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# Incest and fixation in the plays of Eugene O'Neill

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## ABSTRACT

According to Freud the Oedipus Complex, manifests itself in the child around the age of five. It derives from the boy's unconscious rivalry with the father for the love of his mother. Freud referred to the whole complex of feelings by the word "oedipal," naming the complex after the Greek tragic hero Oedipus, who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother. Fixation, according to Freud, is a source of disharmony of development when childish forms of libido persist. If there is frustration in the gratification of these forms of libido representing the vital needs in childhood, the individual's development may be arrested or fixated and abnormalities may appear in the adult personality. These theories have gradually opened up a new awareness to understand and interpret certain plays of Eugene O'Neill. This paper intends to show how O'Neill presents the powerful motive of Oedipus and Electra complex, the incestuous relationship and fixation among characters in *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude*, *Dynamo*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

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## Introduction

According to Freud, everyone has repressed wishes and fears; and dreams in which repressed feelings and memories emerge are disguised. One of the unconscious desires most commonly repressed is the childhood wish to displace the parent of our own sex and take his or her place in the affections of the parent of the opposite sex. This desire really involves a number of different but related wishes and fears. Freud referred to the whole complex of feelings by the word "oedipal," naming the complex after the Greek tragic hero Oedipus, who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother. The Oedipus Complex, according to Freud, manifests itself in the child around the age of five. It derives from the boy's unconscious rivalry with the father for the love of his mother.

Fixation, according to Freud, is a source of disharmony of development when childish forms of libido persist. If there is frustration in the gratification of these forms of libido representing the vital needs in childhood, the individual's development may be arrested or fixated and abnormalities may appear in the adult personality. These theories have gradually opened up a new awareness to understand and interpret certain plays of Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill presents the powerful motive of Oedipus and Electra complex, the incestuous relationship and fixation among characters in *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude*, *Dynamo*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

As Normand Berlin has pointed out *Desire Under the Elms* has "greed, sex, incest, adultery, infanticide" (p.75). In the play the actions take place in the setting of New England. Ephraim Cabot is a vigorous and greedy farm owner of seventy five. He finds God in stones and he tries to guide his grown up sons with his own principles. He has devoted his entire life to his stony God and this seems to be the reflection of his own ego. He is intensely feared and hated by his two elder sons Simon and Peter. When Ephraim was away from the farm in search of a wife, they flee to California. Eben, the youngest son believes that his mother has died because Ephraim has overworked her in

the farm. With an intention to take revenge on his father, he encourages his elder brothers to leave the farm and he buys his brothers' share of the farm to be its sole owner. By buying the farm he reflects on the personality of his father Ephraim. Ephraim returns to the farm with a girl, Abbie. She is Ephraim's third wife and Eben's new step mother. Ephraim married Abbie as he needs a son to possess the farm and Abbie plans in a different manner. The dialogue between the two reveals their intention:

Ephraim: The farm needs a son

Abbie : I need a son (CP2, p.348)

Eben sees her as an intrusion to his aim to own the farm. But Abbie proceeds carefully with an intention to own the farm with a son through Eben and seduces him not only with all her charms but also by using his fixation towards his mother. Eben's mother fixation is such that he is driven at every step by the image of his dead mother. After the death of his mother, he feels that her spirit haunts the farm. Abbie uses this belief to seduce him.

ABBIE : When I first came in – in the dark – there seemed somethin' here.

EBEN[simply] : Maw

ABBIE : I kin still feel – somethin'

EBEN : It's Maw. (CP2, p.353)

CP2 refers to O'Neill, Eugene. *Complete Plays*. ed. Travis Bogard. Vol 2. New York: Library of America, 1988. All the subsequent textual references are to this edition only. The page numbers are given in parenthesis immediately after the quotations.

