
**ROLE OF CHILDHOOD MEMORIES IN O'NEILL'S CHARACTER 'LAVINIA': A
PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA***

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ABSTRACT: The present study aims at exploring how childhood memories and unconscious part of the mind contribute to form personality. The assumptions of Freud (1900; 1915) and Jung (1964) regarding psychoanalytic theory have been used as a major theoretical framework. Neill's character Lavinia in his play *Mourning Becomes Electra* has been selected for psychoanalysis. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the story of the family who is beaten by the repressed memories and jealousy.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Lavinia, Dreams, Freud, Jung.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of present psychoanalytical theory is to establish that without having a psychoanalytical framework it would be difficult to arrive at the meanings of Lavinia's words. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis influenced the entire world. In effect, Freud's psychoanalysis was welcomed by the American "Souls that had been withered by Puritanism", as writes (B.Nagy, 1962). Psychoanalysis has been an example of a global therapy (Comer, 1995, p.143).

It is true that American writers in the twenties and thirties tried to use Freudian theory of psychoanalysis in their literature. Freud's theory was, as writes Maurice Le Breton, "fashionable" (65) in the United States. Among those writers, Faulkner (1897-1962), in narrative, and Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), in the theater, are probably the most important. O'Neill's in *Mourning Becomes Electra* was influenced by Freud. But it is well true that O'Neill was much influenced by Freud, it is also true that O'Neill did not understand Freud at all. This is apparent in most of his dramas.

This is commonly known that Freud borrowed the oedipal legend to point out that all children; normal and neurotic get themselves attracted towards their parents of the opposite sex. The myth of King Oedipus, Freud wrote, "is only the slightly altered presentation of the infantile wish" (Rickman, 1957, p.28). But, as we know, Oedipus married Jocasta "unaware that she was his mother" (Hamilton, 1982, p.209). For Freud, however, there is what he calls unconscious motivation—"actions which, though not intended (consciously), nevertheless were compulsive enactments of inner latent wish (Hamilton, 1982, p.210). It is ego which balances id and superego. Ego rationalizes id and benefits individuals in the long term. It also helps to separate real about the

standards set by the superego. The superego acts in connection with the morality of higher thought and action. It also works in socially acceptable ways. It stresses morality and encourages our decision of right and wrong which is necessary for acceptable social behavior. Dreams allow us to explore the unconscious; according to Freud, they are “the royal road to the unconscious” (Freud, 1900, p.608). In an attempt to expose the vital role of unconsciousness and childhood memories which is essential in forming the personality of the individual, O’Neill’s work is valuable to study, O’Neill not only aestheticizes but also moves the mind of his reader. His play “Mourning Becomes Electra” can be taken as a true projection of such an individual whose personality is crippled by the repressed childhood memories and unconscious mind. Lavinia’s unconscious part of the mind does not let her to love her mother.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Freud, “the mind could be considered to consist of three systems—the Conscious, the Preconscious and the Unconscious” (Freud as cited in Isbister, 1985, p.168). The concepts of psychoanalysis can be deployed with reference to the narrative or poetic structure itself, without requiring access to the authorial psyche (an interpretation motivated by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s remark that the unconscious is structured like a language. Or the founding texts of psychoanalysis may themselves be treated as literature, and re-read for the light cast by their formal qualities on their theoretical content (Freud’s texts frequently resemble detective stories, or the archaeological narratives of which he was so fond).

Like all forms of literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism can yield useful clues to the sometime baffling symbols, actions, and settings in a literary work; however, like all forms of literary criticism, it has its limits. For one thing, some critics rely on psycho criticism as a “one size fits all” approach, when other literary scholars argue that no one approach can adequately illuminate or interpret a complex work of art.

Though O’Neill was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Inge and Jung, in philosophy, and Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, Aeschylus and Sophocles, in drama (Martine, 1924, p.196), O’Neill’s major influence—especially in *Mourning Becomes Electra*—was Freud. But if it is well true that O’Neill was heavily influenced by Freud in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it is also true that O’Neill did not understand Freud at all. Even in his most successful dramas (i.e. *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*), to use Ervine’s words, “psychoanalysis... plays havoc with Mr. O’Neill’s thought” (Ervin, 1948, p. 78-90).

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK.

Conceptually this paper originates from Freud’s theory of repressed unconscious that resultantly cultivates psychological problems in human beings. Supportive ideas of Jung and Freud have been presented to throw light on the role of unconscious and suppressed memories on the personality. Psychoanalytic theory came to full prominence in the last third of the twentieth century as part of the flow of critical discourse regarding psychological treatments after the 1960s, long after Freud’s death in 1939 and its validity is now widely disputed or rejected. Freud had ceased his analysis of

the brain and his physiological studies and shifted his focus to the study of the mind and the related psychological attributes making up the mind, and on treatment using free association and the phenomena of transference. His study emphasized the recognition of childhood events that could potentially influence the mental functioning of adults. His examination of the genetic and then the developmental aspects gave the psychoanalytic theory its characteristics. Starting with his publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899, his theories began to gain prominence.

ANALYSIS

According to psychoanalytic theory, personalities arise because of attempts to resolve conflicts between unconscious sexual and aggressive impulses and societal demands to restrain these impulses. Freud believed that information in the unconscious emerges in slips of the tongue, jokes, dreams, illness symptoms, and the associations people make between ideas. In the case of Lavinia her personality was dominated by her childhood memories. She was stiff, hard, blunt and having jealousy towards her mother. This is apparent that her bitter childhood memories made up her personality here is her hatred towards her mother is apparent and we can see how much she is under the control of her childhood memories.

Lavinia is consciously in love with her father. When Peter asks indirectly Lavinia for marriage, she says, I can't marry anyone, Peter... Father needs me."

"He's got your mother," Peter says. "He needs me *more*" (I.1, 235), Lavinia answers. "You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin!" Christine tells her (I.2, 251).

It is also reality that Lavinia was an unwanted child as Christine tells Lavinia "You were always my wedding night to me_ and my honeymoon" (1.2, 251).

On the other hand the love of Christine for Orin has always been a source of repression for Lavinia. She felt some kind of depravity since her childhood. Christine tells Lavinia "I loved [Orin]," until he let you and your father nag him into the war, in spite of my begging him not leave me alone (O'Neill:1.2, 250).

When Ezra comes home, Lavinia says to him, "You're the only man I'll ever love!" (I.3, 266).

Lavinia was a deprived child. She has assumed Christine's function along with her personality. She takes care of Orin, watches over him like a mother. In her childhood she was in conflict with her mother so she made it an integral part of her personality and kept on hatred her mother. Lavinia was more in love with her father than her mother. She deliberately wanted to snatch everything her mother possesses i.e Ezra, Orin and Adam Brant. This was the result of hatred her mother gave her in her childhood. The taunting memories of childhood made Lavinia hard towards her mother and anyone else who loves her mother.

CONCLUSION

The play attempts to prove that human beings cannot escape from the influence of their childhood memories; it is an integral part of their personality. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis has proved that individuals are subject to their past repressed feelings. So, the present study of one of O'Neill's

character strengthens the view that childhood repressions later influence the personality of an individual.

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