

Unconscious to Conscious: A Panel Discussion

Sofia Global Conference on Emerging Mental Health

Costa Mesa, California

August 16–18, 2024

Ava Lindberg, PhD

Panelist

As a Jungian depth psychologist and structural anthropologist, I am fascinated by multiple domains of the journey of the individual within culture, traversing and transcending the unconscious into consciousness, as well as discovering the underlying archetypal and transpersonal elements of myth, symbols, and spirituality that provide insight into universal patterns of human culture. *The Unconscious* is the title given to this panel discussion. We who spoke are multiple practitioners with differing perspectives on the unconscious, how we perceive it, how we work with it, and how it works with us. My approach and contributions to the panel during discussion are described in this article.

How I Work with the Unconscious

In my experimental psychological research, I integrate gamification and structured game formats to enhance unconscious dream recall and deepen engagement with dreamwork. This approach not only reveals personal and collective patterns but also occasionally facilitates profound healing insights. In my practice as a Jungian analyst, I observe how dreams, fantasies, and motivations emerge first in the unconscious—often in

fragmented or ambiguous forms—before they can be consciously acknowledged. When these unconscious elements are met with sensitivity, explored through discussion, imagery, or writing, they begin to move into consciousness in a more creative and transformative way. For a first exploration, I will focus on nightmares as a critical site of this transition.

A second example relates to academic and applied research, particularly when advising or teaching graduate students at Sofia University about psychological research methods. I notice how the unconscious subtly weaves through their research process. It is not simply intellectual effort or methodological complexity that generates the deep unrest, uncertainty, or frustration often experienced by students, but something more profound—what I call the “archetypal journey of the researcher.” Research unfolds through distinct phases—topic selection, objective refinement, literature review, design, execution, and analysis—each carrying its own archetypal weight. The transition between these stages often stirs unexpected oppositional forces, surfacing anxieties and shifts in identity that reflect the unconscious pressing into awareness.

The unconscious is immense in its depth and potency, often exceeding the influence of conscious will. Yet it remains largely unrecognized, surfacing instead through projections onto external events, people, and circumstances. Actively engaging with the unconscious—through dreaming, active imagination, sand play, therapeutic dialogue, or recognizing synchronistic events—is rarely a smooth process. Rather than feeling illumination or empowerment at first, it often provokes disorientation, discomfort, and

resistance. Projection, in particular, is one of the challenging manifestations of unconscious material. It is the process by which personal traits, unprocessed emotions, and hidden aspects of the self—what C.G. Jung termed the shadow—are ascribed to others. This can create powerful emotional charges, making another person appear either idealized or menacing, depending on what the unconscious projects onto them. While projection can lead to romantic infatuation, hero-worship, or an idealized sense of destiny, it more commonly manifests as fear, hostility, or deep unease. These projected emotions feel external, as if imposed from the outside, yet they originate from within. They disturb sleep, fuel conflict, and create cycles of blame, when in reality, they are glimpses of the unconscious demanding recognition.

Yet, despite its destabilizing effects, working with the unconscious offers immense potential for insight, relief, and transformation. Here, as in the panel discussion, I will explore two examples that illustrate how engaging with unconscious material—whether through dreamwork, therapeutic practice, or research—can lead not only to greater self-awareness but also to profound emotional healing.

How Nightmares Are Handled in the Dream Game: A Case History

The first example comes from the world of gamification and dreaming. It is specific to the occurrence of nightmares within the Dream Game. Adding gamification elements to dreaming with a matrix of Dream Game players causes the conscious processes of mastery, socialization, exploration, and achievement to be transmitted to or activated to and by the dream psyche or dreaming self, intensifying dreams, dreamwork, illustrations,

and symbolic interpretations by players. The fun and engagement of the game format is magnified and represented by high points, communication of dream material to players, daily leaderboards, rewards with an award ceremony, and pre- and post-research stages using quantitative and qualitative methods (surveys, focus groups). Yet, although the pleasurable, fun, competitive, and engaging aspects of gaming make sense with regular dreaming, can it work or be aligned with those more difficult of dreams, those dreams worse than bad dreams, called nightmares?

