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An Interpretation of Freud's Oedipus complex in *The Sound and the Fury*

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Abstract: Sigmund Freud's concept of Oedipus complex deals with the fact that boys will be sexually attracted towards their mother and will focus their hatred towards their father. But threatened by their more powerful father they will try to imitate their father and forms a super-ego based on morality. Something very similar happens with the girl child also, where she is attracted to her father but due to the threat from her father she tries to associate with her mother. In William Faulkner's, *The Sound and the Fury*, we see a very distorted version of this Oedipus Complex where due to lack of any proper mother figure, how two brother projected this complex on their sister Caddy. Caddy, the daughter, in the absence of motherly attention, assumes the role of a mother substitute to her brothers. However, her brothers react differently to such absence. The mentally challenged Benjy is comfortable taking Caddy just as a mother figure but Quentin, the other brother, in the absence of any fatherly threat develops an incestuous feelings for his sister. The other brother, Jason, the only son having motherly love in abundance from Mrs Compson, is never out of the semiotic stage and suffers from neurosis as stated by Freud. He develops as a vain and arrogant person. Thus the development of the child through the five stage, as stated by Freud, is very essential. Any diversion from it can lead to underdevelopment of the superego and the irrational behaviour not acceptable for the society.

Keywords: Oedipus Complex, Electra Complex, Sexual attraction, Neurosis, Phallic stage, suicide, incest, depression

It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulses towards our mother and our first hatred and murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so.

- Sigmund Freud: *The Interpretation of Dreams*



Sigmund Freud in his book, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), wrote that, "The sexual wishes in regard to the mother become more intense and the father is perceived as an obstacle to the boy; this gives rise to the Oedipus complex." Amidst all the ego, repression and neurotic anxiety, Freud had come up with the stages of development in the child. The phallic stage is considered as the stage where the child becomes aware of his phallus and develops Oedipus complex or Electra complex. According to Freud, in the phallic stage, a boy at first is attracted to separate sex parent and develops a hatred for the parent of the same sex. The boy is sexually attracted to his mother and wants to have her for himself. But the father acts as a hindrance. The boy develops a hatred towards the father but is unable to act on it. Father being more powerful, the boy develops fear of castration and eventually associates and develops qualities of the same sex parent. "The best the baby boy can hope for is to grow up to be like his father and eventually find someone like his mother."

Same goes for the girl, who develops attraction towards her father, but fears her mother. But since there is no fear of castration, according to Freud, superego is never fully developed in the girl child. Freud had further added that if the child does not develop from one stage to another, due to any problem, and is fixated in any one stage, it might affect his further life. If the boy or the girl is unable to get over the sexual attraction for the opposite sex parent, he develops neurosis.

In the novel, *The Sound and the Fury* by the American author William Faulkner, we see that Mrs Compson, the mother, is least interested in her children. She is hypochondriac and is busy nursing her own ego. In the absence of a proper mother figure, the girl child, Caddy assumes the role of a maternal figure to her brothers. Freud had previously said that this lapse in developmental stage can cause neurosis. She had a maternal instinct for everyone in the family. She even asked her boyfriend to go away so that she can take care of her brother Benjy: "Go away, Charlie. He doesn't like you." Even when Quentin, the other brother, had offered her to run away with him with the "school money the money they sold the pasture for...", she refused and decided to get married to save the reputation of her family. Contrary to this, Mrs Compson loved only Jason and none of her other children or her husband really mattered:



"... with Jason you must let me go away I cannot stand it let me have Jason and you keep the others they're not my flesh and blood like he is strangers nothing of mine and I am afraid of them I can take Jason and go where we are not known..."

Kristeva said in, *Desire in Language*, that in mirror stage when the child develops a sense of identity separate from their mother and face an "abjection", they enter a symbolic stage. She further adds in her book, *Black Sun*, that even after entering the symbolic stage, the child continues to urge for the semiotic connection with the mother, and tries to reunite with her but this leads to 'melancholia'.

Due to the lack of any proper maternal attention, the two Compson brothers Benjy and Quentin shifted their maternal urges towards Caddy. Mrs Compson had said about Benjy that, "I thought that Benjamin was punishment enough for any sins I have committed I thought he was my punishment". Benjy, the "intellectually disabled" brother, since he lacks any sexual urges, has only maternal feeling for Caddy: "You're not a poor baby. Are you. You've got your Caddy. Haven't you got your Caddy." She smells like "tree" to him, like a safe haven, when his own mother is ashamed of him.

While Mrs Compson was more interested in maintaining social appearances, Caddy was the one who actually loved Benjy. Mrs Compson had said that: "Do you want to make him sick, with the house full of company." While Caddy looked after Benjy and at all his discomforts: "Did you come to meet Caddy. What did you let him get his hands so cold for, Versh." In the face of such a situation, proper development of any child throughout the five stages suggested by Freud is impossible. Caddy had always a wild and head strong behaviour. When the servant tells her, "Your mommer going to whip you for getting your dress wet", she replies, "She's not going to do any such thing."

