**Workshop 05: The Application of Freudian Psychoanalysis to the Analysis of Literary Texts**

**1. The Oedipus Complex in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

Although Freud himself made some applications of his theories to art and literature, it remained for an English disciple, the psychoanalyst Ernest ]ones, to provide the first full-scale psychoanalytic treatment of a major literary work. ]ones's *Hamlet and Oedipus*, originally published as an essay in The American Journal of Psychology in 1910, was later revised and enlarged.

Jones bases his argument on the thesis that Hamlet's much debated delay in killing his uncle, Claudius, is to be explained in terms of internal rather than external circumstances and that the "play is mainly concerned with a hero's unavailing fight against what can only be called a disordered mind." In his carefully documented essay Jones builds a highly persuasive case history of Hamlet as a psychoneurotic who suffers from manic-depressive hysteria combined with an *abulia* (an inabilitv to exercise will power and come to decisions)-all of which may be traced to the hero's severely repressed Oedipal feelings. Jones points out that no really satisfying argument has ever been substantiated for the idea that Hamlet avenges his father's murder as quickly as practicable. Shakespeare makes Claudius's guilt as well as Hamlet's duty perfectly clear from the outset-if we are to trust the words of the ghost and the gloomy insights of the hero himself. The fact is, however, that Hamlet does not fulfill this duty until absolutely forced to do so by physical circumstances-and even then only after Gertrude, his mother, is dead. Jones also elucidates the strong misogyny that Hamlet displays throughout the play, especially as it is directed against Ophelia, and his almost physical revulsion to sex. All of this adds up to a classic example of the neurotically repressed Oedipus complex.

The ambivalence that typifies the child's attitude toward his father is dramatized in the characters of the ghost (the good, lovable father with whom the boy identifies) and Claudius (the hated father as tyrant and rival), both of whom are dramatic projections of the hero's own conscious-unconscious ambivalence toward the father figure. The ghost represents the conscious ideal of fatherhood, the image that is socially acceptable. His view of Claudius, on the other hand, represents Hamlet's repressed hostility toward his father as a rival for his mother's affection. This new king-father is the symbolic perpetrator of the very deeds toward which the son is impelled by his own unconscious motives: murder of his father and incest with his mother. Hamlet cannot bring himself to kill Claudius because to do so he must, in a psychological sense, kill himself. His delay and frustration in trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for vengeance may therefore be explained by the fact that, as ]ones puts it, the "thought of incest and parricide combined is too intolerable to be borne. One part of him tries to carry out the task, the other flinches inexorably from the thought of it."

Norman N. Holland neatly summed up the reasons both for Hamlet's delay and also for our three-hundred-year delay in comprehending Hamlet's true motives:

Now what do critics mean when they say that Hamlet cannot act because of his Oedipus complex? The argument is very simple, very elegant. One, people over the centuries have been unable to say why Hamlet delays in killing the man who murdered his father and married his mother. Two, psychoanalytic experience shows that every child wants to do just exactly that. Three, Hamlet delays because he cannot punish Claudius for doing what he himself wished to do as a child and, unconsciously, still wishes to do: he would be punishing himself. Four, the fact that this wish is unconscious explains why people could not explain Hamlet's delay.

A corollary to the Oedipal problem in *Hamlet* is the pronounced misogyny in Hamlet's character. Because of his mother's abnormally sensual affection for her son, an affection that would have deeply marked Hamlet as a child with an Oedipal neurosis, he has in the course of his psychic development repressed his incestuous impulses so severely that this repression colours his attitude toward all women: "The total reaction culminates in the bitter misogyny of his outburst against Ophelia, who is devastated at having to bear a reaction so wholly out of proportion to her own offense and has no idea that in reviling her Hamlet is really expressing his bitter resentment against his mother." The famous "Get thee to a nunnery" speech has even more sinister overtones than are generally recognized, explains Jones, when we understand the pathological degree of Hamlet's conditions and read "nunnery" as Elizabethan slang for brothel.