First, let's briefly discuss nightmares from sleep science, neuroscience, and clinical psychology. When I stood up in the Sofia University Costa Mesa auditorium to give an initial presentation example on the unconscious vis-a-vis nightmares, I asked the assembled live audience to indicate how many ever suffered from nightmares. At least half the audience raised their hands. I was surprised—and not surprised—although this size of audience raising their hands was clearly more than one in 20, the usual figure of nightmare sufferers in the general population. The Sofia audience seemed especially interested in what modalities, particularly in terms of gaming and dreaming, could be used to eliminate, ameliorate, or at least give credence or reason-to-be for this most terrifying of night occurrences.

As described by researchers in dreaming, sleep, neuroscientific, and psychological categories (Hartmann, 1984; Li et al., 2010, 2015; Woodward et al., 2000; Semiz et al., 2008; Sheaves et al., 2015; Pigeon et al., 2012, 2013; Fisher et al., 2014; Hasler & Germain, 2009; Delorme et al., 2002), nightmares are radically dysphoric dreams involving intense negative emotions and can present during late-night rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. The

nightmare is distinguished from bad dreams because the dreamer wakes themselves up to stop the nightmare. One in 20 of the general population seems to experience nightmares, sometimes every week; others experience it more frequently, e.g., psychiatric populations who have PTSD, are borderline, or schizophrenic have significantly higher nightmare prevalence. Nightmares can be associated with self-harm, suicidal ideation/behavior, and psychological distress. They can occur after a traumatic event but also manifest even during life stressors such as exams, natural disasters, and the death of a significant other.

The nightmare example given in the Sofia panel on The Unconscious was a dream player-gamer's experience with nightmares and their dreaming and insight evolution through a full week of Dream Game 10 during seven nights and eight days in mid-March 2024. Coming in online from South America, this player's pseudonym is M. Josefa; she is also a fine artist-painter whose illustrations for the dreams she dreamed during the game were done by hand. She dreamed, interpreted, and created dream illustrations that depicted a progression from a radical nightmare of fear and confusion on the first night of the Dream Game 10 to several still-difficult, then more transitional dreams in the middle of the game . . . to two final dreams that suggest healing and renewal. Illustrations drawn by the player are shown at the end of the article as figures.

On night 1 of the Dream Game 10, pseudonym M. Josefa had a lengthy, extreme nightmare about violence and being beaten up, robbed, and pursued by menacing others; there is no mercy, no hope, and no salvation, not even when she as the dream figure takes shelter in an underground basement of a nearby church called La Merced (Mercy). The nightmare is fraught with entrapment, betrayal, deep-rooted anxiety, and isolation. The

dream's symbols also mirror in negative fearsome detail the actual situation in the part of this historic South American city she lives in; the center for the past two years has been riddled by crime.

Her drawings of the first nightmare are entitled No Mercy, No Exit, and The Labyrinth (see Figure 1). She is lost in endless interior stairs and corridors, experiencing distortion, confusion, and imprisonment. When in the first dream she tries to take shelter from the assaulters in La Merced Church, she is locked out on the outside, then finds herself imprisoned in the dark basement of the inside, but mercy is not accessible to her.

On Night 3, the dreamer gamer has a second, also bad dream that is unsettling, disturbing, frightening, yet not quite as extreme in causing a terrorized response as the first nightmare from which she had to wake herself up. M. Josefa reports that the occurrence of two initial bad dreams in the Dream Game 10 made her seriously think about stopping the game, but because she is fascinated by dreaming in a matrix, she persevered to find out what would happen with her dreaming life as the week progressed. The second dream on Night 3 shows herself as dreamer robbed of valuables at home. Then, the dream action shifts to her childhood home in Connecticut and introduces an ally, a warrior figure, and gives her slight hope of finding support, safety, and protection. Although she does not illustrate the second dream from Night 3, she describes in text her childhood home as being on a quiet, safe street called Nash Court, in Stamford, CT, not far from both a Catholic school, church, and a public elementary school which she attended. The ally is a trusted, expert worker with whom M. Josefa calls in for house repairs, fixing of plumbing, gardening, stonework, and laying of roofing in her house in her South American historic

city; in the dream he appears as an ally figure, standing up tall, puffing up his chest as if a super-hero figure.

