

Sons and lovers: a psychoanalytic reading essay

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The ancient Greek play *Oedipus the King*, written by the playwright Sophocles, premiered over 12 centuries ago, yet the grisly tale of the character Oedipus permeates modern culture, thanks largely to the influence of Sigmund Freud, the godfather of psychoanalytic theory.

Locked into a fatalistic trajectory prophesied by the all-powerful oracle so central to Greek tragedy, hapless Oedipus inadvertently murders his father Laius, marries his mother, Jocasta, and then sires two children by her, Antigone and Ismene, who become his half-sisters as well as his daughters.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud posited that *Oedipus the King* retained its power over the centuries on account of “the peculiar nature of the material by which the conflict is revealed” 1. Sigmund Freud concluded that the fate of the play’s protagonist Oedipus maintained its resonance with modern audiences because “there must be a voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the compelling power of fate” 2.

Much of Sigmund Freud’s theory rests on the assumption that unconscious drives and impulses govern the bulk of human activity; thus Greek fatalism fits neatly into the Freudian model. Sigmund Freud understood that there was “actually a motive in the story of King Oedipus which explains the verdict of this inner voice.

His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers” 3.

Sigmund Freud understood the compelling nature of the story of Oedipus across the millennia to rest on the truth that it revealed about the “ primitive wish of our childhood” 4. In the mind of the famous neurologist, in Oedipus the King, Sophocles successfully brings “ the guilt of Oedipus to light by his investigation, [and]... forces us to become aware of our own inner selves, in which the same impulses are still extant, even though they are suppressed” 5.

The novel *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence analyzes the three strongest female relationships in the protagonist Paul Morel’s life: his girlfriend Miriam, his lover Clara and his mother Gertrude. Contemporary critics and readers alike typically view the relationship between Paul and Gertrude Morel as the quintessential representation of the Oedipus complex in the modern fiction canon.

Numerous critics claim that the novel succinctly and purposefully elucidated the theory that dominated the 20th century. Kenneth Roxworth argues that “ there is ample evidence that Western European civilization is specifically the culture of the Oedipus Complex” 6. This essay offers a psychoanalytic reading of the novel *Sons and Lovers* and addresses the psychological needs of Paul and Gertrude Morel – both conscious and unconscious – and examines how the dynamics of their relationship mirror Sigmund Freud’s theory.

Critic Anthony Burgess conjures Sigmund Freud when he suggests that “ Lawrence was the first literary artist to emphasize the huge importance of sex as a means of human fulfillment [and] what makes Lawrence...an

essentially modern, if not modernist, novelist is his awareness of the sexual impulse as an aspect of nature” 7.

Sigmund Freud argued that both Sophocles and D. H. Lawrence understood the desire to murder one’s father and copulate with one’s mother as an aspect of the human psyche; yet each writer treated the awareness of that desire and the consequences of its realization “ with feelings of aversion, so the content...must include terror and self-chastisement” 8.

Thus Sophocles and D. H. Lawrence differed from each other only by their location in time. The dynamic that exists between Paul Morel and his mother Gertrude in *Sons in Lovers* adheres to Sigmund Freud’s theory in that both characters seem unconscious of the unhealthy pull they have toward each other; their inability to live independently of each other arrests them in an infantile, needy relationship that neither can move on from.

Thus they unconsciously thwart each others’ ability to relate normally to other people. Gertrude Morel reveals a detrimental and irrational hatred for Miriam. “ She’s not like an ordinary woman, who can leave me my share in him. She wants to absorb him...She exults—she exults as she carries him off from me...She wants to absorb him. She wants to draw him out and absorb him till there is nothing left of him, even for himself. He will never be a man on his own feet — she will suck him up...” 9.

Similarly, Paul cannot spend time with other women without worrying about Gertrude. “ Why did his mother sit at home and suffer?... And why did he hate Miriam, and feel so cruel towards her, at the thought of his mother. If

Miriam caused his mother suffering, then he hated her — and he easily hated her” 10.

Paul admits to Gertrude that when he is with Miriam, he thinks only of her. “ No, mother — I really DON’T love her. I talk to her, but I want to come home to you” 11. In Sigmund Freud’s words, “ repression in the emotional life of humanity...is manifested in the differing treatment of the same material...we learn of its existence – as we discover the relevant facts in a neurosis – only through the inhibitory effects which proceed from it” 12.

In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel struggles to emotionally commit to a woman other than Gertrude, and inevitably fails. In Sigmund Freud’s reading, Paul Morel’s desire to sexually possess his mother Gertrude is not the problem per se; rather, it is the rejection and suppression of this impulse within him that renders him emotionally impotent.

Paul Morel therefore becomes the embodiment of the male stricken by the Oedipus complex, emotionally and psychologically constrained by the “ complex emotional content, rooted in parental love and hate as a child’s dynamics of wishes and anxieties, that brings about in an adult’s life concerns and inhibitions inaccessible to consciousness, but that play an important part in determining...intentions, actions and judgments” 13.

The unconscious desire of the mother looking to live vicariously through her offspring is also echoed when Gertrude expresses ownership over Paul’s artistic success. “ There was so much to come out of him. Life for her was rich with promise. She was to see herself fulfilled...All his work was hers” 14.

In a Freudian reading of the relationship between Paul Morel and his mother Gertrude therefore, both characters essentially become prisoners of their own unconscious drives and impulses, which they continually reject, deny and repress.

Critics also extend the Oedipus complex to D. H. Lawrence himself and the sexual relationship that existed between Lawrence and his wife Frieda. Anthony Burgess observes that the marriage lived in the same confused emotional and sexual landscape that D. H. Lawrence created in *Sons and Lovers*. “ Lawrence had nothing of the paternal in him, and he was savage at Frieda’s mourning for the children from whom her elopement had cut her off.

She, in turn, mocked Lawrence when, in exile, he was working on *Sons and Lovers*, writing a skit called *Paul Morel, or His Mother’s Darling*” 15.

Many critics claim that this relationship was the inspiration for the central conflict of the novel. Anthony Burgess asserts that in *Sons and Lovers*, “ the near-incest [the novel] depicts is unfulfilled and hence, unlike the classical Oedipus coupling, sterile...Lawrence himself was sterile and later impotent: the marital relationship was ...essentially a tempestuous duet, a hostile symbiosis that produced nothing except a kind of grand opera without music” 16.

The complexity of the author’s sexuality lends itself to the Freudian interpretation of his creative expression, particularly in the case of *Sons and Lovers*.

Sons and Lovers by D. H. Lawrence depicts a relationship between the protagonist Paul Morel and his mother Gertrude that embodies the Oedipus complex popularized by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud.

The novel lends itself well to the Freudian dynamic of repression, guilt, aversion and emotional paralysis which result when unconscious drives are not acknowledged, accepted and assimilated into the larger whole of the adult's self concept. In the words of Anthony Burgess, Sons and Lovers " is the more profound in presenting the pains of sexual initiation, not the assured loves of the mature, with the chains of maternal possession rattling on every page" 17.

The novel ably demonstrates the arrested quality of life that suppressed desire engenders in human beings. Similar to the ancient play that Sigmund Freud derived the theory from, Paul and Gertrude cannot escape each other and their seemingly intertwined fates.

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