**2. Death Wish in Poe's Fiction**

Aside from Ernest Jones's Hamlet and Oedipus, one of the most widely known psychoanalytic studies of literature is Marie Bonaparte's Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe. A protégée of Sigmund Freud, Bonaparte is, like Jones, one of those rare critics who have combined a thorough professional knowledge of psychoanalysis with a comparable grasp of her literary subject. For the uninitiated her book is as fantastic as it is fascinating. Her main thesis is that Poe's life and works are informed throughout by the Oedipal complex: hatred of father and psychopathic love of mother. The rejection of authority forms the core of Poe's critical writings; the mother fixation (the death wish or longing to return to the womb, manifested, for example, in his obsession with premature burial) is the matrix for Poe's poetry and fiction. Even his fatal weakness for drink is explained as a form of escape that enabled him to remain faithful to his dead mother, through a rigidly enforced chastity that was further ensured by alcoholic overindulgence. As Bonaparte writes,

Ever since he was three, in fact, Poe had been doomed by fate to live in constant mourning. A fixation on a dead mother was to bar him forever from earthly love, and make him shun health and vitality in his loved ones. Forever faithful to the grave, his imagination had but two ways open before it: the heavens or the tomb according to whether he followed the "soul" or body of his lost one. . . . Thus, through his eternal fidelity to the dead mother, Poe, to all intents, became necrophilist. . . . Had [his necrophilia] been unrepressed, Poe would no doubt have been a criminal.

Using such psychoanalytic theories as her foundation, Bonaparte proceeds to analyze work after work with a logical consistency that is as unsettling as it is monotonous. "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" are seen as tales of revenge against the father. The wine vault in the former story is a symbol of the "interior of the woman's body . . . where the coveted, supreme intoxication dwells, [and] thus becomes the instrument of retribution. .. ." The victim in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is likewise interpreted as a symbol of Poe's hated stepfather, John Allan, and his horrible blind eye is a token of retributive castration. "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a psychoanalytic model of the Oedipal guilt complex. Madeline Usher, the vault in which she is prematurely interred, and the house itself are all, according to Freudian symbology, mother images.

**3. Love and Repressed Sexuality in William Blake’s “The Sick Rose”**

“The Sick Rose” is often interpreted as an [allegory](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/allegory) for the corrupting influence of sexual desire. That said, William Blake was actually an advocate for sexual liberation well ahead of his time. With this in mind, the poem seems to critique the way that sexual unions are so often shrouded in secrecy, darkness, and shame. The poem thus becomes an allegory not for the corrupting influence of sexual desire itself, but for the damage caused by the suppression of that desire.

A rose is a conventional [symbol](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/symbolism) of love, romance, and femininity (often linked to the vagina itself). In this context, the worm can read as a phallic representation of the male sexual organ, which here seeks to penetrate the rose’s bed (meaning both flower bed and the conventional type of bed). The poem certainly plays with these connotations, with the rose’s “bed” offering up a kind of “crimson joy.”

But though the worm represents strong desire, it can only act on this desire by remaining hidden. And despite the mention of “joy,” the union between the rose and the worm is neither openly joyful nor celebratory. The worm’s desire is “dark,” “secret,” and can only be fulfilled in the anonymity afforded by travelling during a “howling storm” at night. The worm’s desire is literally and figuratively forced underground, perhaps gesturing towards societal ideas about sex that are based on shame, guilt, and sinfulness.

The nature of the worm’s so-called love, then, is damaging and destructive. It seems that it’s the “dark[ness]” and secrecy of the worm’s love that “destroys” the rose’s life—rather than the action of loving itself. While love is usually something positive and nourishing, here is a vision of love corrupted into a deadly force. While love is usually life-affirming, here it’s a killer. And though the poem doesn’t delve too deeply into what makes this love so corrupt, it’s the worm’s distinguishing feature of invisibility that makes this union so grotesque. The rose doesn’t even necessarily know of the worm’s existence, adding another unsettling layer of seediness and secrecy.

In the unhealthy union between worm and rose, then, sex and desire cease to be joyful, (re)productive, or creative. Though sex is the method by which the human race maintains its presence on this planet, here sex—or its suppression—is a destructive, evil force. The worm is invisible, both there and not there. That is, though sexual desire is ever-present, its natural fulfillment depends upon the prevailing attitudes towards sex. Arguably, then, the sickness of the rose stands in for the sickness of repressed sexuality in general. In other words, the poem suggests that society has lost perspective on the naturalness—and innocent joy—of sex.