On Night 5, M. Josefa has a third dream; it is transmogrified from the first two, showing the emergence of a transformed self that is created in the dream's dream art. She writes more specifically, "During the night I am bringing an abstract idea into form. I draw with both hands to create it. When I awake, I decide to draw it, in reality, using both hands as I did in the dream. Analyzing it, I realize that something is forming out of nothing, out of a state of confusion and unknown. There is a new persona beginning within me; it is in the creation of a new reality around me. I title both dream and illustration from Night 5, 'A new face.' (See Figure 3)

On Night 6 of the Dream Game, a fourth dream showed the introduction of a fun, antique, desirable dream car. The dreamer acquires a pale sea-foam-green 1950s Cadillac with big fins. In the dream, she owns and is driving it; it is hers. Surprised, she feels relaxed, happy both in the dream and when she wakes up. She writes to the matrix of players through the game facilitator, "If dreaming is in reality an extension of waking, I like my new car!" (See Figure 4) On the last night 7 of Dream Game 10, a fifth dream shows evidence of self and neighborhood healing. Dream 5's dreamscape presents a positive daytime, light-filled setting of organization and a friendly group; the dream shows a protected, safe, inclusive group with help and support from old and new friends, children, neighbors from the municipal area, and even protective police figures. What is strange—or perhaps not so strange when one studies dreaming and its aftermaths assiduously as I do—is that in real waking life about a week later, an actual neighborhood coalition begins to form to bring

safety into the street area where she lives in historic old town. M. Josefa had not heard of any neighborhood activist group previously; it was a surprise when group togetherness started to mobilize in waking reality not long after the end of the game's dream series. Within a month, neighborhood people, police, and herself had organized, met, were planning events, getting to know one other, were learning from the local police how to protect themselves from assault, robbery, and how to keep aware of the untoward presence of negative forces on the street. The coalition set up alarms and chat lines to describe suspicious goings on, calling in police to train them, and by the time of the panel discussion at Sofia in August 2024, two large, at-night, neighborhood demonstrations had been attended by families, police, with drums, horns and other instruments, carrying lights to demonstrate to intruders that the historic center neighbors were taking back the neighborhood. See Figure 5. This is a photograph of the real-world neighborhood coalition that began shortly after M. Josepha's nightmare dream series had made its transitions.

Whether coincidence, psi or transpersonal future experience appearing in her present dreams, a construction of reality that moved from nightmarish violence, imprisonment, and betrayal to a transformation of self with others in a coalition of activists that began to eliminate, diminish, and heal the original fear, or an archetypal emergence of rebirth from the psyche cannot be known. However, it suggests that through writing down nightmares, illustrating them, analyzing and communicating them with a facilitator or to a player group, and then allowing an evolution of dreams to continue over the next few days—rather than stopping them all because the first dreams were so terrifying and violent—does have potential for the unconscious to evolve into consciousness. The

nightmare was able to move from its dark, fearsome state into a light-filled helpful group reality shown both in dreams and in waking life.

Interpreting the Nightmare as the Unconscious Emerging into Consciousness

M. Josefa's initial nightmare, characterized by violence, running away, intense fear, and entrapment within and below a labyrinthine church, serves as a vivid manifestation of her unconscious mind surfacing into consciousness. Drawing from Jungian psychology (Jung, 1953/1966), such nightmares can be seen as expressions of the shadow—the repressed or unacknowledged aspects of the self that the conscious mind has yet to integrate. The imagery of being trapped and seeking refuge in a place symbolizing mercy, yet finding none, suggests a confrontation with unresolved internal conflicts. This process aligns with the concept of individuation, where the integration of unconscious elements into conscious awareness fosters personal growth and self-realization.

