

Half of Oedipus as seen by Freud

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How did Freud come to appreciate the Oedipus Complex and yet not appreciate the importance of Oedipus' name in his psychic development?

Freud graduated from medical school in 1882. He became interested in neurological research and did some creative work. When there seemed to be no financial future in that field and since he was raising a family, he turned to neurology for income. Some of his patients with various diagnoses like conversion hysteria, obsessiveness and paranoia took him back to their childhood sexual traumata. After a while he realized that all of Vienna could not be molesting their children. He realized these stories were memories of phantasies and not of actual events. He then went inwards and backwards in the inner lives of the patients and discovered that childhood sexual phantasies about the parents lay at the root of many such troubles. This he first called the nuclear complex, later the Oedipus complex and still later the family complex.

Where did this concept come from? The story of Oedipus begins with a prophecy to Laius, his father, that his son about to be born would kill him and take his mother, Jocasta, for a wife. This is not an uncommon feeling among men who are about to become fathers, since they are about to be displaced and furthermore will have to help the mother and the child. They usually mask such feelings with pride at what they are producing. This plot often came true for rulers, as in the case of Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great, who murdered his father.

Yet his name, Oedipus, means "swollen feet". Reacting to the threat from his unborn son, his father, Laius, king of Thebes, condemned him to be exposed to death. Reluctant to kill a child, the servant tied his feet with a rope, so that they became swollen – hence the name Oedipus – hung him from a tree and left him. He was later found by another servant, who took pity on him and took him to his city, where he was adopted by the local king. Through court rumors Oedipus found out that he might not be the child of these parents. He also heard of the prophecy that he might kill his father and take his mother for a wife. Fleeing them he met an older man on the road, who arrogantly told him to get out of the way. In an attack of "road rage" he attacked the king of Thebes, his biological father, killed him, guessed the riddle of the Sphinx, which had terrorized Thebes, so that she killed herself, saved Thebes from the plague and married the widowed queen, unbeknownst to both of them, his biological mother.

There are many such stories. Oedipus legends are widespread throughout the world and most cultures. Lowell Edmunds (1985) did extensive research on this legend and its analogies and found six

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versions in medieval Europe and the Near East, forty-five in western Europe, eleven in Slavic countries and thirteen versions in the Near East, Asia, Africa and the western hemisphere. The theme is universal.

As ruler of Thebes, Oedipus, as depicted by Sophocles, is a very authoritarian and very angry man, threatening to kill the blind seer, a sort of analyst, who reveals that Oedipus is probably the murderer of the previous king as well as of Jocasta's brother. When he recognizes the truth of the prophecy, he turns all the rage on himself, pulls out both his eyeballs as punishment and asks to be banished from Thebes. Earlier he had shown his great intuition in solving the riddle of the sphinx. These two elements, inordinate rage and intuition, should be considered in evaluating what moves him.

First let us see how the theme developed in Freud's thinking and writings. He focused particularly on clinical material, but also the writings of creative people who understood this human dilemma and anthropological understanding of the development of religion in its earliest form as totemism. After fifteen years of clinical experience in the summer of 1897, Freud first wrote of the "nuclear complex", in letters 64 and 71 to Fliess, his mail-order analyst, as the nucleus for all neuroses. In letter 115 (pp. 253-263) he says that hostility to the parents is an integral part of neuroses. It has a decisive effect on adult sexuality.

In "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1901) he notes that the unconscious love relationship between the father and daughter and between the son and mother (note the different sequence for both sexes) exists from infancy on. He then saw the Oedipus myth as a poetical rendering of what is typical in these relations.

In "Three Essays on Sexuality" (1905), he notes that the perversions are a residue of the development towards the nuclear complex. After the complex is repressed, those elements of the sexual instinct, which are strongest in the individual emerge once more.

In 1910 in "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" he notes that, when the boy learns of the existence of whores, he realizes that he too, not only his parents, can enjoy sexual life. Then he realizes that his mother is like a whore and all the old wishes to possess his mother re-awaken. He wants his mother and sees his father as a competitor and comes under the influence of the Oedipus complex. This is Freud's first use in his writing of the term Oedipus complex.

