

Hamlet's sanity answered through freudian theories

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Sigmund Freud was the founder of modern psychology. and throughout his life he produced theories about the human mind that were revolutionary for his time. His thoughts about human sexuality, the conscious and subconscious mind, the structure of the mind, and psychotherapeutic techniques are the basis of human psychology. (Thornton) Freudian theories about human behaviour and the human mind are commonly used in psychology today. His theories, in one way or another, can apply to every person living or dead. Although Sigmund Freud lived centuries after William Shakespeare wrote his play Hamlet, Freudian theories can also be applied to the main character Hamlet and explain his sometime erratic behaviour.

Through his theories of the Oedipal Complex, transference psychology, and the defence mechanisms, Hamlet's behaviour can be better understood, and therefore help answer the question of his sanity.

According to Freud, men and boys go through what he calls the Oedipal Complex, the theory stating that they subconsciously have sexual feelings for their mothers.

(" Oedipus Complex (psychology)")According to this theory, these feelings grow from the strong connection that children already have with their mothers from infancy. Mothers provide protection, love, and support that makes a young child automatically attached to them. (" Oedipus Complex") When a child hits the age of sexual awakening, aged three to six, children will create an erotic attachment to the parent, generally, of the opposite sex. (" Oedipus Complex (psychology)") Although the feelings are not fully

recognized by the child they are present in their subconscious mind. ("Oedipus Complex")

Once this attachment is developed, a young boy will feel like they are competing for the affection of their mothers with their fathers. Boys may become jealous of any affection given to their fathers and may lead to them wanting to exclude their fathers so that all attention is on them. Once they hit puberty, the boy will learn to change the way he loves his mother to be less romantic, and not be as concerned with the competition with his father. However, through this transition, a boy will find that anyone he feels sexually attracted to, may remind him of his mother. ("Oedipus Complex") Also, for some boys the relationship they have with their mother is the first close female relationship they have. Any female relationships boys have, sexual and otherwise, will always be compared to the relationship that they have with their mother. ("Oedipus Complex (psychology)")

The Oedipus Complex has many parallels to Hamlet because of Hamlet's relationship with his mother Gertrude. Hamlet's father dies and Gertrude marries his uncle Claudius. Hamlet has a strange connection to their marriage and often talks about their sex life. "She married. O, most wicked speed, to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (Shakespeare I. ii. 156-7). Hamlet begins to struggle with the thought of his mother having sex with another man, and goes back to his competition for affection because of his feelings. According to Freud's theory, by losing his father, Hamlet feels he should no longer have to compete for Gertrude's affection because his only

other competition is now dead. Claudius ruins this by marrying his mother and Hamlet, has to start the whole competition over again.

This leads Hamlet back to a sexual awakening, this time with a much more disturbing, more complex version. This new sexual awakening heightens Hamlet's affection for his mother to real romantic feelings. This also leads Hamlet back into jealousy of the other parent. Hamlet becomes jealous of the fact that Claudius gets to be with Gertrude because it is a desire that he will never be able fulfill. Hamlet tries to make Claudius look bad in front of Denmark because when addressed Hamlet only answers with "A little more kin and less than kind" (I. ii. 64). Hamlet takes his jealousy and sarcastically answers showing his feelings towards both Claudius, and Claudius' marriage to his mother. His passive aggressive attitudes towards Claudius show that he feels threatened and jealous of him and therefore representing the Oedipal Complex against his stepfather.

His relationship with Ophelia also shows an Oedipal Complex because the relationship he has with his mother changes how he feels about Ophelia. As said previously, Hamlet does not approve of his mother's marriage and often thinks of her marriage as being "incestuous" (I. ii. 157). During the third act, Hamlet verbally attacks Ophelia because he sees similarities between her and Gertrude. Hamlet has lost Gertrude's main attention and affection and therefore feels betrayed by his mother.

He thinks that his mother is deceptive and that she is betraying his father. He sees these same qualities in Ophelia and yells at her "God has given you one face and you make yourself another" (III. i. 148). Even though Ophelia is

not being deceiving he connects her to Gertrude just because she is female. This parallel the Oedipus Complex because the relationship with his mother affected his relationship with Ophelia. His connection with women will never be strong because of the respect he lost for his mother when she married Claudius.

Freud's transference psychology theory can also be applied to Hamlet and help better comprehend his mind. The transference psychology theory says that your unconscious mind will redirect feelings for one person subconsciously to the next. Freud thought that this transfer of feelings was an "important part of psychotherapeutic work" (Vollmer). The redirection of feelings also occurs through the loss of a vital person in one's life, such as a parent, sibling, or other role model. By losing one of these, the mind attaches these feelings onto another. Parental transference is when father or father-figure feelings are transferred onto a person. Fathers are meant to be authoritative, wise, powerful, and protective. By projecting father feelings onto a person, the expectation is that they will provide this comfort. ("Transference")

Hamlet's relationship with Claudius represents this theory because after the death of Hamlet Sr., Hamlet subconsciously places his fatherly feelings on Claudius. This has a negative affect because of his conscious hatred for Claudius and the way he acts towards him. "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" is fatherly comforting that Claudius tries because he knows that he is now a father figure to him (I. ii. 65). He knows that Hamlet is lacking this role and tries to step into the role for him but fails. Hamlet

refuses to acknowledge Claudius as his father and only acknowledges Gertrude as a parental role, " Ay, madam, it is common" (I. ii. 73).