Learning by Engaging with Nightmares through Gamification

Addressing nightmares by actively engaging with their content, rather than attempting to forget them, can be a transformative approach to healing. For instance, psychotherapeutic techniques such as Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) encourage individuals to consciously reshape their nightmares, fostering a sense of mastery and reducing distress (Krakow and Zadra, 2006). Incorporating gamification elements into the unconscious process, as seen in the Dream Game, appears to enhance motivation and provides a structured framework for exploration. By transforming the daunting task of

confronting nightmares into an interactive and supportive experience, individuals suffering from nightmares, or indeed any form of intense fear, may find it easier to process and integrate troubling dream, PTSD, or traumatic content, leading to improved emotional well-being and resilience.

The Archetypal Journey of the Researcher

As a current methodological advisor and professor scheduled to teach narrative inquiry in the Sofia PhD Program in Transpersonal Psychology (Bilingual) as well as former faculty member in the MACP program, I have guided students through both introductory and advanced research methods. Additionally, as founder of SunResearch, a qualitative-mixed methods consultancy serving major brands and creative agencies, I have spent decades designing, executing research, leading research teams, and observing how individuals engage with research. I began to notice an unconscious dynamic at play among graduate students as they progressed through the research process.

At each transition point in their studies, students unknowingly underwent internal shifts—resisting movement to the next stage, often expressing frustration, uncertainty, or even distress. This recurring struggle suggested to me that research was not merely a linear academic process but an unfolding archetypal journey, in which each stage required a transformation that was felt but not consciously understood. With every step, a previously unconscious aspect of the researcher came to light, only to be met with the shadow of the next unknown phase, triggering resistance before adaptation could occur. Given that research consists of at least eight major stages—from selecting a topic to presenting results—this journey is marked by distinct archetypal shifts, each requiring an evolution in

the student's persona, psyche, and emotional landscape. Recognizing these hidden psychological patterns can help researchers navigate their work with greater awareness and resilience.

1. ***The Shadow and The Orphan Archetype***: This dark, hidden aspect represents the initial state of fear or uncertainty that precedes a student diving into a research process. It embodies the personal struggle and inner vulnerability researchers may face before choosing their topic. It could be the wound that drives them to seek answers to a research question.
2. ***The Lover Archetype***: After overcoming the initial fear or uncertainty, researchers enter a stage of passion and fascination with their chosen topic, question, and purpose. They become deeply engaged, emotionally invested in their research, like a lover enamored with their beloved. They can think of nothing but the topic, question, and purpose, falling in love with everything about it, merging, seduced, and fascinated.
3. ***The Hero and The Explorer Archetype***: The third stage embodies the exciting spirit of curiosity and adventure as researchers initially leap into methodologies and explore different avenues of inquiry, theoretically. The quest, the mission is rushing onward.
4. ***The Empiricist Archetype***: Following the stages of infatuation, meaning making, and intense curiosity, researchers are forced to transition to a more analytical, often practical mindset. They see that they must reduce elements of the research in order to meet a gap in the current literature, find out new knowledge, and be sure that the research is doable in terms of the proposal's ontology, participant realities, scope, budget, timing, personal research role, legal and ethical considerations, recruitment

options, control groups, and team needs. They must introduce constraints into the process, grounding unbridled their once enthusiasm into serious empiricism. This can be uncomfortable when student researchers have fallen in love with the Lover, Hero, and Explorer phases of the proposal.

5. ***The Innocent and The Sage Archetype:*** As researchers start to execute the proposed data collection, they adopt a dual archetypal persona. One is the Innocent, an open, receptive stance towards what it may reveal along with The Sage, a meta-wisdom overview, listening deeply, bracketing bias, asking open-ended questions, and prompting participant answers without imposing preconceived notions. At times, they encourage and manage movement into transpersonal realms.
6. ***The Ruler Archetype:*** During analysis, researchers move into necessary hierarchy, integration, and organization, bringing order and structure to findings, making decisions, prioritizing importance. They identify patterns and themes from the totality of findings with linear reduction of massive data into finite learning. They are now taking a leadership role with their own data, heightening some themes and letting others go.
7. ***The Synthesizer and the Priestess Archetype:*** For overall interpretation, researchers gather their key insights, weaving them together into a coherent narrative or synthesis to construct a final report, potentially white paper or conference presentation, adding in the quiet brilliance of experience, manifestation, and transcendent insight.
8. ***The Storyteller and the Magician Archetype:*** Researchers present their findings in a compelling, often dramatic manner to professors, other students, conference audiences, clients, team, or funders, engaging their audience with the story of the

research, key participant excerpts, impactful relevance to the scientific community, field, and society, suggesting future research to fulfill, extend, and enhance. Spinning their tales of purpose, design, intriguing executional moments, and key results through data visualization and engaging tonality, researchers have become magician-like storytellers telling the transformational narrative of their research journey.

