

## Review

# Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory Oedipus complex: A critical study with reference to D. H. Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers"

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**Sigmund Freud and his Oedipus complex are among the most often discussed critical and contentious issues of modern psychology and literature. Freud has brought lot of controversies in the field of modern psychology and literary trend through his theory Oedipus complex. Contrariwise, in some other assessor's notions his concept of Oedipus complex deserves a great deal of appreciation. Nonetheless, prominent English novelist D.H. Lawrence is one of those modern writers who are greatly influenced by Freudian theories and have been promoting Freud's notions through their works. His "sons and lovers" are considered as one of the most modern as well as controversial novels of the twentieth century. In this fiction, the protagonist Paul's extremely emotional dealings with his mother are the illustration of Doctor Freud's psychological theory Oedipus complex. Nevertheless, this paper aims to critically analyze the facts lying with the hallucination of Oedipus complex as it is presented in "Sons and Lovers". The evaluation is conducted liberally and objectively as well as through comparisons between the central characters of Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers" and Sophocles' King Oedipus. This attempt also tends to judge the universality of Freud's claim particularly sexual theory with the help of modern biological experiments and the result of relevant laboratory tests, conducted by eminent psychologists and psychiatrists. In short, the critique ultimately endeavors to find out a factual solution for the controversies, raised by Oedipus complex, with the help of logic, fact and scientific researches.**

**Key words:** Freudian psychoanalysis, Oedipus complex, "Sons and Lovers".

## INTRODUCTION

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory Oedipus complex is one of the most influential as well as divisive theories of twentieth century. Freud coined the term Oedipus complex to refer to a stage in the development of young boys. He felt that in early development, around the age of five young boys wish to have all their mother's love, thus , jealousy causes them to resent and even unconsciously wish for the death of their fathers, ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus\\_complex](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_complex)).

However, the concept has been greatly dominating the

modern way of thought from time to time. Specially, in case of literature the upshot of this theory is quite vivid, because, Freud himself has taken the imaginative root of his theory from the masterpiece of Greek literature, Sophocles' King Oedipus. Many of the modern writers are also greatly influenced by the theory. They have been trying their utmost to prove the universality of Freud's theory. Among those writers D.H. Lawrence is remarkable. Through his masterpiece "Sons and Lovers" Lawrence has tried his best to universalize this Freudian

concept. He tries to show that his hero Paul can never come out from the labyrinth of Oedipus complex as mythical Oedipus could not. Hence, he tends to make a universal link between the two worlds modern and ancient in order to prove the eternal appeal of Oedipus complex.

On the other hand, it is also vividly noticed that though Freud's views have met with acclaim and appreciation but his views have also been strongly criticized by a number of empirical scientific researches. Dr. C. Boeree thus perfectly says "Freud's books and lectures brought him both fame and ostracism from the mainstream of the medical community. He drew around him a number of very bright sympathizers who became the core of the psychoanalytic movement. Unfortunately, Freud had a penchant for rejecting people who did not totally agree with him. Some separated from him on friendly terms; others did not, and went on to found competing schools of thought" (Boeree, 2006). Yet, Freud's Oedipus complex thus becomes a matter of immense controversy which ever shakes the readers' thought and belief while they read anything written based on 'Oedipus complex'. It is, therefore, an inevitable demand of time to settle such a controversial issue else it remains threatening for the human civilization.

## THE BASIS OF FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS

To better understand and analyze Oedipus complex, it is mandatory to have a look at the base of Freudian psychology or psycho analysis. Freud starts his mission in the world of psychology with the treatment of hysteria which according to him was caused by sexual desire but unfortunately this was not acknowledged by his mentor Dr. Joseph Breuer under whose guidance Freud was learning about hysteria (Rahim, 2002). This presupposition about psychological diseases was one of the bases of Freud's sex theories. Besides, he had a guess or assumption of the division of human brain and its functions. He strongly believed and popularized the idea of conscious versus unconscious mind. In his hypothesis, the conscious mind is what one is aware of at any particular moment like someone's present perceptions, memories, thoughts, fantasies, feelings etc and preconscious mind is what closely work with the conscious mind or it is the memories that is not presently conscious but can be made conscious easily. According to Freud these two are the smallest parts of brain, the largest part is what he called the unconscious. In Freud's view this unconscious level of mind is the source of

