

Freud and Hamlet (1838)

Ernest Jones essay "The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery" was first published in *The American Journal of Psychology* in January of 1910. It was published in German the following year as a monogram, and then revised and expanded in 1923 when it appeared under the title "A Psycho-Analytic Study of Hamlet" as the first chapter in Jones' book, *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*. It was further revised and extended into Jones' *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), a book which was almost immediately taken to be the expression of the official Freudian position on Hamlet, largely due to Jones' closeness to Freud himself, both as a disciple and as his official biographer.

Jones begins by emphasizing the revolutionary energy that was infused into psychology by the thinking of Sigmund Freud and his disciples, but it soon becomes apparent that these changes were firmly built on the foundation of the Romantic revolution a century before the popularization of Freud's work. Like the Romantics, Jones takes as a starting point that the audience for a dramatic work should relate to the characters on stage as if they were real people, and not simply fictitious creations. No dramatic criticism of the personae in a play is possible except under the pretense that they are living people, and surely one is well aware of this pretense. - Jones. p.18.

More importantly, Sigmund Freud (and Ernest Jones) accepted the Romantic assumption as a starting point that the major interest in the character of Hamlet is the reason for his seeming delay. Finding this reason became the principle focus of Freudian criticism of Hamlet. It was as if Freud felt that a cause had to be isolated for this behavior (or lack of it) even if it was too late effect a cure. Freud referred to the matter as the "Problem of Hamlet"; as if it were the only major critical question that mattered. (More.)

It should be pointed out, however, that the bulk of this material [psychoanalytic criticism] is devoted to what we call with impunity, The Problem -- namely, why does Hamlet hesitate to kill the King? -- and that in this regard it contributes to a current of criticism that psychoanalysis did not originate but which psychoanalysis profoundly affected. Nor can we fail to underscore for a second time that it was in attempting to answer the problem of Hamlet's procrastination that the psychoanalytic school of Shakespearean criticism originated. - M.D. Farber, *The Design Within: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Shakespeare*, Science House, N.Y. 1970. p. 79.

Sigmund Freud, himself, had this intention in mind in his studies of Hamlet. He wanted to be remembered as the psychological detective who found the solution to "The Problem."

The play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motives for these hesitations and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result.

According to the view which was originated by Goethe and is still the prevailing one today, Hamlet represents the type of man whose power of direct action is paralyzed by and excessive development of his intellect. - Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. James Strachey, Avon, N.Y. 1965. p.298.

What Jones did was focus yet further on what he considered to be the essential mystery behind Shakespeare's work.

Dover Wilson gives as his opinion that the understanding of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is the greatest of all literary problems...

The central mystery in it -- namely the meaning of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for his father's murder -- has been called the Sphinx of modern literature. - Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, W.W.Norton, N.Y. 1976. p.22.

Shakespeare and Freudian theory in Hamlet and Titus Andronicus

In 1900 the eminent Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud produced a seminal work entitled *The Interpretation of Dreams* which contains the idea that dreams allow psychic exploration of the soul, that dreams contain psychological meanings which can be arrived at by interpretation. Freud states that "every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state." According to Freud's original formulations dreams have two contents, a manifest content which is the dream that one actually experiences and a latent content which is the meaning of the dream as discovered by interpretation.

Literature can be thought of in the same manner, as a figment of the imagination whose underlying truth can be discovered through interpretation. A piece of literature may have a truth to tell but it can remain hidden to us until such time as we interpret its signs. According to Freud there are three routes into the unconscious; dreams, parapraxes (or slips of the tongue) and jokes, and it is evident that psychoanalysis asks us to pay a lot of attention to language, in puns, slips of the tongue etc. This suggests how psychoanalysis is directly related to literary criticism, since both kinds of analysis focus on close readings of language. Therefore, by understanding Freudian theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of literature. This Essay attempts to discover how Freud's psychoanalytical accounts of human nature can bring us to a deeper understanding of the family relationships at work in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*.

According to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* we all have repressed wishes and desires. One of the most common of these repressed desires is the wish to sexually possess the parent of the opposite sex and eliminate the same sex parent. Freud named this theory the Oedipus Complex (which he discusses in detail in an essay entitled *Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes*). This was named after the mythical Oedipus who killed his father and married his mother without knowing that they were his parents. In *Oedipus Rex* the basic wish-fantasy of the child is brought to light and realised as it is in dreams, in *Hamlet* it remains repressed, and we learn of its existence only through the effects which proceed from it.

