

## Greeting

I want to take advantage of the informality of Alumni presentations and begin by talking about the coming together of two streams in my professional life--- streams that I've found both disruptive and reparative. To do so, I need to go back more than a few years.

In high school English class, much to my surprise, I found myself *drawn into* the dramatic works, especially Shakespeare's Hamlet. However, as chance would have it, in Grade 13, the teacher abdicated, leaving us to our own devices (as in, copy these notes down, you'll need them for the final). So, feeling up against it as the exams loomed, I headed off to the local library, and among other things, found a psychoanalytic take on Hamlet--- probably written by Ernest Jones---and got even more confused. I felt frustrated because *I knew I thought more than I could say* about Hamlet.

Anyway, in the end, I made my way through departmental literature and composition exams. I even made a couple of attempts to follow my interest in literature and drama at university but, once again, was put off by lacklustre teaching. So, I decided to stay with what I knew and restricted my studies to mathematics and a splash of psychology courses.

Jumping ahead now fifteen years or so, when I joined the CTP program, my literary interests were revitalized. Here, at CTP, I began reading writers steeped in literature and comfortable with metaphor. Early on the writers were Theodore Reik as well as Freud and Winnicott and, later, these were joined by the likes of Christopher Bollas, Adam Phillips, R.D. Laing, Thomas Ogden and Hans Loewald.

At first, most of my reading and writing in the CTP program was an individual effort that flowed along comfortably enough. It's not that way now. In getting ready to talk about my Story of Oedipus, night after night, in the early hours, I've found myself within a torrent of ideas that threatened to cover the whole landscape or, at the very least, defeat the time constraints of my talk here tonight.

I'll tell you now about the two streams that disrupted the gentle flow. I'll start with the last stream entering what was, by then, a river with some oomph to it. Three years ago, I decided to take Cathleen's Literature seminar here and at the end of the first year, decided to stay on for a second because the seminar and Cathleen's teaching in it exceeded my expectations. By the time I took the seminar, I no longer thought in terms of getting the correct skinny on each of the writings we looked at and I was open to the way thinking and speaking within a group has a way of gathering complexities together---complexities each of us in the seminar could glean from according to our needs. By the way, during the second year of the course, I read **Oedipus the King** for the first time. I'll come back to that later.

The earlier of the two streams of influence came with the birth of our reading group about six or so years ago. When the group got rolling, we tended to steer each other in the direction of papers written with a metaphoric rather than, say, a philosophic turn. And, when our attention headed toward seeing the Oedipus Complex from its many sides, it seemed a natural move to return to Sophocles' play and see how Oedipus landed on each of us.

I compare my experience of reading and talking with my peers about a play as rich, deep and stirring as Oedipus the King as like being part of a musical ensemble. In our conversations, none of us, including the speaker, would know where we were headed or how we would riff off of each other's thoughts, ideas and emotional stirrings. Yet in the process, five distinct and unique thinkers inevitably shine through. As our conversations wove in more complexity, the real riches revealed were in the discovery and elaboration of personal voices. What I'm saying here is that Jackie still sounds like Jackie even when she's singing in a chorus.

To conclude this, over the next two nights of presentations in the discussion part of the evenings, I'd like to invite you to join in the spirit of our reading group by *surprising yourself and saying something you didn't know you thought*.

I've titled my talk **Outrageous Fortune: Simple and Complex**. I'll warn you now that my writing and speaking here is an attempt to condense my midnight musings. And, I'll also warn you that I'm not so good with introductions and conclusions but I will try to compensate by providing you with an ample middle.

That being said, let me give some indication where I want to go with the talk.

Complexity in Freud's thinking contains but is not limited to his idea of the Oedipus Complex with its accompanying castration anxiety that spawns a passed-along moral sense. As you might have gathered by now, my use of the word complex usually refers to its simple pre-Jungian meaning of complicated, multifaceted or nuanced etc. In our work, I am constantly pulled toward the subtle shifts and shadings of any complex ideas that try to get at some knowing of unconscious processes. Freud is my inspiration for this feel for psychoanalytic thought. I believe that his great achievement was in refusing to be seduced by overly simple formulations. He abandoned what didn't fit and elaborated what did. I also think that Freud was released into his stunning achievement by the death of his father. Further, I think that throughout his life Freud was, at least in part, an emotional captive of Oedipal relating. I also think his psychoanalytic thinking was affected by this, but not substantially limited.

