. Varjak needs the mentor’s advice to face his nemesis after the villain creates the misfortune that wrecks the hero’s life. The mentor initiates the hero’s training and it is through the mentor’s supervision that the young protagonist actualises his potential and achieves his heroic status. Thus, Structuralist theories prove helpful in order to define Jalal’s essential role.

Spirituality is another strong theme of the novel. Sufism has a big influence on the author. Said hails from Lebanon, and Persian literature is heavily influenced by the writings of Sufi poets. In the spiritual guidelines provided by Sufi teaching, one can gain knowledge of the self through three steps: somnolence (Ghanood); experience (Adraak), and finally the new beginning (Warood) can take place. Mystical dreams are therefore a vital element of gnosis of the self in Sufism.

As a consequence, the two most important aspects of the text; the dreams, and the mentor-disciple relationship, are closely intertwined. In *The Development of Personality*, Jung highlights the importance of morality as a life-shaping decision: “Personality can never develop unless the individual chooses his own way, consciously and with moral deliberation.”<sup>8</sup> Attaining one’s personality is a struggle against the environment: ‘its first fruit is the conscious and unavoidable segregation of the single individual from the undifferentiated and unconscious herd’ (Jung 1954:173). *Varjak Paw* traces the development of its protagonist from being part of an oppressive family unit to becoming an autonomous individual. Varjak learns through his dreams that his being different from others constitutes an asset:

He remembered his dreams. “You must know yourself, be sure of yourself, before you can let go of yourself. Do you know who you are?”  
“Yes, I do,” he thought. “I’m Varjak Paw. Nothing less and nothing more” (Said 2003:224).

As the narrative reaches an end, Varjak has accepted and welcomed the fact that he is different. His vivid dreams enable him to develop himself and to reach the stage of individuation, in which the various facets of one’s personality are known and accepted. The moral dimension of the novel is introduced and expanded through the dream-episodes.

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<sup>6</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. 1970. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975, 164.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*. Trans. Laurence Scott. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1958, 72.

<sup>8</sup> C. G. Jung, *The Development of Personality*. 1954. Second edition, 1964. Translated R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, 174

In his study of morality in children's fiction, Vigen Guroian defines moral living in the following terms: "Moral living is about being responsible towards other people. And virtues are those traits of character that enable persons to use their freedom in morally responsible ways."<sup>9</sup> Guroian sees in the great fairy tales an invitation for the reader to draw analogies between the imaginary world of the story and the world in which we live (Guroian 1998:23). Jalal is Varjak's guide on his perilous path towards individuation and a moral living. Said's narrative vividly contrasts the turbulent episodes of Varjak's life with his peaceful and enriching dreams in the company of his instructor. The beautiful and moving illustration in the last dream-episode represents the achievement of the long learning process: the unprecedented use of black and grey colours in the same picture shows that the bridge between dream and reality has been crossed.

As a conclusion, one can clearly see now that the mentor Jalal plays an essential part in Said's narrative. Through Varjak's vivid dreams, Jalal teaches his young and naïve disciple vital lessons in self-awareness and generosity. Jalal's crucial messages help Varjak on his perilous life-path. Thanks to his mentor's wisdom, Varjak can bridge the gap between dreams and consciousness and apply his master's lessons by practising what he has learnt in his dreams. His personal pilgrimage reaches an end when he realises that he has grown up ("The place would never change: it was him who had changed" Said 2003:191), and that he has to find his own home: "We'll find a new home somewhere. Just like Jalal, like he left Mesopotamia. Except this time it'll be ours, because we'll make it ourselves" (Said 2003:251).

As regards the narrative pace, the dreams give a fascinating tempo to the story. By reading Varjak's adventures, the young readers effortlessly discover the relevance of dreams in real life. In an approachable manner, Said's novel makes his young audience aware of the interconnection between the realms of consciousness and dreams, echoing Jung's statement that: "half a man's life is spent in this realm, [...] consciousness has its roots there, and [...] the unconscious operates in and out of waking existence."<sup>10</sup> Said's novel can then be described as a crossover novel which appeals to both adults and children, for complementary reasons: the children are enthralled by the gripping and engaging story, whereas adult readers appreciate the philosophical dimension of the dream-chapters.

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<sup>9</sup> Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination*. Oxford: OUP, 1998, 19.

<sup>10</sup> C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1933, 15.