In *Hamlet and Oedipus*, Ernest Jones (Freud's student and biographer) states that With his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage-[Hamlet] associates the idea of sexuality with his mother and so this facet of his subconscious enters into the family relationship.

Gertrude's sexuality invades the play and Hamlet's long repressed desire to take his father's place is unconsciously stimulated by the sight of someone else taking this long coveted position. Hamlet is even more disgusted due to the fact that Claudius is his father's brother and to Hamlet this seems to be incestuous, indeed the ghost of Hamlet's father calls Claudius "that incestuous, that adulterate beast." This remark seems to add a spark of jealousy to Hamlet's anger which is manifested in the sniping remarks that he makes to Claudius

KING CLAUDIUS : But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son,--
HAMLET : [Aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind.

In the opening scenes of Hamlet the family unit has been altered to include Claudius as the father which places Hamlet in the rather difficult position of having to choose between two father figures. In order to assume a masculine identity Hamlet must take on the characteristics of his father and, due to the fact that he is confronted by two father figures, Hamlet must kill the false father (a situation that Shakespeare had previously used to effect in Henry IV). Hamlet has clearly idolised his father for years (comparing him to Hyperion, the Sun-King) a fact borne out by the impassioned speech which he delivers to his mother when he compares his father to Claudius.

HAMLET: Look here, upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
See, what a grace was seated on this brow;
Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself;
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
A combination and a form indeed,
Where every god did seem to set his seal,
To give the world assurance of a man:
This was your husband. Look you now, what follows:
Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother.

Therefore when Hamlet's father is murdered and Gertrude remarries rather too swiftly for Hamlet's liking, he feels that he must avenge his father's death in his role as a dutiful son. In doing so Hamlet can gain the respect of his father and act out the role of main authority figure which his father had done . That is to say that Hamlet could take on the characteristics of the father he had idolised whereby mentally fulfilling the wishes of the Oedipus complex. Wish fulfilment is the desire, unconsciously motivated, to attain those things that provide us with pleasure. This pleasure may or may not be the best thing for our psyche but this does not stop the id

(the natural matrix of basic and potentially conflicting instincts or drives) from desiring it and the ego from trying to keep the id happy.

In her work *Suffocating Mothers* Janet Adelman states that Hamlet is a play that centres on the crisis of the masculine subject and its "radical confrontation with the sexualised maternal body", foregrounds male anxiety about mothers, female sexuality, and hence, sexuality itself. Hamlet's relationship with his mother is obviously the most important aspect of this play but while this is the case, we know very little about Gertrude herself. She is not a powerful character and the play shows very little of her true persona. She is not a wicked woman and she is not a bad mother to Hamlet, vowing to help him and using her last breath to address her son rather than her husband. Gertrude is a woman who knows exactly what is going on and never says anything. She knows how her husband was killed and by who but realises that it is a good idea to remain silent on this matter.

It is Gertrude's passivity in this situation which strikes Hamlet and leads him into thinking of her as a wicked mother. To readers Gertrude does not promote ideas of maternal wickedness but she does to Hamlet and this idea serves only to reiterate his childhood desires. What clearly binds Gertrude and Claudius together, to Hamlet's horror, is intense sexual attraction. "You cannot call it love", he declares, sickened by the very thought of his mother's sexuality. Gertrude's blatant sexuality is wicked in Hamlet's eyes as she is allowing herself to be easily possessed. Hamlet's frustrated Oedipus complex cannot let him support Gertrude's sexual maternal body and he begins to feel corrupted by her actions

HAMLET: O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! 130
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden 135
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two

Hamlet feels that his own body has been sullied by his mother's actions and he wishes that death could save him from the contamination. The world has become "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" like a garden which has gone to seed due to that which he cannot bring himself to utter: Gertrude's sexuality. Gertrude's body has become a garden of vile plants and weeds, a thing "rank and gross in nature", that is to say that Hamlet believes her middle-aged sexuality to be unnatural and thinks that she has contaminated her son with her deeds.

