



Amala Poli // Stillness. A dark room that looks exactly like the one in which you fell asleep. Every detail captured in the first few moments of comprehension. You are awake, or so you think in a minute. Your surroundings begin to dawn on you. But there is this overwhelming sensation of being crushed, of being unable to breathe. You are fighting it. Your body feels raw fear, every nerve ending feels like it is on fire and yet you cannot move a muscle.

Seconds ago, wasn't it just seconds ago that you were tossing and turning? All you have to do is make a small movement and then you will be free. Some primal instinct assures you of this. The half an inch of air between your thumb and index finger would suffice. But this movement, it feels immense, just slipping out of your reach. There must be someone who can wake you up completely. Not a sound escapes you, because your jaw is clamped shut. Shallow breathing tells you again that you must be awake. Just not fully, not yet. A few minutes more, it will pass. It has to.

You are now aware of another presence in the room. Dark, menacing, and it has to be a ghost, your dreamy rationality assures you. You once again notice the reproduction of the room you slept in, to the last detail. Only, it now has an added element. A spirit, a dark body that cannot be possibly be real. But everything else is! Every other bit so far is terrifying because of how real it is. It might be the strangest feeling you have ever had, but the only reassurance is this supernatural presence, which tells you that your body's inability to move must be temporary. The most fear inducing sensation is the memory of your body's movement, because you have lost that ability now. In this one moment, you know paralysis better than anything you have ever known. It threatens to overwhelm you, take you under, drown you in its dark murky depths of absolute stillness until...

With a last, sudden rush of effort, you break free. You are fully awake, sweating, terrified. A wave of relief passes over you as your now conscious mind affirms that the terror was not 'real'.

This second-person narrative, if it seems familiar to you or resonates with your memory of a sleep incident, would indicate that you have experienced sleep paralysis at least once. Though I am choosing to use the scientific term for this sleep occurrence, the article explores experiential facets and attempts to illustrate the mystery surrounding this phenomenon.

An obscure sleep disorder, one that is probably not as fascinating as sleepwalking and carries none of the vivid potential of nightmares, finds few instances in popular culture that can distinguish it from representations of horror and haunting. In a recent study on the relationship between sleep paralysis and sleep quality, author Dan Denis states: “Currently little is known about the experience, despite the fact that the vast majority of episodes are associated with extreme fear...” (Denis 355). One of the earliest descriptions of sleep paralysis can be traced back to Ivan Fyodorovich from Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, where Ivan has a “long, unpleasant dream” that he remembers vividly, while feeling certain that the dream was in fact ‘real’ (A. Stefani et al., 199). A significant feature of a first time occurrence of sleep paralysis is this certainty that the episode must have taken place in reality, or that the felt experience was not less ‘real’ even with the sleeper’s awareness of not being fully awake, and this leads to several interesting questions about this middle-state or limbo realm of sleep.

‘The presence’ in sleep paralysis, is a feature of a singular episode most often characterized as the sensation of an evil being or a demon spirit crushing one’s chest, or of the sleeper’s awareness of another entity in the room. Medical anthropologist and author Shelley R. Adler, in her book on sleep paralysis, finds that the term “night-mare”, (3) deliberately hyphenated to distinguish it from nightmares, gives more depth to the cultural and ancient understandings of this sleep occurrence without prioritizing the scientific terminology, viz., sleep paralysis. Adler explores the complexities of lexical inconsistencies for describing such a “common, yet unfamiliar experience.” (3) At the heart of all the research pertaining to sleep paralysis lies this paradox, about the almost casually common nature of experiences of sleep paralysis, which are yet to be well-understood with regard to a phenomenology and causality.

During an episode of sleep paralysis, one might feel awake and yet paralyzed or trapped in one’s own body in a state of confused wakefulness, the consciousness blurred and yet focused on the urge to transition from the limbo state of mixed sleep to a state of complete wakefulness. What characterizes this unique sleep experience is the inability of the sleeper to move or release themselves and the sensation of being trapped in one’s own body. Usually occurring during sleep onset or upon awakening, the episode may consist of hallucinations of exterior presences in the room, and the confusion upon being fully awake arises due to the mirroring of the setting during the episode. Other characteristics can include heightened auditory, olfactory, or physical sensations, such as the sound of a loud knocking on the door, of feeling physically lifted up or as though one is floating away, and though much less common, an experience of strange smells. (Adler 13)

One of the earliest studies conducted in Newfoundland looked at the relationship between attacks of an ‘Old Hag’ [1] as the experience was traditionally interpreted, and sleep paralysis, to see the

similarities between the two. The study drew attention to the descriptive similarities across communities in relation to the experience. (Ness, 15) In a study conducted by M. Lišková et al., the possibility that sleep paralysis can be pleasant was explored through a survey of the participants. Pleasurable experiences of this phenomenon indicate possibilities to locate the blurring between lucid dreaming and sleep paralysis. An increase in the number of such episodes for a single individual can lead to an increased sense of control over the panic sensations induced by episodes. [2]

Do sleep paralysis and its negative attributions somehow inhibit individuals from describing and discussing these vivid encounters? Adler concludes in her work that one of the reasons for this could be the foreignness of supernatural or paranormal experiences and their distance from secular worldviews. However, she also notes that “For many night-mare sufferers, science and spirituality are simply not mutually exclusive” (Adler 136). This is possible because of the strongly spiritual as well as supernatural overtones, albeit ghostly or terrifying, yet ‘real’ for the sleeper in episodes of sleep paralysis. A literary instance of this is embodied in Ivan Fyodorovich in troubled sleep, who wraps a wet towel around his own head as the devil sits laughing at him and his beliefs, wakes up, and begins searching for the towel.

Adding to the folklore and mystery surrounding this phenomenon at present is its unique capacity to enable the co-existence of the spiritual and the scientific in the modern individual’s imagination as well as experience of sleep paralysis.

Image Source: Flickr Creative Commons, “The Nightmare” (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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