He can't accept Claudius as his father and therefore only chooses to use his maternal role model instead. This leads to negative transference because he begins to lose the paternal role that is essential in his life. Hamlet also has a negative transference because fathers are always meant to make you feel safe. Hamlet is unable to feel safe because his father, Hamlet Sr., was a much better protector in Hamlet's eyes. He compares Claudius to his father and can not understand how Gertrude can be in love with them both:

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. Have you eyes? (III. iv. 69-73) The fact the Gertrude could be in love with a man as great as Hamlet Sr. and then move onto a failure like Claudius is a complete mystery to Hamlet. The transference of feeling will never be able to be positive for Hamlet because he has no faith, trust, or respect for Claudius. Even though transference is a part of the subconscious mind, Hamlet's conscious mind will not allow these subconscious feelings to come to the surface.

Freud developed theories with his daughter Anna as well, and together they created the defense mechanisms humans go through to protect themselves from anxiety and stress. (McLeod) Your mind can go into these defenses to protect itself from too much grief, or anxiety and through the different

stages of defense your body will behave in different ways. The mind will do this to ward off any feelings that are unpleasant to deal with. They are called defense mechanisms because they are methods that the brain goes through to protect itself from anything unpleasant. One of the earliest stages of defense is displacement, which means placing feelings on someone who the issue has nothing to do with. An example can be, having a bad day at work and taking out anger on family and friends at home.

Often this results in anger against the innocent person and may go farther than expected. Another form of defense is repression which occurs when bad memories are blocked from the mind to forget about bad memories. Children often do this if they grow up in abusive homes and may lead to them remembering nothing from their childhood. One of the final stages of defense is regression, which often helps a person get over the grief that they are facing. Regression is when a person goes back to child-like behavior to mask their true feelings and what they are thinking. This can lead to middle-aged men behaving like toddlers just to hide their feelings and protect themselves against more painful or stressful thoughts. (McLeod)

Throughout the play Hamlet goes through these stages to protect himself against dealing with the recent death of his father. Hamlet is told that his grief over his father's death has been "unmanly grief" meaning that he needs to be a man and get rid of the feelings he is having (I. ii. 94). Hamlet can not simply get rid of the feelings of grief over the loss of his father so he goes through the defense mechanisms to mask his feelings. The first that happens is displacement, when he gets angry at Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern. Hamlet is so angry with Claudius he insults his childhood friends and gets angry with them. "I am glad of it: a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear" is the intelligent sarcastic remark used on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in which Hamlet calls them unintelligent (IV. ii. 21-22).

Although the king fools them into spying on Hamlet, they do not realize what they are doing and do it anyway. When Hamlet finds out that Claudius is behind it, however gets angry at his friends instead. Freud would look at this and realize that Hamlet is taking his anger out on them because he does not have the option or the time to get angry with Claudius. He displaces his anger on the wrong people, who are left confused and hurt. He also goes through repression because of his high expectations and ideas of his father. Hamlet Sr. never appears in the play and therefore only Hamlet's view of him is known. Hamlet Sr. may have been an awful father and may have paid less attention to Hamlet than Claudius.

Since this would be a horrible and painful way to remember him, Hamlet chooses to think of him on the same level as "Hyperion" or as "Mars" both are strong, powerful men who are looked up to in their society. It is much easier and less painful for Hamlet to remember his father this way (III. iv. 64) (III. iv. 65). The stage Hamlet is in at Ophelia's funeral is regression because of his behavior and fight with Laertes. Laertes has just lost his father and sister within a short period of time and is overcome with grief. Hamlet finds out the news of Ophelia's death and instead of respecting Laertes in a difficult time for him, Hamlet acts like a child and tries to make all of the attention on him. He makes a foolish argument that "he loved Ophelia: forty

thousand brothers/Could not" (V. i. 261). He resorts to a childish argument to hide his grief that he has now lost the love of his life Ophelia.

Through Freud's theories of the Oedipal Complex, transference psychology, and the defence mechanisms, Hamlet's behaviour can be better understood, and therefore help answer the question of his sanity. Hamlet has not lost his sanity in the way he is perceived because Hamlet is simply behaving in the simple human psychological ways that Freud claimed to be normal. Hamlet's relationship with his mother is just an extreme version of the Oedipal Complex; his hostility to Claudius was because he fails to fill the paternal role he needs, and the way he behaves towards others were simply his mind protecting him from anxiety and grief he felt after the loss of his father. Through the eyes of Freud, Hamlet's behaviour would be just normal human behaviour.