In the talk I'll also follow up on my interest in the ways we maintain the integrity of our psyche through the use of defenses. I'll do this by outlining some of the defense strategies used by Hamlet, Freud and Oedipus and roughly fit these defenses into post-Oedipal, Oedipal and pre-Oedipal forms.

And, what getting around to my Story of Oedipus? Well I'll leave that for a bit later since it arrived on the scene only recently. But, when I do get to my Story of Oedipus I'd like to end it with a version of this question: Is the modern reader of the play induced into suppressing, repressing or dissociating key parts of the play? But for now, I'll get at my Story of Oedipus by linking it to aspects of my (updated) Stories of Hamlet and Freud.

So, first, to Hamlet. About two years ago now, I was intrigued by a talk given at Toronto Psychoanalytic by Dr. Judith Hamilton. Dr. Hamilton used various clips of filmed versions of Hamlet to highlight Freudian, Kleinian and Lacanian takes on the play. Although my memory of this is a bit fuzzy, I do remember the Lacanian interpretation hitting a resonant frequency. The idea of this interpretation was that although Hamlet had moved beyond Oedipal relating, as evidenced by his developed love interest in Ophelia, he was thrown back into the earlier form of relating by the demands of the ghost of his father. By taking on the ghost's call for revenge, Hamlet re-submerged his psyche in a family, by then, rife with narcissism, psychopathy, incest and murder. And, once he entered the poisoned swamp of Claudius and Gertrude, the beckoning of the siren call to sexual life outside of the family became distant, faded out of reach and eventually became shrouded in a fog. In the play, it is a cloak of transferences that inexorably descend and consume first Ophelia and then Hamlet.

This analysis leads me to wonder if Hamlet might have hesitated to act because, given his nature, he was handed an impossible prescription to fill. Perhaps he was *too developed* to pull off the psychic split needed to carry out the dual commands of revenge me with your uncle (i.e. “Adieu, Adieu Remember Me”) and don’t upset your mother (“i.e. Leave her to Heaven”). Hamlet’s most famous speech “To Be or Not to Be” details the existential crisis he finds himself in. In the speech, he asks himself whether the imposed design for his life with its slings and arrows of outrageous fortune has left him with a life not worth living.

*I see I’ve got a posted note here so let me have a look at it. Goodness, it’s written to Mr. Holt, my Grade 13 teacher. It says don’t worry if you didn’t get all that, all the notes will on the alumni section of the CTP web site. And although there won’t be a final exam, there will be a quiz later on, so stay with me.*

Now, let’s have a look at Freud’s life and how Oedipal strivings played out between Freud, his father Jacob and on into Freud’s own family. Fortunately for us, when Jacob died in the 1890’s, no ghosts appeared to Freud. Instead Freud was psychically freed up enough to be captured by a flurry of dreams. The dreams lead him to a re-collection and re-examination of early passions he had toward his mother and father. Often, the dream images revealed shadows cast over Freud by his relationship with his father. I’ll mention a couple of these that relate to our play.

First of all, Jacob wasn’t much of a hero to Sigmund. Whatever cache he had with his son was seriously eroded when Jacob told young Sigmund about his encounter in the street with an anti-Semitic bully. The bully made a nasty remark and knocked Jacob’s hat into the street. Freud asked his father what he did then. Jacob said he retrieved his hat and went on his way. Small wonder Sigmund later leaned toward Hannibal, a Semitic conqueror, as his childhood hero. A second early memory revived by Freud’s dreams was a memory of what happened when young Sigmund had attempted to assert his phallic pride in front of his parents by peeing in his parents’ bedroom chamber pot. The action provoked Jacob into declaring: “This boy will amount to nothing.” If we follow R.D. Laing’s thinking on this type of exchange, in that moment Freud was being handed down an injunction: “Do not try to take my place or outdo me”. When the natural love of a son for his father is added to the mix, Jacob’s oracular message might land as: “Show your family loyalty to me. Do not try to outdo me” or “Remember I am weak. You might kill me if you show me up”. Either way, while Jacob was alive, Freud failed to impress him even when those attempts served Jacob’s interests and, as a result, Freud constrained his ambitions.