In 1913 in "Totem and Taboo" (Part 1, The Horror of Incest", p. 17) he expands the aim of the boy's incestuous desire to include his sister as well as his mother. The normal boy liberates himself from this immature attraction, while the neurotic remains fixated with these incestuous wishes. Creative writers center their work on incest often in poetry (Rank, 1907, 1912). Savage people dread it. In the same essay (p. 129), he notes that the two basic laws of totemism are not to kill the totem animal and to avoid intercourse with members of the opposite sex (32) of the totem clan. If one kills the totem animal, one becomes a totem. If one substitutes father for the totem, the Oedipus theme is apparent. Primitive people even describe the totem as their common ancestor and father. If the totem animal is the father, the two totemic prohibitions become clear – not to kill the father and not to have intercourse with women of the same totem clan. Both are crimes of Oedipus.

He pursues Darwin's theory of the "primal horde" (p. 143). The sons of the horde are forced into celibacy, while the father of the horde keeps all the women to himself. They then arise and kill him so they may enjoy the women. Then they feel guilt and obey his values and live peaceably. This series of events gives rise to the two taboos of totemism – not to kill the father and not to have sexual relations with women of the same totemic clan.

In the same essay (p. 156) he sees the beginnings of religion, morality, society and art as having a common origin in the Oedipus complex.

In the section on dreams in "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis" (1915-1916), he notes that in many people in dreams and often in waking life there is the wish to get rid of the parent of the same sex. Sometimes it is masked by affectionate impulses when the parent is ill and one wants to put a stop to his suffering. This complex may be re-enforced when the marriage cools off and the parent turns even more to the child of the opposite sex.

In chapter XXI of "The Introductory Lectures" (1915), in considering the development of the libido in individual psychology, he notes that the choice of a love-object well before puberty is almost

identical with the earlier love-object for the oral pleasure-instinct. He moves from the mother's breast to the mother. By then repression has withdrawn his sexual aims from his awareness. It also gives rise to resistance to the ideas of psycho-analysis. This same Oedipus complex gives rise to feelings of guilt and morality. This can easily be observed in pre-latency boys in their relation to the mother and father, even though the child may show affection to the father at other times. Attempts to court the mother are frank and open. A similar development occurs in girls. In addition he notes that the common parental attraction to the child of the opposite sex enhances these Oedipal feelings but does not give rise to them. With the birth of more children, the Oedipus complex is enlarged to the family complex. The child openly shows his resentment for the newcomers. The feelings towards the mother may be transferred to the young sister. The little girl may take an older brother as a substitute for the father and may take a younger sister as a substitute for the child she yearned for from her father. Much of this can be observed directly or recalled consciously by people without analysis. Theodor Reik (1915-1916) showed that puberty rites among savages represented a re-birth in the sense of releasing the boy from his incestuous bond with his mother and reconciling him with his father. Mythology shows that incest detested by humans was permitted to the gods. Incestuous sister-marriage was sanctified for Egyptian Pharaohs and the Inca rulers of Peru. Direct observation of children shows that the Oedipus complex of feelings is due to more than retrospective phantasying. At puberty when the sexual urges become powerful the old, familiar incestuous love-objects are freshly re-invested with libido. The human either follows or reacts against these powerful, libidinal urges. To grow up and join society he must detach himself from his parents emotionally. The son must detach his libidinal feelings from his mother and find a real outside love-object. He reconciles himself with his father if he has remained in opposition to him. If he has become subservient to him in reaction to his infantile rebelliousness, he must free himself from his pressure. These tasks must be faced by everyone. Neurotics do not arrive at a solution. In them the son remains bowed to his father's authority and cannot transfer his libidinal strivings to an outside sexual love-object. The same fate awaits the neurotic daughter. In this sense the Oedipus complex is the nucleus of neuroses. He mentions that Otto Rank (1912) showed that dramatists of every period chose material from the Oedipus and incest complex in various forms and disguises. He adds that the Encyclopedist, Diderot, also noted that the savage left to himself preserved his foolishness, had the violent passions to strangle his father and lie with his mother. These elements are found in the dreams of normal people and neurotics. That is why he dealt with dreams first.

In "From The History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1914), he discusses the sexual development of the Wolf-Man and sees that the patient saw "his father as a castrator and the menace of his infantile sexuality in spite of what was in other respects an inverted (or negative) Oedipus complex" (p. 119).

