

Freud, the Oedipus Complex, and The Hunger Games

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Abstract

Sigmund Freud asserted that art was the result of the Oedipus complex, a psychological conflict that is found in the psyches of all people, in any era. The Oedipus complex theory asserts that a boy or girl falls in love with the parent of the opposite sex and desires to kill the same-sex parent in order to replace them. Upon realizing this is unrealistic, the child buries these feelings, and this first repression initiates the formation of the unconscious. All fictional stories, according to Freud, are the release of this unconscious Oedipal struggle via symbols. The Hunger Games, too, can be interpreted using the Freudian method. Katniss must confront the Capitol—the Superego—and its violent forces—the Id—in order to realize that she is guilty of desiring to kill a parent. By coming to terms with this psychic crime, she frees her neurotic ego and libido so that she can begin to love the opposite sex.

The audience/reader, by identification, undergoes the same psychological process as Katniss. The Hunger Games, like all good fiction, helps people, and society at large, address their core unconscious dilemma.

Keywords: Freud, Oedipus Complex, Hunger Games.

Essay

Before Freud's brilliant insights into the workings of the human mind at the end of the 19th century, artists had fragmentary understandings of mental processes, but they lacked a method to elucidate art's deeper meaning (Strachey, 1990). This changed forever with the creation of

psychoanalysis. Freud introduced the concept of the unconscious—with its repressed content and desires, its dreams and erotic fantasies—and by mapping how it functioned, he provided the first ‘tool’, one could say, for a scientific examination of our thoughts and behaviour, and, by extension, our creative endeavours (Strachey, 1990). In seminal texts in which Freud deconstructs literature—*Interpretation of Dreams*, *Some Character-Types Met With in Psychoanalytic Work*, and *Dostoevsky and Parricide*—he applies his theories to the works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Dostoyevsky, thereby demonstrating that certain motifs, particularly that of the Oedipus complex, are universal. By using fiction as evidence that the psyche is structured in the same way and concerned with the same psychological dilemmas, across a time span of 2,500 years in a diversity of different cultures, we can follow Freud’s lead and use his ideas in relation to contemporary works. For this essay, we shall explore one of the most internationally popular movies of the moment, *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), in order to prove that psychological themes are bound to repeat themselves in artworks and the reason they do so is to aid in our own mental health and development.

Freud famously asserted that “the beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art meet in the Oedipus complex” (Freud, 1913, pp. 156-7). He believed this because in the course of any person’s psychosexual development, they undergo five stages and the Oedipus complex plays a crucial role in the formation of the unconscious. First, there is the oral stage in which the infant is dominated by the pleasure principle and libido is focused on the mouth and sucking; then there is the anal stage during which the child learns bowel control and becomes fascinated by this function; afterwards, between the ages of three and five, begins the phallic stage (sometimes referred to as the Oedipal phase) (Milton et al., 2011). Here, the child becomes increasingly aware of their genitals and the strong sensations they evoke. Additionally, they become more aware of their bodies in general and the bodies of others, and this curiosity leads them to realize the anatomical differences between the genders. Central to this comprehension for both boys and girls is the phallus, which proves instrumental in forming a healthy, or unhealthy, relationship with their parents, and, ultimately, a ‘normal’ psyche, free from neuroses.

When boys experience these burgeoning sexual feelings, they direct their libidinal energies towards their mothers to form an attachment of the anaclitic type, characterized by a strong emotional and physical bond with her. Simultaneously, the boy recognizes his father as the model

after whom he should emulate. For a time, these two conceptions exist without any problems (Freud, 1921). However, this changes when the child ‘falls in love’, so to speak, with the mother “who has cast a spell over us through her care and loving and all the touching, wiping, stroking, and hugging this entails” (Alsop et al., 2002, p. 42). He fantasizes being her lover, possessing her for himself, and destroying, if not killing, anyone who stands in the way of fulfilling this desire—and that includes the father. (It is this fratricidal and incestuous urge where the Oedipal complex obtains its name, for Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* commits both of these actions.) Yet the boy comes to realize, through the reality principle, that his father is physically bigger and stronger than him, and that he could be punished with castration, a latent fear boys ostensibly develop when they see girls naked (Milton et al., 2011). This emotional crisis leads the psyche to divide itself, as the love for the mother and the murderous impulses against the father are repressed, and it is this very first repression that precipitates the formation of the unconscious (Alsop et al., 2002).