So in the end, Freud's father's death liberated Freud's ambition. And, without a doubt Freud, thinking about the riveting drama of **Oedipus the King** when he wrote to Fleiss, identified with Oedipus at the crossroads. Here, at the crossroads, before heading toward Thebes, Oedipus, who had been greatly wronged, finally strikes back, unleashing an Oedipal fury that kills his father Laius and most of his fellow travellers. Perhaps this identification with Oedipus *and the ambivalence surrounding it* contributed to Freud's life-long fear of travel and the feelings of dread he had to overcome before he could finally travel to his beloved city of Rome.

We also know that, Freud, who was his mother's favourite and closer in age to his mother than his father was, visited and tended to his mother regularly for thirty years after his father's death. Throughout this period, Freud held onto the view that the early infant years were essentially unambivalent and unconflicted. This defensive idealization was rather quietly held until Barbarian Kleinians gathered at the Gate insisting on the centrality of a wildly conflicted baby.

In the battle with the Kleinians, the power of the repetition compulsion asserted itself. Freud, no longer having a Crown Prince to fight the good fight for the centrality of his Oedipus Complex, set about analyzing and grooming his favourite daughter Anna to protect his fortress in the not-so-civil war with the Kleinians. And, to bring the identification with Oedipus full circle, late in his life, Freud lovingly referred to Anna as his Antigone. I see I have a footnote here:

*I find myself wondering what Anna would have made of her efforts to protect her father's work if she knew that by the time I studied psychology at university the wetlands of the unconscious had been drained, Freud had been awarded his past-masters degree by the unstudied, and Anna's mechanisms of defence were the only psychoanalytic offerings left standing in the curriculum.*

Before leaving Freud, I want to add that Freud's thinking and theorizing was not limited to the biologically-based instinctual model that he began with, or to the centrality of the Oedipus Complex that he insisted upon. Today the best contemporary psychoanalytic writers are mainly elaborators of ideas that Freud introduced a hundred or so years ago. For example, Thomas Ogden writes now about the psychodynamics and necessity of being able to dream while awake and Christopher Bollas is so captured by the infinite expanses of free association, with its inherent ability to introduce new questions, that he's not sure now that interpretation has much value at all. I could go on but I want to get to Oedipus now.

As someone who read psychoanalysis for twenty years before reading our play, my first surprise in reading the play was that Oedipus is so un-oedipal. The measures he uses to protect himself and others are all primitive. I'd like to begin by outlining three defences that tie into key dramatic points in the play:

In a first look at his defences, I want to focus on his actions once he hears his fate. What defence does he use to protect himself and his loved ones from the terrible fate that awaits them? He flees. But, as Freud has taught us, you can't run away from yourself. Attempts to do so bring about compulsive enactments. And, as everyone familiar with the myth knows, in his flight Oedipus unwittingly kills Laius at the crossroads and, once he has made his way to Thebes and solved the riddle of the Sphinx, he accepts the reward of marriage to recently-widowed Jocasta, a woman old enough to be his mother.

The flight fight response is obviously built around fear but the Kleinian analyst Wilfred Bion goes further and says fight-flight always results from a state of panic. Bion also says that fight flight is the preferred defence of anyone whose early psychotic anxieties were not sufficiently contained by a maternal environment. Panic needs to be contained before any intellectual or psychic work can be done. No one can think straight in a state of panic. If Oedipus did not panic and had the capability to consider his position, he might have left the Oracle, returned to his presumed parents and pressed them further on his origins. And, without being in a panic, he certainly might have thought that, given the possible uncertainty of his birth, there were certain risks associated with killing older men or bedding older women.

Now, a second defence.

Early in the play, when the priests beseech Oedipus to save the Thebes from the plague, his esteemed status as ruler of the city is clear. I'm using Robert Fagles translation of the text.

*Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods,  
your children know that, bending at your altar.  
But we do rate you first of men,  
both in the common crisis of our lives  
and face-to-face encounters with the gods.  
You freed us from the Sphinx, you came to Thebes  
and cut us loose from the bloody tribute we had paid  
that harsh brutal singer. We taught you nothing,*

*no skill, no extra knowledge, still you triumphed.*

But a few pages later it's clear that Oedipus has done more than believed the hype when he enters a scene interrupting the prayers of the chorus to declare:

*You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers.  
Come, listen to me--- do what the plague demands:  
You'll find relief and lift your heads from the depths.*

*I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,  
A stranger to the crime. If I'd been present then,  
There would have been no mystery, no long hunt  
Without a clue in hand.*

In these parallel passages, along with a heavy dose of irony, Sophocles prepares us to see that Oedipus' swollen sense of himself will contribute to the drama about to unfold.