In "Some Character Types Met With in Psycho-analytic Work: II Those Wrecked by Success" (1916), Freud uses a play by Ibsen to show the universality of the Oedipus complex especially in the heart of a maid who wants to get rid of her mistress and take over the master of the house, the father. Rebecca, the daughter of a deceased midwife, is adopted by Dr. West. When he dies she goes to work in Rosmersholm, a sad house where the wife is childless. Rebecca decides to get rid of her mistress. She shows her a medical book, where it says that the purpose of marriage is to produce children. Since the mistress cannot do that, she throws herself into a mill-race. For a year Rebecca and Rosmer live in the same house. When rumors spread about them, he asks her to become his second wife. She cannot marry him and confesses to him and to Kroll, the pastor, who is the brother of the deceased wife, that she got rid of the wife. She confesses that she had had an affair with another man. Kroll, arrives one day to humiliate her by telling her that she is the illegitimate child of Dr. West, who adopted her after her mother's death. She is distraught because she had been Dr. West's mistress. Under the influence of her Oedipus complex, she had twice repeated it. Thus an artist like Ibsen appreciated the power of the Oedipus complex.

In "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919) he thinks that probably perversions and fetishism and other such illnesses are scars of the solution to the Oedipus Complex. In the same essay, he discusses beating phantasies which girls may have of boys being beaten. They originate in phantasies of the girl being beaten by the father with great sexual pleasure for her. They arise when the father has made great

efforts to win the girl's affection, which increases her hatred towards and competition with the mother, on whom she may have affectionate dependence. She is involved in the agitations of the parental complex (p. 186). She may change her unconscious phantasy to the conscious one of a man beating boys. The boy may begin with the passive phantasy of being beaten by the father and then changes it to being beaten by the mother, thus evading his homosexual wishes towards the father.

In an editor's note to "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), the editor reminds us that "the earliest of the regressive identifications, those derived from the dissolution of the Oedipus Complex come to occupy a special position and form the nucleus of the super-ego".

In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), he says the neurotic does not recall infantile sexuality but rather current re-workings of the Oedipus conflict often as forms of transference. The inability to master the parent of the opposite sex and especially the birth of another child leaves the person with deep feelings of inferiority.

In "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921) he points out that as seen in psycho-analysis the earliest sexual wishes towards the parent of the opposite sex persist in the unconscious.

In "Psycho-analysis and Telepathy" (1921) Freud tells of his analysis of a young man, who tried to break off a relationship with a famous demi-mondaine. She stood for a married woman he had been having a secret affair with for years. He decided to marry her daughter and pursued her. She agreed but was found to be too neurotic. She went into analysis and there discovered she had known of her mother's affair with the man because of her Oedipus complex.

In "Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality" (1922), he sees the origins of normal jealousy in the Oedipus or brother-sister complex of the first sexual period. It includes grief at the thought of the loss of the loved object, enmity towards the successful rival and self-criticism to account for the loss.

In "A Short Account of Psycho-analysis" (1923) he repeats the enormously important role played by the Oedipus complex, stemming from the child's relationship to his two parents arising because of the long period of the dependence on his parents and the two eras of sexual development at the ages of three to five and again from puberty on. A third factor in human intellectual activity has "created the great institutions of religion, law, ethics and all forms of civic life to help the individual master his Oedipus complex and divert his libido from its infantile attachments into social ones that are ultimately desired".

What ultimately happens to the Oedipus complex? In "Dissolution of the Oedipus complex" (1924) Freud notes that the Oedipus complex is the central phenomenon of early childhood sexuality. Then it seems to succumb. What brings about its destruction? Powerful disappointments. The little girl, who regards herself as the apple of her father's eye, may receive harsh punishments from him. The little boy, who regards his mother as his property, finds one day she has brought a competitor onto the scene in the form of a sibling. With such powerful experiences, lack of satisfaction of the Oedipal wishes leads to its dissolution. There may also be a phylogenetic factor, when the next phase of latency sets in.

The phallic phase, which is contemporaneous with the Oedipal period comes to an end because of threats of castration. The permanent withdrawal of the breast in the oral period and the daily requirement to empty one's bowel do not lead to the fear of loss of the penis or of castration. Rather for the boy, it is his becoming aware of the girl being penis-less, that leads to his believing in the threat of castration. The boy either sees himself as a competitor to his father for his mother's affection or wants to take his mother's place with the father. Either solution requires the loss of his penis. His narcissistic pleasure in his penis leads him to turn away from the Oedipus complex. This is achieved by his giving up the object cathexis to the mother and identifying with the father by introjecting the authority of the father into the ego to form his super-ego. The libidinal trends of the Oedipus complex are desexualized, sublimated and inhibited in their aim. The impulses are changed into affection. This process preserves the genital but removes its function. With this comes sexual latency. Rather than repressed, the Oedipus complex is destroyed. If it is merely repressed it may have later pathogenic effects.