man's motivations such as desires for sex, food and so on, (Rahim, 2002). Furthermore, Freudian psychology is largely based on objects that are guided by needs; hunger, thirst, the avoidance of pain and sex. Dr. C. Boeree comments that "When everyone thought of male and female as roles determined by nature or God, he showed how much they depended on family dynamics" (Boeree, 2006). Hence, Freud's thoughts are ever supposed to be guided by desires. To him these desires are the fundamental factors of human life and psyche other than any spiritual and moral functions. According to Freud, among the objects organism is the prime one whose important part is nervous system which is known as *id* at beginning. This *id* transforms the needs of organism into motivational forces which Freud called wishes. Here there is a great contradiction regarding this *id*. Dr. C. Boeree says "The infant, in the Freudian view, is pure or nearly pure *id*" (Boeree, 2006). Now question comes if a child's *id* is pure how does he or she possess sexual complexity or desire which causes him to envy his father even to wish death for him?. Besides, Freud's analysis of human brain is based on his imaginative division of human brain in to three levels(as shown in figure 1d) which in fact do not exist and contradict with the real pictures of human brain as shown in Figures 1a, b, c.

It is a well-known fact that human brain has both some conscious as well as some unconscious feelings and functions but our concern query is whether the brain is naturally divided or not? Or does there truly exist any unconscious level of mind which lay the foundation for sexual desire? If it is true with empirical evidence then Freud can have a universal appeal otherwise modern psychology and civilization has to reconsider and be careful about its disastrous effect.

According to Dr. C. Boeree "Behaviorists, humanists, and existentialists all believe that (a) the motivations and problems that can be attributed to the unconscious are much fewer than Freud thought, and (b) the unconscious is not the great churning cauldron of activity he made it out to be. Most of the modern psychologists today see the unconscious as whatever we do not need or do not want to see. Some theorists do not use the concept at all", (Boeree, 2006). On the contrary, instead of three levels in our brain, modern psychologists and biologists have rather invented the existence of glands in human brain as shown in the Figures 2a, b, c, d. Another famous psychologist Carl Jung says that it is the concept of unconscious which has made Freud nothing but puny. The conscious is on the other hand a function or feeling of brain not its level or part. There is no separation or any

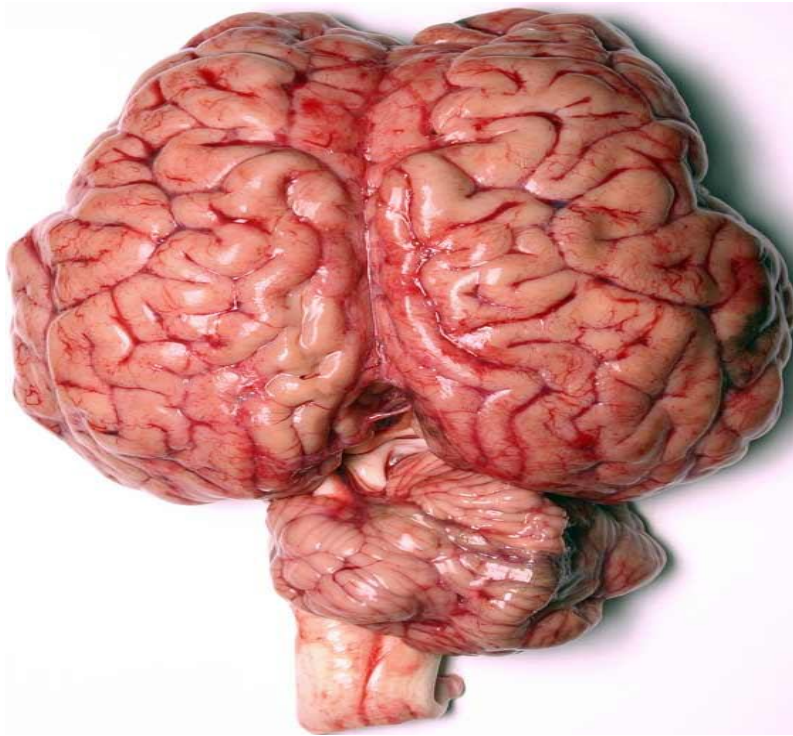


Figure 1a. A picture of normal human brain.