Eben constantly asserts that he is the heir of his mother and is protected by the guardian spirit of his mother. Abbie induces Eben for the physical union by convincing him that his mother wants him to have Abbie because 'she knows I love ye!' Eben also seeks his mother's blessing on their physical union, saying that 'It's her vengeance on him – so's she kin rest quiet in her grave!' Eben falls in Abbie's trap with an intention to take revenge for the death of his mother. The motive of taking

revenge lies behind his incestuous affair with Abbie. Eben is the victim of Oedipus complex, caught between the father's desire to possess and the mother's desire to take revenge. The incest with his step mother is an outlet for this double fulfillment, as well as a means of normalizing his psychic urges. If Eben's motive is to take revenge upon his father, the motive behind Abbie's desire is observed by Normand Berlin as follows:

Abbie's desire is both material and sexual. Greed motivates her early actions in the play. She always wanted a home and she possesses one now. That is why she married Old Ephraim Cabot and that is why she wants a son to make sure the farm will remain hers. Also present from the beginning is her sexual desire for Eben; her very first glance at "his youth and good looks" awakens it. (p.74)

Abbie's personal concern for her security and a home makes her neglect the nature of her marriage. Her drive to acquire Eben's body is also an irresistible sexual urge to gain something which she could not get from her aged husband, Ephraim. The possessive instinct leads to abnormal and incestuous relationship between Eben and Abbie. There is lust, incest and Oedipal desire in their sexual union. *Desire Under the Elms* thus represents the tension and conflict between the conscious motives and the unconscious forces epitomized in Eben's sexuality, his hatred and revenge on his father and love for his mother. The Oedipal struggle between father and son and Eben's close relationship with his mother is also conveyed in this play.

In *Strange Interlude*, Gordon's hatred for his biological father Darrell can be seen as Oedipal complex. But Gordon does not know about his real identity behind his birth. Darrell can feel the hatred and explains in terms of psychological analysis to Nina:

Perhaps he (Gordon) realizes subconsciously that I am his father, his rival in your love; but I'm not his father ostensibly, there are no taboos, so he can come right out and hate me to his heart's content. (CP2, p.764)

Gordon's hatred for Darrell increases when he sees Nina kissing Darrell. From then on he dislikes Darrell feeling that he has taken Nina's love. Gordon when comes to know that he has been named after Nina's dead lover Gordon Shaw, he intuitively feels that Darrell dislikes the name as Nina loved Gordon Shaw more than anyone. Young Gordon now decides to "be just like Gordon and Mother'll love me better'n him." Realizing the tension in Gordon, Nina lies that Darrell has become a bore and explains her kissing him is only a formal way of saying good bye to him. On hearing this Gordon feels happy and kisses Nina to take away the kiss of Darrell.

Marsden's mother in *Strange Interlude* is another dominating mother similar to that of Eben's mother, who influences Marsden in all his actions. For example his work as a novelist, his friendship, his travels, and every major act in his life was referred back to his mother for justification and approval. She is the governing person of all his important decisions. Marsden was free to do the things that were determined by his complex relationship with his mother.

In *Dynamo*, Oedipus' motives and sexuality can be traced through tensions of Reuben Light, the central character in the play. Reuben's father Reverend Hutchins Light is a fifty year old, short, fundamentalist minister with a complacent, sanctimonious, and holier than any superior person. His wife Amelia Light is a stout woman. She is fifteen years younger than her husband. She dominates her husband with her strength and

dark good looks. She is a religious fanatic who views her husband as a "minister of the Lord" and her son as "one of the Lord's anointed" and herself as "the daughter -in-law of God." Mrs.Light wants Reuben to go into business and to marry a nice girl with money. The Puritan father who worships the God of Wrath and his wife submit to his faith but she develops extreme possessiveness and unconsciously supports his plan to frustrate their son's love for the neighbour's daughter, Ada.