The Archetypal Flow of the Student Researcher

What graduate students may not immediately realize—but experienced researchers come to understand—is that the research process is not merely a linear progression of steps but an archetypal journey requiring shifts in persona, cognitive style, and emotional engagement. At each stage, unconscious resistance emerges, as researchers struggle to release one archetypal mode and adopt the next. Moving from The Lover’s all-consuming passion to The Empiricist’s constraints, or from the Ruler’s structured synthesis into The Storyteller’s creative expression, can feel disorienting, even jarring. Yet, the ability to navigate transitions and embrace the alternation of expansive and reductive phases is essential to completion of the research and the researcher’s individuation process.

The Unconscious as Transpersonal Catalyst: Research, Shadow, and Transformation

Since emphasis on and acknowledgment of the unconscious can provoke conflicts in conscious leadership, necessitating additional mediation, reflection, and the careful realignment of inner personas, the two examples given during the panel discussion—the evolution of nightmares and the archetypal journey of the researcher—illustrate how the

unconscious demands engagement with shadow, discomfort, perseverance, and active imaginal work. Just as a nightmare, when understood, can evolve from a disturbing affliction into a source of healing and self-integration, the research journey similarly moves through cycles of resistance, revelation, and transformation. The unconscious is not a passive reservoir but an active force that insists on recognition; it will obstruct progress, manifest through resistance, or erupt in symptoms if ignored. The unconscious, when properly navigated, intensifies both creativity and depth of meaning, heightening personal, academic, and therapeutic insight. Recognizing the shadow dimensions within research, academic teams, and dream gamer-players in a matrix not only reengages scholarly work but also expands transpersonal and empirical knowledge, forging deeper, more authentic connections between intellect, soul, and spirit.

References

Delorme, M. A., Lortie-Lussier, M., & De Koninck, J. (2002). Stress and coping in the waking and dreaming states during an examination period. *Dreaming, 12*(4), 171. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021128326940>

Fisher, H. L., Lereya, S. T., Thompson, A., Lewis, G., Zammit, S., & Wolke, D. (2014). Childhood parasomnias and psychotic experiences at age 12 years in a UK birth cohort. *Sleep, 37*(3), 475–482. <https://doi.org/10.5665/sleep.3478>

Hartmann, E. (1984). *The nightmare: The psychology and biology of terrifying dreams*. Basic Books.

Hasler, B. P., & Germain, A. (2009). Correlates and treatments of nightmares in adults. *Sleep Medicine Clinics, 4*(4), 507–517. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsmc.2009.07.012>

Jung, C. G. (1966). *Two essays on analytical psychology* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1953)

Kobayashi, I., Sledjeski, E. M., Spoonster, E., Fallon, W. F., & Delahanty, D. L. (2008). Effects of early nightmares on the development of sleep disturbances in motor vehicle accident victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 21*(6), 548–555. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20368>

Krakow, B., & Zadra, A. (2006). Imagery rehearsal therapy: Principles and applications. *Sleep Medicine Clinics*, 1(2), 295-303. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsmc.2006.03.003>

Li, S., Lam, J., Zhang, J., et al. (2015). Can sleep disturbances predict suicide risk in patients with schizophrenia-spectrum disorders? An 8-year naturalistic longitudinal study. *Sleep Medicine*, 16, 45–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2015.02.111>

Li, S. X., Zhang, B., Li, A. M., & Wing, Y. K. (2010). Prevalence and correlates of frequent nightmares: A community-based 2-phase study. *Sleep*, 33(6), 774–780. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sleep/33.6.774>

Pigeon, W. R., Britton, P. C., Ligen, M. A., Chapman, B., & Conner, K. R. (2012). Sleep disturbance preceding suicide among veterans. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(1), 93–97. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300470>