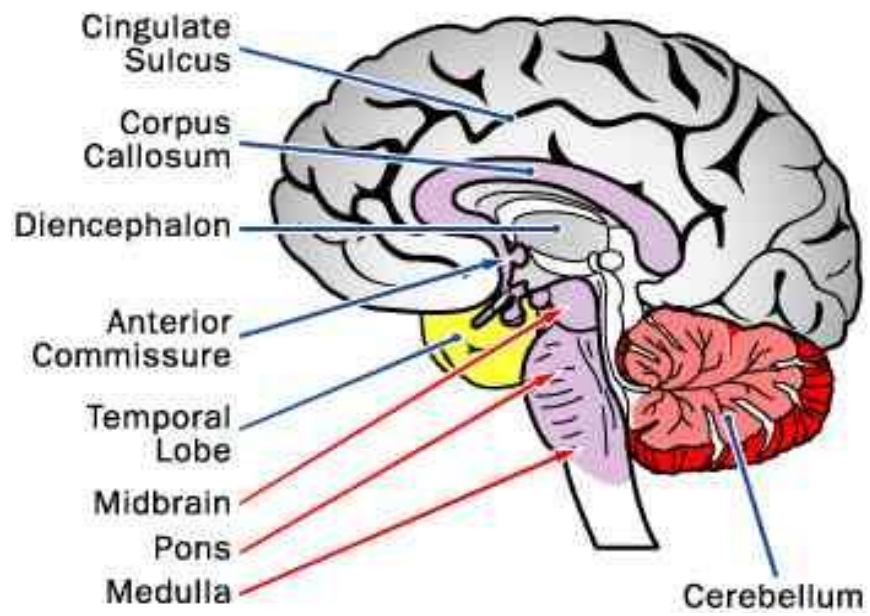
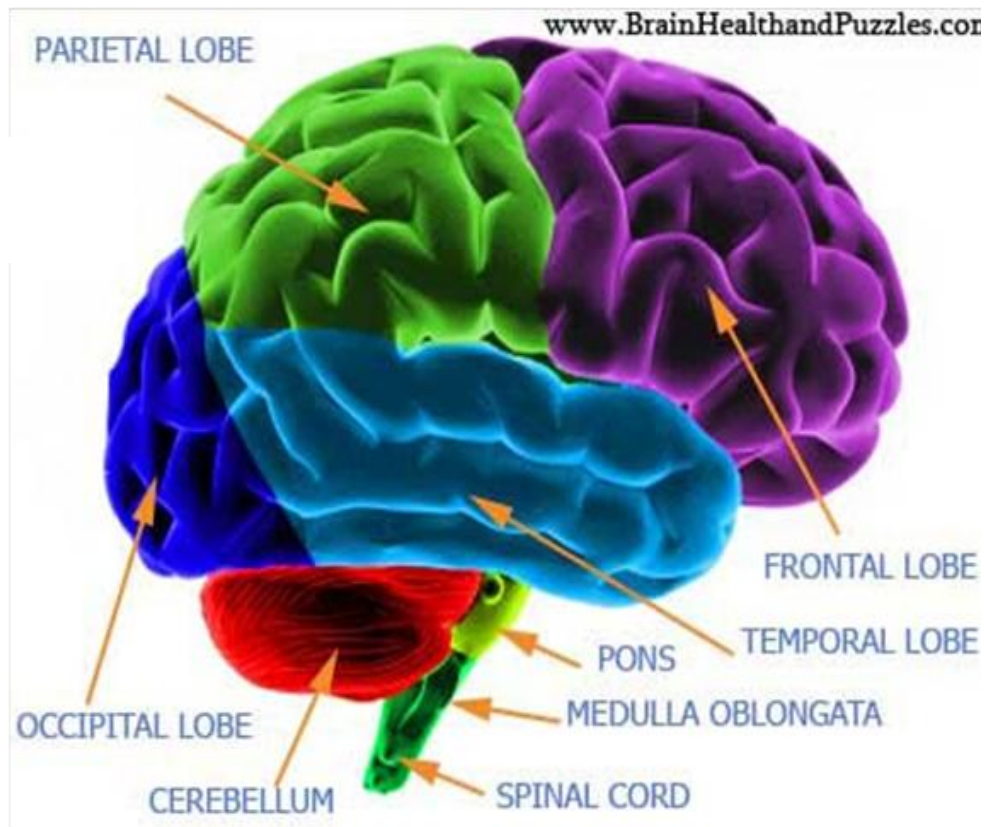


Figure 1b. Major internal part of the brain.



**Figure 1c.** Major internal parts of the human brain.

separate parts in brain known as conscious, unconscious and preconscious (Boeree, 2006).