Ada Fife is the daughter of Mr.Fife, an engineer. Fife involves Reuben in a scheme to test the love of Reuben. He sees a story in the paper about a man who had killed another fellow in a fight over a girl. When Reuben expresses his desire to marry Ada, Fife pretends that he and his wife are the guilty couple. Reuben is shocked and promised to keep the secret within him. Mrs. Light is dismayed by Reuben's disappearance in his bedroom and when she hears Reuben approaching, she orders Mr. Light to hide in the closet.

Reuben retells Fife's story to his mother who has promised on the Bible never to reveal his secret to anyone, including his father. Being comforted by his mother's maternal tenderness, Reuben admits his love for Ada. Mrs.Light angrily calls her a "little harlot" and summons her husband. Reuben is shocked by the betrayal of his mother whom he had "loved better than anyone in the world." Betrayed by his mother, Reuben is able to escape from his mother fixation for the time being and in disgust he shouts, "You're not my mother any more! I'll do without a mother rather than have your kind" (CP2, p.850). Reuben becomes disillusioned because of his mother's betrayal and his father's anger leaves the home renouncing his parents and the God in whose name they have justified their behavior:

If there is his God let him strike me dead this second. I dare him! (CP2, p.852)

Several years later, Reuben returns home to learn that his mother has died of grief. Reuben longs for dead mother's forgiveness. Then he looks at the closet, remembers his mother's betrayal and feels a surge of hatred, yet he longs to reach her somehow. Doris V Falk comments:

Insane with guilt and grief, he concentrates his now fanatical faith in electricity in worship of the actual dynamo in the hydroelectric plant where he works.(p.127)

To Reuben, electricity, his mother and God become one in the dynamo. Reuben becomes obsessed with the idea that he can be united with his mother and he feels remorse for her but he has become cynical about love, and he deliberately seduces the engineer's daughter. Unable to resist his temptation to have sexual intercourse with Ada, Reuben blames her for his defilement. He believes that the only way to free himself from the temptation is to kill her. He takes the revolver and shoots Ada twice and runs into dynamo room. Embracing science brings destruction and self-loathing to Reuben. Substituting science for religion brings Reuben to insanity. Chaman Ahuja comments about Reuben as, "O'Neill's protagonist is a mean, despicable, sex-ridden case of Oedipal psychosis, a lunatic at the mercy of the unconscious drives, a puppet incapable of heroic struggle."

Reuben tries to turn away from his sexual feeling for Ada because he feels that it is a betrayal of his mother's pure love. After he sleeps with Ada, the only penance he can offer is suicidal immolation. He climbs up the ladder runs leading to the exciter head of his Dynamo-Mother. He says, "I only want you to hide me Mother! Never let me go from you again! Please Mother! (CP2, p.884) and he throws his arms around the exciter

and there is a flash of bluish light. All the lights in the plant become dim and the noise of the dynamo is reduced to faint and his body crumples to steel platform and from there he falls heavily to the floor. Doris V Falk observes :

Reuben has found his final integration. The dynamo –that irresistible materialism which draws him to his destruction-is the mother whom he loved and by whom he was betrayed, but it was God the Father's lightning, flowing through the dynamo, that killed him. (p.128)

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* Oedipal situation is worked out through Orin's devotion to his mother and Lavinia's inclination towards her father and his spiritual attachment with her, which causes hatred for Christine, denoting the conflicting unconscious motives of the characters' minds.

Adam Brant plays an important role in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He is the captain of a ship. His father was David Mannon, the younger brother of Lavinia's grandfather. His mother Marie Brantome was working as a nurse in the Mannon house. Abe Mannon, the brother of David, drove David out of Mannon house when he came to know about the affair between David and Marie. Both of them got married but they could not lead a prosperous life without money. Adam was born in such a poor atmosphere and David started drinking. One day David left Marie and hanged himself. After the death of his father Adam went to sea and became a Captain. In the meantime Marie wrote a letter to Ezra asking for help. But Ezra neither replied the letter nor helped Marie. When Adam comes to see her from sea, Marie died in his arms out of sickness and starvation. Adam loved his mother very much and he hated his father for not taking care of Marie. As he is dead, he turned his hatred towards Ezra. Adam believed that Ezra was responsible for Marie's death and he wanted to take revenge upon the family of Mannon. When Adam meets Christine for the first time he reveals his hatred for her being Ezra's wife:

I thought, by God, I'll take her away from him and that'll be part of my revenge. And out of that hatred my love came. (CP2, p.922)

Christine falls in love with Adam and in order to make his visit natural she even goes to the extent of asking Adam to flirt with Lavinia. Her love for Adam is made possible by her unconscious identification with him of the pre-nuptial youthful chivalry and décor of her husband, lost in the discords and tensions of marriage with her husband Ezra. Ezra, like Ephraim, is an embodiment of family pride. Because of egotism and Puritanism Ezra does not know how to love his wife in the beginning. Mannon returns from war as a changed person who longs for love. But it is too late for Ezra as Christine is passionately in love with Adam. Christine reveals her relationship with Adam and his family background. Ezra is shocked and suffers of chest pain for which she gives a poisoned medicine as per the plan by Adam. Adam fulfills his desire to take revenge on Ezra using Christine and her love as a tool. Lavinia discovers the illicit relationship between her mother and Adam. It only increases the tension between the mother and the daughter. It is evident when Christine accuses Lavinia as follows:

You've tried become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place. (CP2, p.919)

Lavinia's fixation towards her father is explicit in Act III, when she says, "You are the only man I'll ever love! I'm going to stay with you" (CP2, p.935). After Ezra's return, Lavinia

watches her parents going upstairs to their room and she says in an anguish of jealous hatred:

I hate you ! You steal even Father's love from me again! You stole all love from me when I was born. (CP2, p.940)

Lavinia comes to know about the murder of Ezra and she vows to take revenge for his death. Orin, the son of Ezra returns. Lavinia tells him about their mother's relationship with Adam Brant. When he insists upon the proof, they decide to follow Christine. After the death of Ezra, Christine goes to meet Adam on his ship. On following her, Lavinia and her brother Orin are fully convinced about the relationship between Christine and Adam. When Christine leaves the ship, Orin shoots Adam and kills him. Orin's murder of Adam can be rationalized by the identification of the latter with his father – his rival in love for his mother. Lavinia's plotting against her mother is explained by her desire to usurp the latter's place by winning the love of Adam, whom she identifies with her father.

It can be assumed from the specific details of O'Neill's characters that every male is attracted to the woman who resembles his mother in physical appearance and every female desires a man who resembles her father. Christine and Lavinia both resemble Marie Brantome especially in their peculiar shade of "copper-gold hair." The Mannon women identified one another with this symbol. While flirting with Lavinia, Adam says:

You're so like your mother in some ways. Your face is the dead image of hers. And look at your hair. You won't meet hair like yours and hers again in a month of Sundays. I only knew other woman who had it. You will think it strange when I tell you. It was my mother. (CP2, p.908)

The relationship becomes incestuous as Adam loves Christine, Ezra loves his wife and daughter, Lavinia loves Ezra, Brant and Orin and Orin loves his mother and his sister. Reciprocally Lavinia hates Christine, Adam hates Ezra and Orin, Orin hates the rivals of his mother's lovers.

Orin like Eben is another character who suffers because of Oedipus Complex. Oedipus situation has been worked out through Orin's devotion to his mother in *The Hunted*. He loves his mother and hates his father. Orin's mother complex is developed to some length and he is still his mother's boy. Christine deals with him in seductive terms emphasizing their physical in their relationship:

You're a big man now, aren't you. I can't believe it. It seems only yesterday when I used to find in your night shirt hiding in the hall upstairs on the chance that I'd come up and you'd get one more good night kiss! (CP2, p.972)

Orin replies enthusiastically "with a boyish grin":

Yes bet I remember! And what a row there was when Father caught me! And do you remember how you used to let me brush your hair and how I loved to? He hated me doing that, too. You've still got the beautiful hair, Mother. That hasn't changed. (CP2, pp.972-973)