What is the process in the little girl? Freud confesses that the material for girls is full of gaps. She, too, has an Oedipus complex, a super-ego and latency period. When she observes the penis in the boy during play with playmates, she imagines she was deprived of a penis because of her inferiority or hopes it

will yet grow. When it does not grow, she accepts castration as a fact, not as a threat, as is true for the boy. Without a threat of castration, there is less of a motive for setting up a super-ego. She hopes to take the mother's place with the father and develops a feminine attitude towards the father. As compensation for renouncing the hopes for a penis, she yearns for a baby from her father. Since this wish is not satisfied, she gives up her Oedipus complex. The wish for a penis and for a child remain strong in her future sexual life. The lesser strength of her sadistic contribution makes her more affectionate. All in all he doubts his picture of the sexual life of the girl is yet clear.

In "Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety" (1926) he reviews the case of Little Hans, where the boy wishes to get the father out of the way. He had seen a playmate fall down and hurt himself and a horse fall down. As he got better, he wanted to be a horse and even jumped on his father and bit him. He hates and loves his father. He represses his hatred towards his father and displaces the conflict onto the horse so that he fears a horse will bite him.

In "The Question of Lay-analysis" (1926) he reviews the wish of the young boy to understand where babies come from. This ends with his thinking of procreating a child in someone else or in himself. This is one possible solution for the forbidden incestuous wishes. Similarly the ambivalent feelings towards a physician of adoration or mistrust derive in transference from parts of the Oedipal conflict.

In "Female Sexuality" (1931) he points out that the girl's development is different from the boy's. She is originally attached to the mother and later has a powerful attachment to the father, which may stem from this earlier powerful attachment to the mother. The pre-oedipal attachment to the mother may be so powerful and many-sided that it may last into the fifth year, so that there may not be a strong attachment to men. So there need not be an exact parallelism of the Oedipal period between boys and girls.

He notes that female sexuality is more complicated. His original view was that the girl started off with pleasure in her clitoris and only in puberty got pleasure from her vagina. He notes that some observers have found that girls can have pleasure in the vagina earlier. When she accepts her own castration state, she sees the male as powerful and herself as inferior. Rebelling against this state of affairs, she may follow three different routes of development. She may have a revulsion against sexuality, give up her clitoridal activity and with it her masculinity. She may cling with defiant self-assertiveness to her masculinity. She may hope for a penis and this may lead to a homosexual object choice. She may in a circuitous manner reach the normal female attitude of choosing her father as the love object.

Having reviewed the development in Freud's thinking of the Oedipus complex, some questions arise. The focus is entirely on sexuality in relation to both parents and its ultimate effects on humankind. What is left out is the role of abandonment, mutilation, adoption, rumors of not belonging, sensitivity and above all his name – Oedipus. It means "swollen foot". Freud knew Greek and yet left this out of the development of his concept of the Oedipus Complex.

In part this may have been due to the kind of patients he had, erotic borderlines, then understood as hysterics.

Part of this may be understood because it was not till 1923 that Freud began to see aggression as a separate drive, not as part of anal-erotism. There must have been a deep feeling of inferiority in Oedipus, because of the swollen feet and having been adopted. This must have greatly increased his sensitivity and probably intuition. These come into play when he surmises he is the child of the local king and is destined to kill him and take over the queen. He leaves town and on the way he kills the old man who orders him out of the way, correctly guesses the meaning of the riddle of the Sphinx, saves Thebes and is rewarded with the queen, his biological mother.

In addition to Freud's own gradual development in psychic theory from the phallic phase back to the anal phase, he was a natural for appreciating the Oedipus conflict. He was born to a twenty year old mother, the third wife of Jacob Freud, who was then forty years old, with whom he had an ambivalent relationship. Competition with the father must have been uppermost in his development. Hence he could appreciate the intensity of the Oedipus complex and its role in human development and yet overlook the rage and sensitivity that came with being called "Swollen Feet".

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