Professor Joseph Jastrow in his prominent work 'Freud: his Dream and Sex Theories' gives a rather rational evaluation of unconscious mind hypothesis of Freud. He says that unconscious is the fundamental source of Freudian psychology. All Freudian movement is run based on this concept, actually it is nothing but a scheme. The fundamental question is here cheated. If we accept this then we may also accept the ancient concept of ghost, applied by Morceress for the treatment of hysteria. Though Freud got some popularity but it was like Hoodman who also achieved fame for his division of mind based on guess. He had claimed that man has two minds but later this assumption was thrown away as an unscientific one. It indeed remained as an erroneous chapter in the history of unconscious. Likewise, Dalpon says Freud's unconscious mind does not have any scientific value. It is a shadow of ghost and should be

thrown out as speculated by Hoodman. He further says that he supposedly came to this conclusion that Freud's unconsciousness is nothing but a groundless imaginative story (Rahim, 2002). So it is now easy to conclude that Freud's concept of sex remaining in unconscious is also groundless as because there is no existence of such level in brain or unless there is any level which contains sex from one's birth then it is quite easy to agree with those biologists who claim that sexual desire is not inherited by birth other than it is rather a physical need which depends on growth of human anatomy or body. For instance those who suffer from any physical weakness or diseases consequently suffer from sexual weakness too. That means there remains a causal relation or interconnection between body and sex.

In moderate view we can say, it is a historical fact that in Freud's time medical science, biology and the modern equipment of biological test were not as modernized as today. When Freud divided human brain into three levels,

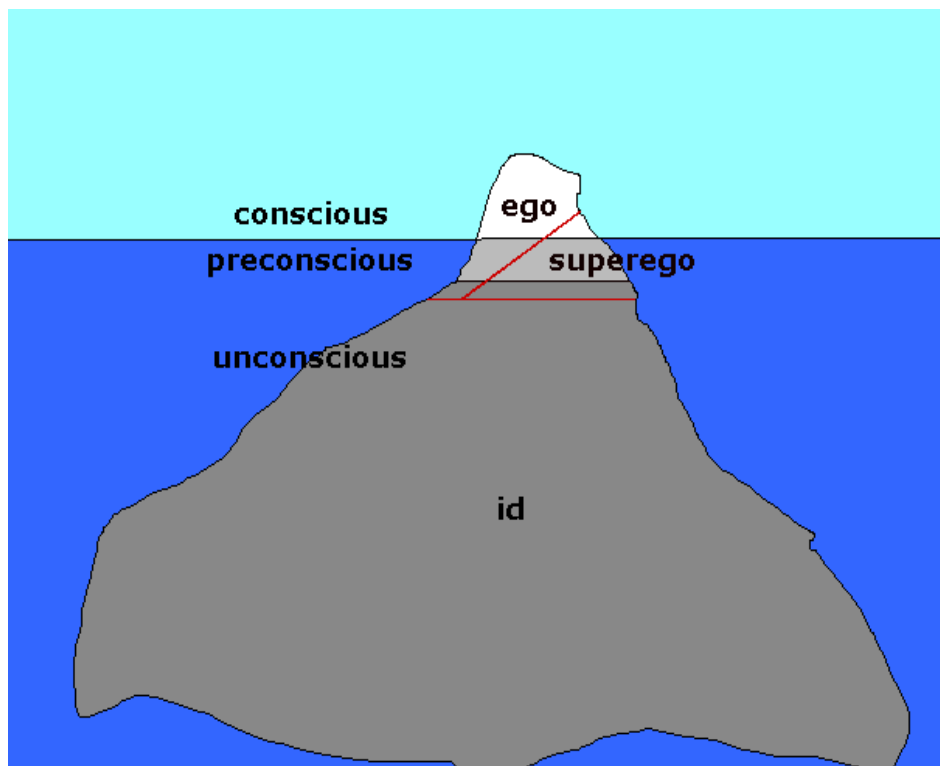


Figure 1d. Freud's imaginative division of brain [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_brain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_brain).

he had quite little opportunity to find reliable and diagnosed evidence about the formation and function of brain. Consequently, he had to depend on his imagination and presupposition for this division. For instance, Freud was totally dependent on hypnotism for the treatment of hysteria. This hypnotism was not indeed any scientific remedy prescribed by medical science rather it was used by sorcerer, charmer, and those who treats with amulet and quack remedies (Rahim, 2002). But unfortunately Freud was guided by this unscientific method of superstitious people for his psychoanalysis and sex theories. Possibly, for this reason Freudian psychoanalysis has almost lost its value and rationality to modern psychologists as we have already mentioned through the remark of Dr. C. Boeree "...Some theorists do not use the concept at all", (Boeree, 2006).