The above words present the tension between the father and the son and son- mother complex which is very significant as the play proceeds. In another situation he adores her beauty when he tells his mother, "You are more beautiful than ever! You're younger, too, somehow! You come before everything" (CP2, p.965). Later when Christine pleads Orin to protect her against Lavinia, Orin soothes her, "I love you better than anything in the world" (CP2, p.971). Then he shares a dream of life on the South Sea islands, when he was wounded and delirious:

There was no one there but you and me. And yet I never saw you... I only felt you all around me. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you. (CP2, p.972)

When Christine advises him to marry Hazel, he declares, "I'll never leave you again now. I don't want Hazel or any one. You're my only girl!" and he recalls his joy in brushing her hair, and now with his father dead they can "get Vinnie to marry Peter and there will be just you and I" (CP2, p.973)

All these instances reveal an abnormal feeling existing between Christine and Orin. It also seems that in his dark unconscious he welcomes the death of his father. Orin's Oedipal intention is revealed from his words after murdering Adam:

If I had been he I would have done what he did! I would have loved her as he loved her-and killed Father too – for her sake! (CP2, p.996)

Orin's mother fixation is such that even after murdering Adam he is ready to forgive his mother for her illicit relationship with Adam. He says, "I'll make you forget him! I'll make you happy! We'll leave Vinnie here and go away on a long voyage to the South Seas" (CP2, p.1001). He acts like a rejected lover when he realizes that she still loves Adam. When Christine commits suicide, Orin hysterically accuses himself of having murdered his mother. After Christine's suicide, Lavinia becomes his mother and takes care of him. She also seems to be free and has grown into a beautiful lady. Now she exactly looks like her mother as she has changed her customary black to her mother's green, has changed her hair style to her mother's and looks more vivacious than ever before. With all these changes Lavinia closely resembles Christine in every way. But Orin is haunted by his mother's memory. Orin is still plagued by his guilt in the death of his mother and added to that, he has transferred his incestuous love for mother to an incestuous love for sister. The transformation into father and mother is complete and Orin's complex made completely explicit when he makes his proposal to his sister. To Orin, Lavinia is his mother and suggests that Lavinia should live with him forever like Ezra and Christine. Orin says to Lavinia:

Can't you see I'm now in father's place and you're Mother? That's evil destiny out of the past I haven't dared to predict! I'm the Mannon you're chained to! (CP2, p.1032)

Orin like Eben and Reuben, takes pleasure in an obsessive love towards his mother, a love that is more like one between lovers. Travis Bogard analyses, "Each is oedipally in love with

his mother. Each is embittered by her loss and feels either that she has betrayed him, or that by seeking to possess her, he has betrayed her. Yet without her he is lost and must in compensation seek a surrogate" (p.441). Now Orin considers Lavinia as his mother substitute. Now he cannot allow his sister to get married to Peter and threatens that he will reveal the history of Mannon's crimes and show it to Peter before the marriage. He says, "I love you now with all the guilt in me – the guilt we share! Perhaps I love you too much, Vinnie!" (CP2, p.1041). Orin suggests that Lavinia should live with him forever and they would live like Ezra and Christine. Lavinia is repelled by this incestuous suggestion and bursts out that she hates him and shouts, "I hate you! I wish you were dead! You're too vile to live! You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward. (CP2, p.1042). Orin shoots himself. The play depicts Ezra's murder, Lavinia's attachment to her father, jealousy between Christina and Lavinia, Adam's murder, Christina's suicide, and Orin's mother fixation. For the most part, O'Neill presents the story of a brother and sister to dramatize the tension due to Oedipus and Electra complexes. The incestuous love of Orin for his mother and sister, of Lavinia for her father, the love of mother for son, of father for daughter, the hatred of father by son, of mother by daughter are presented in such a way that they represent abnormal patterns in human behavior.

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