For girls, the situation is more complicated as they undergo their own Oedipus complex (although Jung coined the term ‘Electra complex’ and this is used by Neo-Freudians, Freud objected to this terminology, so for this essay we shall use the original phrase). They, like boys, become passionately in love with their mothers and discover the sexual differences between the genders; however, unlike boys, they react by believing themselves as ‘lacking’ and as being second-rate (Alsop et al., 2002). Hostility is directed toward the mother because the girl imagines that the mother feels this great inferiority—the female version of castration anxiety, known as ‘penis envy’—and that the mother wants to spend time with the father, rather than with the daughter (Alsop et al., 2002). In other words, the girl believes her mother does not love her because of her defective body. It is penis envy, therefore, that compels the child to reject her femininity and forsake homosexual affection for her mother, which then allows her to cross over to heterosexual love for her father, and, eventually, other men (Alsop et al., 2002). She fantasizes replacing her mother and having a baby with her father. Nonetheless, this fantasy is eventually realized as unrealistic, and may also lead to the loss of the mother’s life-sustaining love, so it is abandoned and repressed (Alsop et al., 2002).

Freud contends that at the foundation of our unconscious, for all people, lies in the Oedipal complex, upon which our entire psychological structure is built. He viewed the unconscious as seething with repressed impulses and these instincts are contained there because our ego finds them

repulsive, if not threatening. As a defensive measure so that it does not become overwhelmed, the ego has buried memories linked to the Oedipal conflict—the worst of repressed material—as far away from consciousness as possible. This results in a divided person, strangers to themselves, divorced from their past of abhorrent desires. Despite the ego's efforts, the unconscious manages to slip this forbidden content into consciousness via distortions and concealment so it is not recognized—this is done to achieve equilibrium between the ego and the unconscious, and, hopefully, to maintain or improve our psychic well-being.

This is evidenced in dreams and daydreams, and, in particular, literature. Stories, Freud thought, emanate from the unconscious, and by the use of symbols, the unconscious is able to evade the author's detection and project itself into the outer world. Symbols in literature are actually symptoms of suppressed emotion from the Oedipal conflict being released. Because the parricidal and incestuous impulse is ubiquitous, it acts as a force that underlies the surface of culture, inevitably erupting in artistic productions (Figlio, 2013). Freud claimed that the play *Oedipus Rex* derives its gripping allure from “[seizing] upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and recoils in horror from the dream fulfilment here transplanted into reality” (Freud, 1897, p. 272). By extension, what makes any story powerful is when it successfully taps into atavistic sources and expresses the foundational Oedipal layers of the unconscious. When unearthing the meaning of stories, “the deepest point at which one can arrive (...) is a point at which one arrives at some sexual wish” (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 50).

Works of art, therefore, are not some external object to which we apply psychoanalysis; rather, they themselves are constitutive of psychological knowledge and are of great value to understand how the psyche operates (Nussbaum, 1994). But what can we possibly deduce from *The Hunger Games*, a Sci-Fi film that has an outlandish plot and is set in an absurdly dystopian future? It takes place in the country of Panem, which consists of twelve districts whose purpose is to serve the needs of the ruling city known as the Capitol. Every year, one boy and one girl from each district are sent to the Capitol where they partake in the Hunger Games, a televised event in which the participants fight to the death until only one remains. The story follows Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen-year-old girl, and the violent battles she endures. At first glance, there appears little correlation to the psyche and its workings.

The film begins with the character known as the Gamemaker talking on a TV show in the Capitol about the importance of the Games, which are now in their 74th year:

I think it's our tradition that comes out of a particularly painful part of our history, but it's been a way that we've been able to heal. At first it was a reminder of the Rebellion and the price the districts had to pay... It's something that knits us all together (The Hunger Games, 2012).

The Games were set up, as outlined in the Treaty of the Treason, as penance for the uprising by the lower-class citizens. Given the historical development of the districts and their lack of power in comparison to the Capitol, given their outlying geographical location, we can assert that the districts are symbolic of the realm of the ego and the Capitol is the realm of the unconscious. The Gamemaker's brief description almost seems to be a metaphor of the Oedipal conflict that occurs in the phallic stage: a losing struggle against more powerful forces, a separation between the ego and the unconscious, the formation of the super-ego. According to Freud, once the boy and girl recognize that it is impossible to fulfil their Oedipal desires, they identify with the same-sex parent and introject them as an internal figure in the psyche, known as the 'super-ego'. Freud thought of the super-ego as a "garrison in a conquered city" (Freud, 1930, p. 124) whose primary role was to keep the conquered population under control: in this case, the child's desire for the parent of the opposite sex. This invading army imagery that Freud uses ties in perfectly with the Capitol being the symbol of the super-ego.