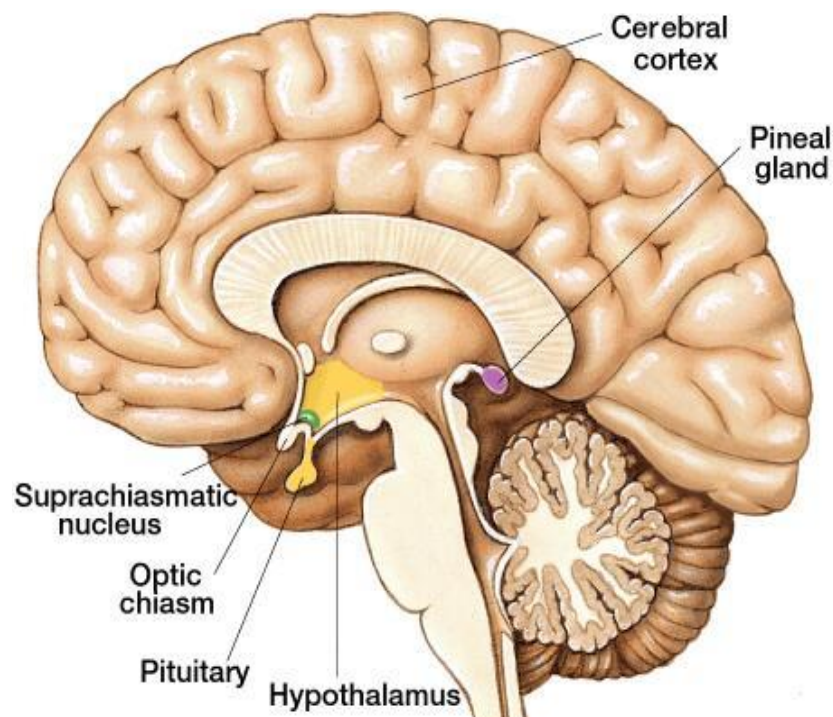
On the contrary, instead of three levels in our brain, modern psychologists and biologists have rather invented the existence of glands which actually contain and pass our feelings and sentiments. These glands create feelings in the body not in brain. It is needless to say that these glands grow with age and require maturity of

themselves as well as body to create (sexual) feelings. Hence, it is quite clear that children's glands and feelings must differ from that of adults'. C. W. Valentine thus perfectly says\_ "...children are free from all sexual feelings" (Rahim, 2002).

### OEDIPUS COMPLEX; THE THEORY

Sigmund Freud introduced the term 'Oedipus complex' in his 'Interpretation of Dreams (1899). According to him, the concept is a desire for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex, which produces a sense of competition with the parent of the same sex and a crucial stage in the normal developmental process (Freud, 1913). In a brief, Freud used the term to refer to a stage in the development of young boys. He assumed that in early development, around the age of five, young children wish to have their entire mother's love. Thus, jealousy causes them to resent and even unconsciously wish the death of their father. The term Oedipus complex was indeed named after the name of Greek mythical figure.





**Figure 2a.** Existence of glands in human brain  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pineal\\_gland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pineal_gland).

Oedipus who was the son of king Laius and queen Jocasta of Thebes, and finally killed his father and married his mother unconsciously which according to the belief of the writer and people of that time, was designed by fate (Safra, 1768).

But, according to Sigmund Freud, the accidents or incidents in the life of Oedipus happened because of sexual complexity between Oedipus and his mother. And on the basis of this story he invented the concept Oedipus complex which he attributed to children of about the age of three to five. He views that all human behavior are motivated by sex or by the instincts, which in his opinion are the neurological representations of physical needs.

He firstly referred to those as the life instincts which perpetuate the life of the individual, initially by motivating him or her to seek food and water, and secondly by motivating him or her to have sex. The motivational energy of these life instincts, the "oomph" that powers our psyches, he called libido, from the Latin word for "I desire" (Boeree, 2006).

Freud's clinical experience led him to view sex as much more important in the dynamics of the psyche than other

needs. We are, after all, social creatures, and sex is the most essential of social needs. Here, we have to remember that Freud put much more importance on sexual desire than any other thing.

### Critical evaluation

From the foregoing analysis, it becomes clear that Freud thought that man was born with some feelings and sentiment like sexual desire, propensity etc. That means - in his view- by birth man is sexy; a child must possess sexual desire even when he is in his Mother's womb and this inborn sexual predisposition lays the foundation for all other propensity. But this claim of Freud has been disproved by number of modern biological experiments or tests which suggest that every propensity or sentiment is originated from separate nerve, and sex producer nerve is unable to produce other feelings, similarly, other nerves are not also involved in producing sex. And at the time of birth, sex producer nerves are immature which require a certain stage of age to produce sexual feelings that means theses cannot work before blooming youth.