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is another play which can be read in terms of Freudian analysis and which features the age old themes of sexuality, power and death although honour, power, and revenge are the major themes of this play. *Titus*

Andronicus invites us to contemplate multiple murders, human sacrifice, severed heads and hands, the rape, murder, and dismemberment of Lavinia, and a cannibal feast featuring Titus' crazed cookery of Tamora's sons.

According to Freud, whatever route is taken into the unconscious, what you find there is almost always about sex. The contents of the unconscious consist primarily of sexual desires which have been repressed. Freud states that sexual desires are instinctual, and that they appear in the most fundamental acts in the process of nurturing, like in a mother nursing an infant. The instincts for food, warmth, and comfort, which have survival value for an infant, also produce pleasure which Freud defines specifically as sexual pleasure. He says our first experiences of our bodies are organised through how we experience sexual pleasure. He divides the infant's experience of its body into certain erotogenic zones, the first of which is the mouth, as the baby feels sexual pleasure in its mouth while nursing. Because the act of sucking is pleasurable (i.e. sexually pleasurable), the baby forms a bond with the mother that goes beyond satisfying the baby's hunger. That bond Freud calls libidinal, since it involves the baby's libido, the drive for sexual pleasure.

In Titus Andronicus there are several pieces of imagery that relate to the mouth, which can be seen as a symbol for the womb and, therefore, female sexuality. In the forest scene, the pit in the ground is related as an “abhorred” pit, which Quintus falls into and describes thus,

What subtle hole is this,
Whose mouth is cover'd with rude-growing briars,
Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood
As fresh as morning dew distill'd on flowers?
A very fatal place it seems to me.

The pit is figured as a bloody pit, threatening like a womb. Another piece of mouth imagery is the scene in which Tamora eats the pie which Titus has made, the pie which contains the remains of her murdered sons. In an ironic Inversion of the mother-son relationship Tamora accepts her sons with her mouth, it is a cannibalistic version of childbirth.

After the rape of Lavinia by Demetrius and Chiron we encounter another piece of sexual ‘mouth’ imagery. The rapists have mutilated Lavinia, cutting out her tongue and removing her hands in order that she may never convey who the perpetrators were. Demetrius and Chiron have not only attacked and deflowered Lavinia literally, they have also figuratively attacked her womb by cutting out her tongue, rendering her speechless (and therefore powerless, for without her womb, a woman is powerless, a nothing). However Lavinia, in a reversal of the earlier disenpowerment, seizes on a remarkable way of revealing the identity of her attackers. Lavinia writes the name of her attackers in the sand with a stick. The deeds of Tamora’s sons are revealed and through the use of the phallic symbol of the stick, Lavinia is able to regain her power.

Titus is an ageing General who has very clear cut ideas about honour and he would do anything to defend the honour of his family. The Roman conception of honour was strong and Titus' actions, although they may seem very strange (to say the least) to modern readers, were in keeping with the Roman culture of the era. At the start of Titus Andronicus Titus suffers a loss of power and this informs the action of the rest of the play. In Act V Scene III Titus tells Tamora and Saturninus the tale of a father who killed his own daughter, to save her honour, because she had been raped. He then seizes and kills Lavinia. The stage directions inform us that Lavinia has entered the room "veiled", or virginal as the use of the veil suggests. In a reversal of Freud's Electra Complex (the girls equivalent to the Oedipus Complex which manifests itself as the desire to possess the father) Titus possess his daughter, unveiling her, which symbolises the removal of her hymen, and sexually takes her back. This act sees Titus re-establishing himself as the phallic male with power over his own family. Titus had lost sexual control of his daughter after her abuse at the hands of Demetrius and Chiron, but in her death, he repossesses her. Titus frees Lavinia from her shame, unveils her, and loses her all at the same time. This scene is made even more sexually relevant if, in the production of this scene, Titus stabs Lavinia to death, making use of the sexually potent phallic symbol of the sword or dagger, as Shakespeare has left her mode of death to the reader's imagination.