But the problem lies with Quentin. In the absence of any feeling for Mrs Compson, Quentin's sexual attraction turns to his sister Caddy. In the absence of any threat from his father, he does not develop any super-ego to stop the incestuous urges. Freud had said that if a child is ever fixated in one stage and is unable to 'abject' himself from such attraction, he is going to face neurosis and melancholia. Quentin is unable to tolerate when Caddy shows her knickers to a male servant: "Caddy took her dress off and threw it on the bank. Then she didn't have on anything but her bodice and drawers, and Quentin



slapped her and she slipped and fell down in the water." He hates both Caddy's boyfriend and the guy she is going to marry. He even confesses to his father that Caddy's baby is actually his: "I said I have committed incest, Father I said..." He even suggests to Caddy that they could run away and start a family somewhere. Caddy perhaps was also as attracted to Quentin, because when Quentin had asked her whether she loved any of her boyfriends she had replied: "her hand came out I didn't move it fumbled down my arm and she held my hand flat against her chest her heart thudding no no..."

Pamela Thurschwell said that,

In Kristeva's terms, the semiotic and the symbolic refer to two interdependent aspects of language. The semiotic is defined as the matriarchal aspect of language that shows the speaker's inner drives and impulses.

Quentin's inability to develop a connection with his mother yet his urge to return to the semiotic stage is palpable. His surrendering himself to the sexual attraction towards Caddy reverberates him to the semiotic stage. The semiotic stage is marked with irrationality and he loses his own individual identity in the process. Once he is in the semiotic stage the socially accepted rationality is no longer in his grasp and he commits suicide. Even though Benjy is mentally challenged, it is Quentin's part of the consciousness, which is more irrational and without any structure:

I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames And when he put Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. When he put the pistol in my hand I didn't. That's why I didn't. He would be there and she would and I would. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. If we could have just done something so dreadful and Father said That's sad too...

Jason is the only son who is loved by Mrs Compson. So he normally develops a sexual attraction for his mother. But in the absence of a strong fatherly figure, and excessive love from Mrs Compson, Jason is never able to get out of his attraction towards his mother. Mrs Compson also prevented Mr Compson to take any action against Jason and hence his super-ego was never created: "... you always have found excuses for your own blood only Jason can do wrong because he is more Bascomb than



Compson while your own daughter my little daughter my baby girl she is she is no better..." This increased his wish to assume the position of a dominant fatherly figure. He wanted to become the authority figure and replace his father. This lack of development causes neurosis and gives him a sense of entitlement. He becomes vain and when things don't go his way he becomes spiteful. Mrs Compson kept feeding his ego by saying things like how the Compsons are selfish and did not love her and Jason was the only angel whom she loved from the very first instance. This kept him in the irrational, semiotic stage, instead of facing the reality of his circumstances. Hence he is never able to tolerate it when Quentin, Caddy's daughter makes a fool out of him and runs away with his stolen money: "Jason told him, his sense of injury and impotence feeding upon its own sound, so that after a time he forgot his haste in the violent cumulation of his self justification and his outrage."

The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object cathexis. (Freud, 1924a)

Hence it is of utmost importance that child develops properly through the developmental stages to form a superego and consequently, the instincts of morality, which will prevent him from taking perverse actions.

He hated his siblings. He irritated Benjy by destroying his favourite dolls, he was jealous that golf field was sold for Quentin's education at Harvard, he never liked Caddy, his sister because she never subjugated herself under Jason and continuously fought with him: "Caddy stopped. "He cut up all the dolls Mau—Benjy and I made." Caddy said. "He did it just for meanness." He has an insensible expectation that jobs will be handed to him by everyone. When he did not get the job he was promised by his sister, he turned vindictive: "I says I reckon that'll show you. I reckon you'll know now that you cant beat me out of a job and get away with it."



Since he was never capable to control his sister Caddy, he turned his dictatorial behaviour on his niece and Caddy's daughter, Quentin. Quentin once complained regarding Jason that: "“Grandmother,” she says, “Grandmother—” “Did you want something else to eat?” I says. “Why does he treat me like this, Grandmother?” she says. “I never hurt him.” “I want you all to get along with one another,” Mother says, “You are all that’s left now, and I do want you all to get along better.” “It’s his fault,” she says, “He wont let me alone, and I have to. If he doesn’t want me here, why wont he let me go back to—” “Whatever I do, it’s your fault,” she says. “If I’m bad, it’s because I had to be. You made me. I wish I was dead. I wish we were all dead.” Without a proper father figure, or a maternal support, she has turned even more wild and stronger than her mother. She is the only means by which Jason can still control Caddy and take her money. His closeness to his mother keeps him still in the semiotic stage and according to Kristeva, makes him irrational.

The semiotic aspect is repressed not only by society but also by the patriarchal aspect of language that Kristeva calls the symbolic. In other words, one should realize that “in Kristevan schemes, the social is always oppressive”.

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