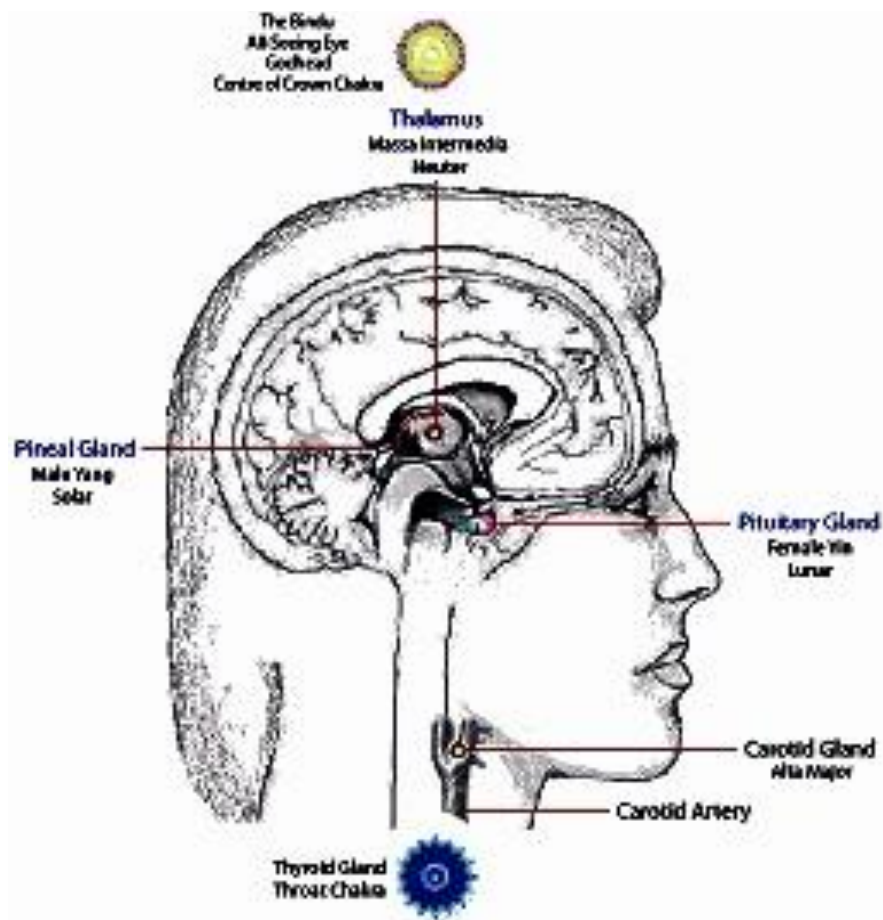


Figure 2b. Existence of glands in human brain.

However, there are number of empirical researches which prove that during childhood, children are free from all kind of sexual feelings or complexities. In this case eminent modern, American psychologist Dr. C.W Valentine's experiment is remarkable. Dr. Valentine took thousands of children, aged up to six for observation in order to verify Freud's view of child-sexuality. Finally, he came out with the result shown in Table 1.

Through, the previous mentioned diagram, Dr. Valentine shows that there is no imbalance attraction neither between daughter and father nor between son and mother as Freud claimed. Neither male nor female children have any revengeful propensity towards their parent opposite of sex. He rather shows that there is a regular and harmonious fluctuation of attraction or affection of children towards their parents; in some stages son, feel more attracted to his father, and

sometimes to his mother. Likewise, in some stages daughter feel more attached with mother sometimes to her father. That means the feelings does not remain fixed.

Another research was conducted on children psyche by famous research institute "The Gesell institute of child Development". The institute having an observation on a certain group of children aged up to ten has published a book named "Child Behavior" that analyses the attitude, behavior and sentiment of children. The book dedicated its full three chapters (from 10 to 11) to the analysis of the sexuality of children, mother-child relation and father-child relation. But there is no little concern or discussion Freud's view of child-sexuality.