In the proceeding scenes, we observe Katniss as she navigates the small, confined world of District 12. It is a town composed of dilapidated shanties with no electricity, meagre livestock, and abject poverty. It is economically depressed, sustained by a bartering system, and its inhabitants wear simple clothing reminiscent of the Great Depression era. Nearly all of its spirit and vitality has been crushed due to the overpowering force of the Capitol. When Katniss crosses over the fence that encircles the town, she enters the forest in order to hunt for deer—symbolic of 'being in the hunt' for a sexual partner, a motif that has long been used in literary works, e.g. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—but she is disrupted by the Capitol's ironically titled "Peacekeepers". From a symbolic standpoint, the ego is in a neurotic state of melancholy and its libido is dammed up.

When the Peacekeepers arrive and select Prim as their Tribute for the Games, Katniss volunteers herself in her sister's place. It is almost as if Katniss is punishing herself for a crime.

Surprisingly, she does not cry or complain, and seems to accept the circumstance as if it were fate, as if she deserves it. This ostensibly indicates an underlying sense of unconscious guilt, and by examining her familial background, we can expose why this may be so. Katniss practically acts as the matriarch of the family: she comforts Prim when she is under duress, she is in charge of obtaining food and material goods, and she reprimands her mother for being weak when her father died. It is as if Katniss is living out the fantasy of what is known as the 'inverse' Oedipal complex (Neu, 1991). That is to say, rather than lusting after her father and wanting to murder her mother, she instead longed for her mother and wanted to murder her father, the opposite of a traditional Oedipus complex. Because her father died in a mining accident when Katniss was young, she grew up without a male figure in the household and never properly dealt with the 'penis envy' phase of the Oedipal conflict. She therefore never transformed her homosexual longings for her mother into heterosexual longings for her father. As such, Katniss developed a 'mother-fixation' and is now revisiting her unresolved Oedipus complex during puberty, or the fifth stage in psychosexual development, the genital stage. It is this failure to deal with the Oedipus complex when she was younger that is now the cause for her melancholia and possible confusion of her sexual identity.

In the Games, Katniss and the other Tribute from her district, Peeta, battle against the teenagers from the other eleven districts. The Games are an unrelenting spectacle of violence and bloodshed; however, Katniss and Peeta only fight out of self-defense and are never the ones to attack. This couple essentially represents the manifested forces of Eros, that of love, while the other Tributes are the embodiments of the forces of aggression. This combination is what comprises the Id. In siding with Eros, Katniss slowly, yet progressively, gains mastery over the aggressive aspects of the Id, and in doing so, cements her feminine identity that had formerly been lacking.

During the Games, Katniss comes to know herself more in a process of individuation by exploring the contents of her unconscious. At one point, Katniss is stung by genetically engineered wasps, known as 'tracker jackers', and this instigates a hallucination about her parents. We see her father venture into the mine, it exploding, and then Katniss yelling at her mother to stop being so weak. Here Katniss' Oedipal wishes are exposed: she secretly wanted her father to die in order that she could take his place and 'marry' her mother. By exposing this longing and bringing it to consciousness, it diminishes its power and Katniss can begin to bring a resolution to the inner conflict. This scene is a turning point in the storyline, and afterwards Katniss begins to express the

first inklings of sexual desire for Peeta, as demonstrated by the kiss in the cave and her self-sacrificing efforts to save his life when he was injured. Finally, Katniss is ready to direct her libido away from the image of her mother and thereby overcome her mother-fixation and the melancholia it entails; finally, she is ready to direct her libido toward the opposite sex. At the culmination of the film, Katniss strikes a blow to the overbearing super-ego by making the ultimate gesture of Eros: she offers up her life by choosing to eat the poisonous berries rather than kill Peeta. The Gamemaker stops the pair from committing suicide and they are crowned Victors, allowed to return home to District 12 in peace, a new balance attained between the Capitol and the districts, the Super-ego and the ego.

By watching Katniss come to terms with her Oedipus complex, the audience also undergoes the same psychological journey that Katniss undergoes, via a process of identification. The audience is immersed in the drama and experiences, the same psychological obstacles and achievements, to a partial degree. As such, *The Hunger Games*, like all art, offers a safe way to explore these deep unconscious dilemmas because the viewer does not have to experience the brutal tasks that Katniss suffered first-hand, that is to say, the audience does not have to experience it in 'real life'. The film provides people with a way of discharging their unconscious emotions, and without such an outlet, people would be forced to vent their Oedipal guilt and aggression in unruly ways, ways that may cause injury to themselves or society. Although *The Hunger Games* (and all other popular films and novels for that matter) appears to be simple entertainment filled with explosions and action, it actually serves an important function: it helps regulate the Oedipal urges of the psyche, and in doing so, helps regulate and maintain the health of our culture and society at large.

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