Pigeon, W. R., Pinquart, M., & Conner, K. (2012). Meta-analysis of sleep disturbance and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 73(9), e1160–e1167. <https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.11r07586>

Rek, S., Sheaves, B., & Freeman, D. (2017). Nightmares in the general population: Identifying potential causal factors. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 52(9), 1123–1133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-017-1408-7>

Semiz, U. B., Basoglu, C., Ebrinc, S., & Cetin, M. (2008). Nightmare disorder, dream anxiety, and subjective sleep quality in patients with borderline personality disorder. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 62(1), 48–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1819.2007.01789.x>

Sheaves, B., Onwumere, J., Keen, N., Stahl, D., & Kuipers, E. (2015). Nightmares in patients with psychosis: The relation with sleep, psychotic, affective, and cognitive symptoms. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 60(8), 354–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674371506000804>

Woodward, S. H., Arsenault, N. J., Murray, C., & Bliwise, D. L. (2000). Laboratory sleep correlates of nightmare complaint in PTSD inpatients. *Biological Psychiatry*, 48(11), 1081–1087. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0006-3223\(00\)00917-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0006-3223(00)00917-3)

Figures

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

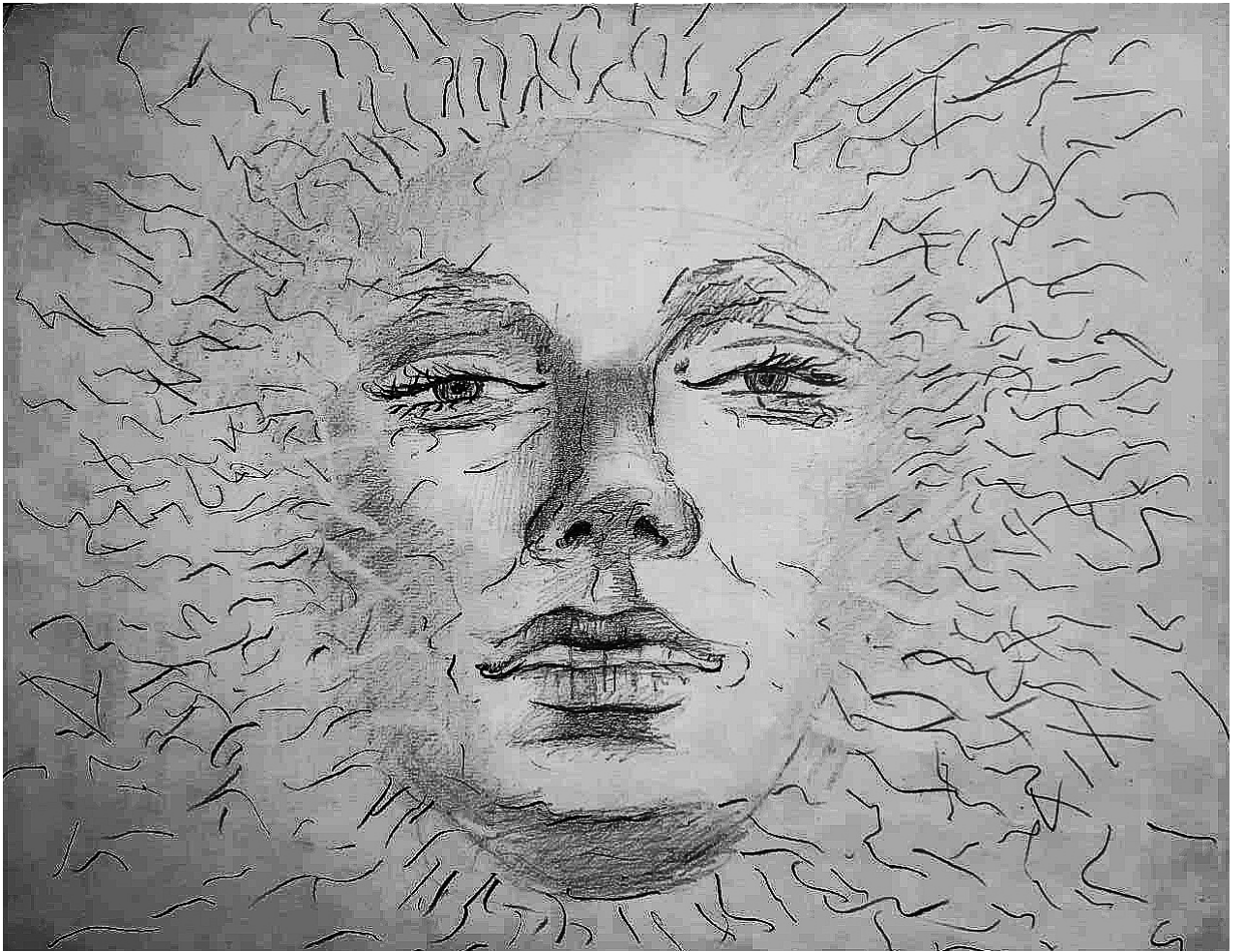


Figure 4

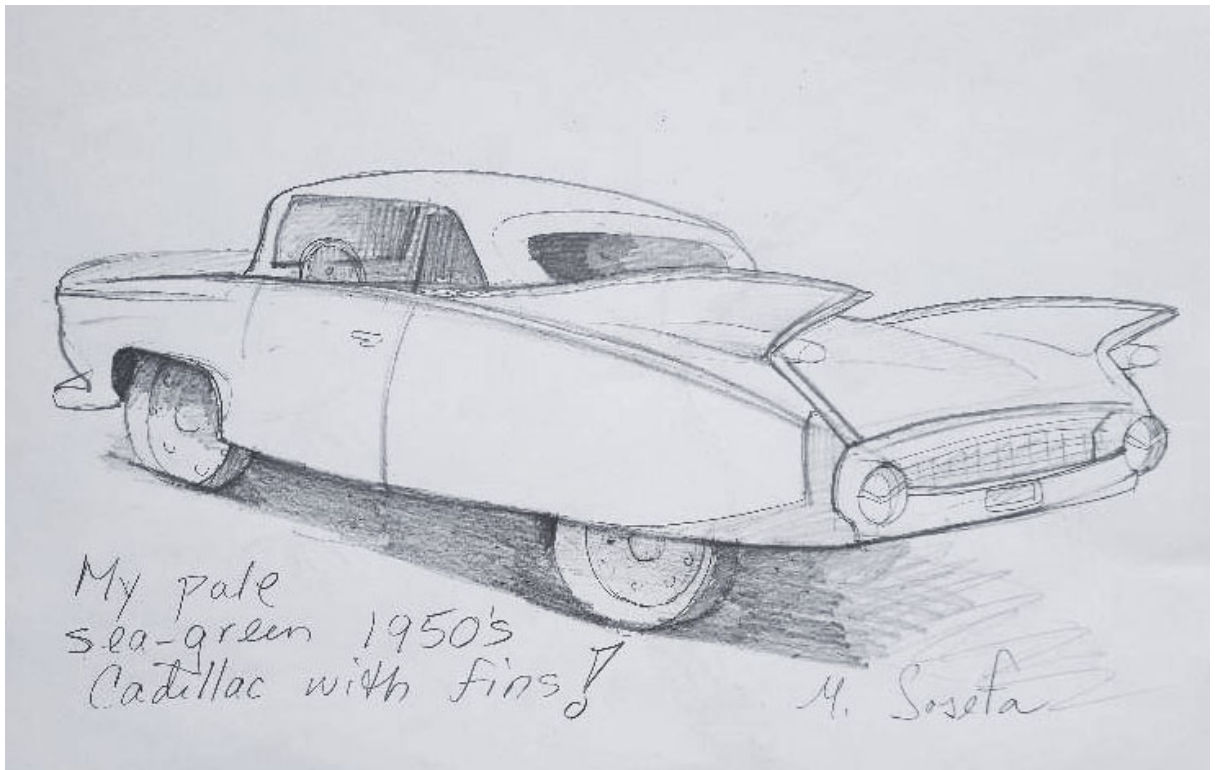


Figure 5