The author of the book seems not to even assume any possibility sexual desire in children's mind as because they totally ignored the significance of the concept of

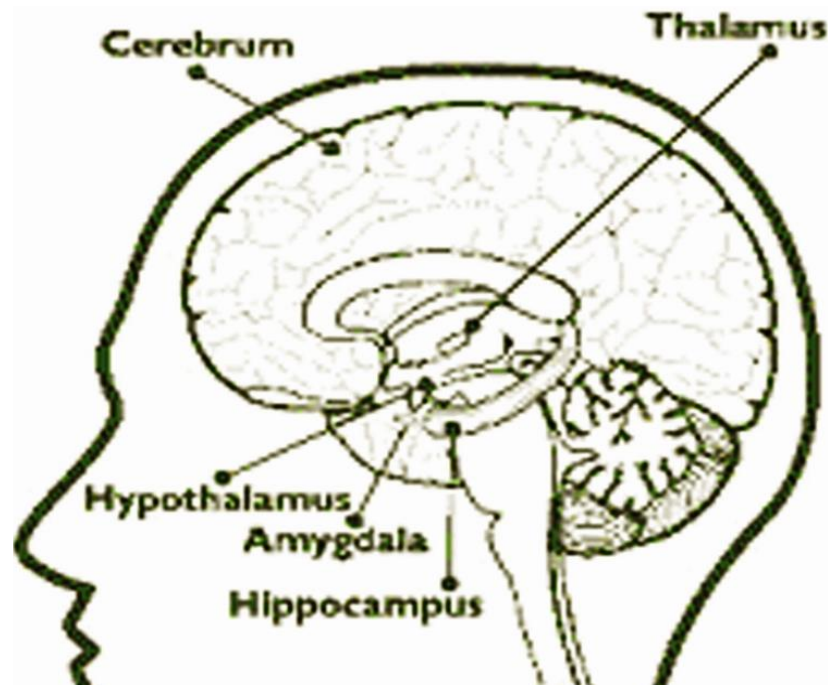


Figure 2c. Existence of glands in human brain.

Freud to be discussed.

If we now evaluate Oedipus' case, there are also lot of follies and contradictions behind the concept. Wikipedia says "Oedipus himself, as portrayed in the myth, did not suffer from this neurosis – at least, not towards Jocasta, whom he only met as an adult if anything, such feelings would have been directed at Merope – but there is no hint of that", ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus\\_complex](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_complex)). So, neither natural mother-son relation (as between Oedipus and Jocasta) nor the duplicate one (as between Oedipus and Merope) has any sexual complexity.

Later on, Freud tried to arbitrarily support his theory with fatalistic beliefs of what must contradict with his so called-scientific claim. Peaking of the mythical Oedipus, he says; "His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so", ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus\\_complex](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_complex)). So according to Freud himself this complex happens because of the curse of oracle. Now it is quite relevant to ask Freud what is the scientific value of this claim? Here it becomes very complex and unscientific claim as

because neither science nor any major religion reveals and universalizes that we all human beings are cursed like Oedipus.

In particular Oedipus may be a cursed one according to Freud's belief in imaginative myth Being a Jew though it is also irrational on his part, but how can it become universal and scientific?. And if we review the concept from the view point of fatalism as Freud suggests then it also lacks to be universal because it is the belief of all fatalist that fate must vary from person to person so how Oedipus fate goes to all human being equally?

By the foregoing comment, Freud has made the concept or theory much more complex and irrational. He is Jew and it is a well-known fact that in Judaism there is no concept of oracle. It is the belief promoted by pagan religion, hence here Freud is going against his own belief as well as claim as a scientist.

### Concept of Oedipus complex in "Sons and Lovers"

D. H. Lawrence's masterpiece "Sons and Lovers" is the most reliable and remarkable illustration Freud's Oedipus complex in modern literature. Hu Junjie being a Freudian psychologist writes that Lawrence is one of the most