Every part of the action in Titus Andronicus moves towards death and this is easier to understand if we look at this in conjunction with Freud's death instincts. In Adam Phillip's essay 'Poetry and Psychoanalysis' he quotes an extract from Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principal in which Freud states "If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exceptions that every living thing dies for internal reasons-becomes organic once again- then we shall be compelled to say that "the aim of all life is death"...". Here Freud is suggesting that death is an "object of desire" as Phillips states. To Titus death was an object of desire; he knew that by murdering and putting Tamora's sons in the pie, he had signed his own death warrant. Titus desired death, he had lost 25 sons in battle (an honourable way to die) and Lavinia and his other sons are reborn in honourable death in the Fields of Elysium. Titus has no need to live for his family or for honour's sake and therefore he desires death.

While Freud and psychoanalysis provides methods of reading the constructions of sexuality and death in Hamlet and Titus Andronicus, they do not implant sexuality into texts that otherwise has no reference to this subject matter. Rather, psychoanalysis helps us to focus on how the play dramatises the problems of unconscious and repressed desires and how these desires work in connection with family relationships to give us a deeper understanding of the motives at work behind the characters words and deeds in these two plays.

The Mystery has been Solved

Given an understanding of what Sigmund Freud considered to be the essential Oedipal feelings common to all men, and the effects of the repression used to keep these guilty fantasies at bay, Freudian critics then go on to address what they consider the heart of the matter in Hamlet; the reasons for Hamlet's seeming delay in killing

Claudius. For them, Claudius represents, in flesh and blood, the embodiment of Hamlet's Oedipal urges. He has actually killed Hamlet's father and is sleeping with his mother.

Hamlet's second guilty wish had thus also been realized by his uncle, namely to procure the fulfilment of the first -- the possession of the mother -- by a personal deed, in fact by murder of the father. - Jones. p.83.

Hamlet's hesitation in killing Claudius, according to Freud, has to do with his deeper association with him. Claudius serves as a flesh and blood expression of his own repressed childhood fantasies, and to kill him would be to murder a part of his own inner self already associated with self-loathing.

Hamlet is able to do anything -- except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish. Here I have translated into conscious terms what was bound to remain unconscious in Hamlet's mind....

The distaste for sexuality expressed by Hamlet in his conversation with Ophelia fits in very well with this. - Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. James Strachey, Avon, N.Y. 1965. p.299.

The "clincher" on Freud's solution to what he called "The Problem" has to do with not only Hamlet's delay in killing the king, but also with the actual murder of Claudius. The long-awaited event can only take place when Gertrude has died. Hamlet is then free to act because the cause of his repressed guilt has been eliminated, and he kills Claudius immediately.

In reality his uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without also killing himself. This solution, one closely akin to what Freud has shown to be the motive of suicide in melancholia, is actually the one that Hamlet finally adopts... Only when he has made the final sacrifice and brought himself to the door of death is he free to fulfil his duty, to avenge his father, and to slay his other self -- his uncle. - Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, W.W.Norton, N.Y. 1976. p.88.

There are two moments in the play when he is nearest to murder, and it is noteworthy that in both the impulse has been dissociated from the unbearable idea of incest. The second is when he actually kills the King, when the Queen is already dead and lost to him for ever, so that his conscience is free of an ulterior motive for the murder. - Jones. p.89.

It is interesting that Freud, in building his argument about Hamlet, puts not only the principle character on the couch, but also his author. He supports his position by citing (possibly eronious) facts from the little that we know of the life of Shakespeare himself

I observe in a book on Shakespeare by Georg Brandes (1896) a statement that Hamlet was written immediately after the death of Shakespeare's father (in 1601), that is, under the immediate impact of his bereavement and, as we may well assume, while

his childhood feelings about his father had been freshly revived. It is know, too, that Shakespeare's own son who died at an early age bore the name of 'Hamnet,' which is identical with 'Hamlet.' - Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. James Strachey, Avon, N.Y. 1965. p.299.

(There is, in fact, evidence to contradict Freud's assumption that Hamlet was written after the death of Shakespeare's father. That death was entered in the Parish Register of Stratford on September 8, 1601. The Stationers' Register, a book located in the guildhall of the Company of Stationers, the printers and publisher's organization of England, places early performances of Hamlet around 1600 to 1601. By this sequence of events, Hamlet either preceded Shakespeare's father's death or appeared so soon after it that it could not have been conceived and written after his demise.)