The last defence I want to highlight is Oedipus' use of selective inattention. Sophocles often plies irony on top of irony. The passages quoted above may remind us that at an earlier point in the play Oedipus *was given the clue in hand* that would solve the murder mystery. Here's Oedipus confronting Creon about giving up on the murder investigation before his own arrival in Thebes:

*Trouble? Your king was murdered—royal blood!  
What stopped you from tracking down the killer  
then and there?*

Creon responds:

*The singing, riddling Sphinx.  
She...persuaded us to let the mystery go  
and concentrate on what lay at our feet.*

So why does Oedipus master of the riddle, turn away from this clue and respond with:

*No, I'll start again I'll bring it to light myself.*

Why doesn't he respond with something like:

*The other riddle from the Sphinx was about walking and feet too! Let's see what I think of when I concentrate on what lays at my feet.*

Daniel Goleman and his notion of lacuna helps us here:

*Lacunae are black holes of the mind, diverting attention from select bits of subjective reality—specifically certain anxiety-evoking information. They operate on attention like a magician misdirecting his audience to look over there, while over here a key prop slips out of sight....A lacuna is, then, the attentional mechanism that creates a defensive gap in awareness. Lacunae, in short, create blind spots.*

So Oedipus, in turning away from what lays at his feet, is selectively not attending to an unthought knowing of his early trauma. His wounded feet are the gateway to his whole history.

This is a good time for my quiz. The question is: What was the fate revealed to Oedipus at Delphi? Think about how you remember the report Oedipus gives of his visit to the Oracle for a moment.

Did you remember the Oracle as saying something like “Your destiny is to kill your father and marry your mother”? This is the way the undercurrent of the play is described in psychoanalytic writing and this is what I expected to find in the play.

Let's now have a look at Oedipus' report of his visit to Delphi. The report was:

*“You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring a breed of children into light no man can bear to see—you will kill your father the one who gave you life!”  
Line 873.*



This prophecy has actually come up earlier in the play in a very similar form when Tiresias made a scathing remark about Oedipus just as he is just out of earshot:

*"He (i.e. Oedipus) sowed the loins his father's sowed, he spilled his father's blood" Line 523*

Notice, in both selections, the spilling of father's blood is assigned second place even though the murder of Laius must occur before Oedipus can marry Jocasta. And, in the reports of the prophecies, marrying or even coupling with mother is not central, having babies with mother is central. Actually, the horror of having babies with mother is central. Or more specifically, the living evidence of maternal incest is so unbearable no man can look upon it.

I think that the psychoanalytic simplification of this complex prophecy exposes a blind spot about the power of the play. I find it interesting that after 20 years of reading psychoanalysis, before reading the play, if I knew that Oedipus had had children it hadn't registered with me. When I took a break from the writing of this paper I became aware that I did not want to go to the heart of my experience of reading the play. Frankly, I find the play profoundly disturbing. It is one thing to mine this play for its connection to universal childhood fantasies of knocking off one parent and gaining exclusive access to the other (at least for a time) and quite another thing to be immersed in the horror of Oedipus' reality.

Late in the play, once Oedipus knows the truth of his life, his drastic action of blinding himself is a response to the terrible fate awaiting his children.

*The sight of my children, born as they were born, how could I long to look into their eyes? What good were my eyes to me? Nothing I could see could bring me joy.*

As promised I want to end this talk with questions. What is happening when the play **Oedipus the King** is reduced to being about killing father and marrying mother? What horrors does incest stir in us? What is being brought to light by the play that no man can bear to see? What blindness does Oedipus carry for us?

I'll end with a passage from ([Isaiah 53:4](#)) that gets at what I'm touching on here:

"Surely he hath borne our Grievs and carried our Sorrows; Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of GOD and afflicted."

ALUMNI PRESENTATION – April 24, 2009

Frank Cherry