

THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX

Sigmund Freud believed that between the ages of three and five, a boy has a largely unconscious group of feelings and ideas centring around the wish to love his mother and to identify with his father. When the sexual urge increases, the boy's love for his mother becomes more incestuous and as a result he becomes jealous of his rival, the father. This state of affairs in which the boy craves exclusive sexual possession of the mother and feels antagonistic toward the father is called the Oedipal complex. Oedipus was a prominent figure in Greek mythology who killed his father and married his mother without knowing that they were his parents.

The development of the Oedipus complex creates a new danger for the boy. If he persists in feeling sexually attracted to the mother, he runs the risk of being physically harmed by the father. The specific fear which the boy harbours is that his father will remove the offending sex organs of the boy. This fear is called castration anxiety. The reality of castration is brought home to the boy when he sees the sexual anatomy of a girl. She appears castrated to the boy. "If that could happen to her, it could also happen to me," is what he thinks. As a result of castration anxiety, the boy represses his incestuous desire for the mother and his hostility for the father, and the Oedipus complex disappears.

However, Freud believed that some boys remain fixated at the Oedipal level, and as men choose sexual partners who resemble their mothers.

The Oedipal complex has been put forward by some critics to explain Hamlet's rage at his mother's remarriage and his inability to kill Claudius (i.e., his "father").

"Hamlet is able to do anything but take vengeance upon the man who did away with his father and has taken his father's place with his mother -- the man who has shown him in realization the repressed desires of his own childhood. The loathing that should have driven him to revenge is thus replaced by self-reproach."

-- Sigmund Freud

Re: Hamlet

Ib

Lucifer is the archetype¹ of all tragic heroes. He fell. The fascination of his fate lies not in the fact that he fell, but in the fact that he who fell was the light-bearer — that his light, before he fell, was transformed into pride. What he did in hell is significant only because he was once an inhabitant of heaven. So with all tragic heroes. So with Hamlet. He too was a light-bearer (“in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!”). His mind was focused on philosophy, on religion, and on art, regions into which something that stands above and is wiser than physical life has long been trying to channel the blind urgencies of selfish will and sex. Is it not immeasurably more in keeping with the character of such a man to attribute his aversion to sensuality and blood to these loftier aspirations of his soul than to primordial² and atavistic³ instincts — to believe that he drew back from the killing of his uncle because he did not want to degrade himself to his level by becoming a murderer than to think he hesitated because he saw in him an image of his own incestuous fantasies?

A. C. GODDARD

The Meaning of Shakespeare

Popular among twentieth-century students of Hamlet has been the psychoanalytical explanation of his behaviour. Probably the most thorough presentation of the Freudian approach to his personality is *Hamlet and Oedipus* by Ernest Jones. Jones sees Hamlet as suffering from an incestuous love for his mother and a love-hate feeling towards his father-figures (his dead father and Claudius). Goddard here takes issue with the Freudians.

1. Again referring to the definitions (page 7), state Goddard's purpose in this passage.
2. In a sentence, state his subject.
3. Would you classify his subject as fact or idea? Justify your choice.
4. Explain the relevance of the allusion to Lucifer.
5. What other purpose is evident in the passage? Refer to the definitions (page 7).

¹ archetype: original pattern or model

² primordial: original, fundamental

³ atavistic: pertaining to the recurrence of ancestral traits