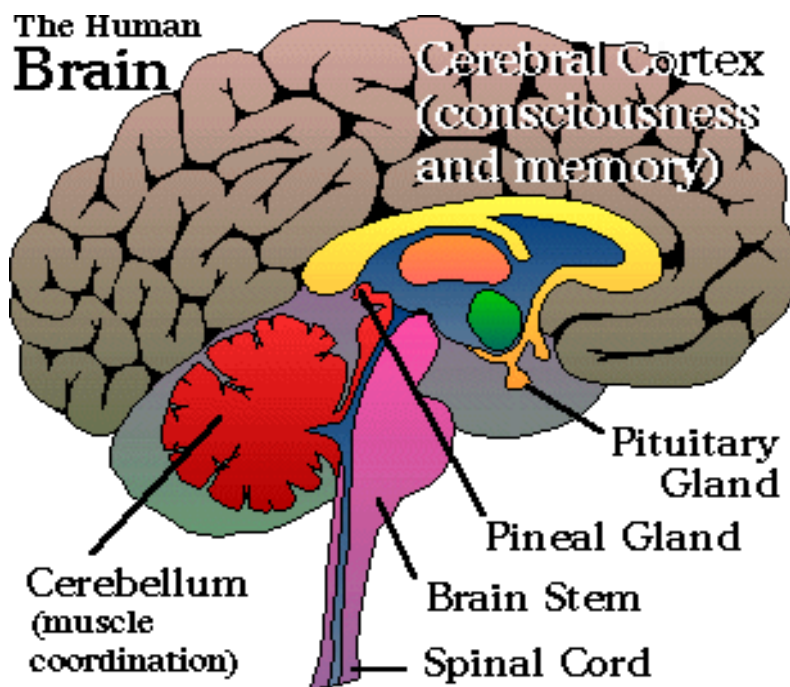


Figure 2d. Existence of glands in human brain.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pineal\\_gland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pineal_gland).

original and controversial English writers of twentieth century. The major theme of his writing was relation between man and woman. And for the pornographic nature of his work 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' was rejected by his contemporary English society (Junjie, 2007).

However, Oedipus complex is the dominant theme of Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers". The complex here chiefly centers around Lawrence's protagonist Paul and his mother's dealings or relation. Among the sons of Mrs. Morel Paul is shown to have most serious Oedipus complex. After the birth of this unhealthy boy Mrs. Morel mysteriously asserts; "With all her face, with all her soul she would make up to it for having brought it into the world unloved", (Lawrence, 2007). The expression vividly exposes her complexity with Paul.

On the other hand, as Paul grows, he also begins to fulfill his mother's wish. He sticks to his mother and trots after her like her shadow. Like an exactly romantic lover he watches every physical movement of his mother, enjoys her dressing up with plenty of delight and sensual pleasure. Lawrence delineates "Paul Loved to sleep with his mother, sleep still most perfect in spite of hygienists, when it is shared with a beloved...". "His ambition as far

as this world's gear went was quietly to earn his thirty or thirty five shillings, somewhere near home and then when his father died have cottage with his mother" (Lawrence, 1985).

Hu Junjie opines that if we accept Freud's claim in "Sons and Lovers", then Freud theory also lacks to be a universal one because Lawrence himself describes Mrs. Morel turning her relation to son because of unusual reasons (Junjie, 2007). Lawrence along with the describing the complex and unusual relation also finds many unusual factors behind this unusual relation. Among those factors the most common factor is Mrs. Morel's shifting her attraction or lust from husband to son which was the outcome of the unusual relation or mismatch between she and her husband regarding character, family status, education, intellect etc. While she is an exceedingly religious woman here her husband is hard drunkard, her refined manner also contradicts with his vulgarity. The marriage life of Mrs. Morel is -in fact-full of conflicts and frustration as Lawrence himself delineates "Their marriage life has been one carnal bloody flight".

Along with the mental torturing Mr. Morel also often

**Table 1.** Attraction of children to the parent of opposite sex at different stages of age.

Age of children (years)	Son's attraction to father	Daughter's attraction to father (%)	Son's attraction to mother (%)	Daughter's attraction to mother (%)
2	11	20	77	87
3	20	28	61	66
4	38	36	57	66
5	28	25	57	66
6	23	15	68	78

(Valentine: 1962. P. 108).

beats her severely and puts her out of home. "The mother is unsatisfied and angry with the coal miner, because he not only fails to live up to her bourgeois idea, but also hurts her in body and mind". All these hurting and agonizing facts lastly cause her to substitute or to move passionately towards her son to find a bit satisfaction into the world "unloved". Thus Hu Junjie concludes that "Her personal abnormal emotion is the direct factor for Paul's Oedipus complex". That means mother's abnormal maternity is indeed the basis of Paul's Oedipus complex. If it is so then how come the theory is universal? Because all the mothers of the world are not dissatisfied, wounded, agonized with their husbands not all the fathers of the world are drunkard, characterless, unsympathetic like Mr. Morel. Hence, it becomes clear that Mrs. Morel's case is an exceptional and individual case not universal a critic says "Most personality theorists, however, consider these examples aberrations rather than universals, exceptions rather than rules. They occur in families that are not working as well as they should, where parents are unhappy with each other, use their children against each other. Where there is no mismatch or bizarre relation between wife and husband and the relationship is typical there may be no possibility of such complexity or unusual acts or relation. Hu Junjie further explains that healthy spiritual states must be based on healthy life styles and social systems. The problem described in "Sons and Lovers" are not only the mental problems but also social factors. So along with psychological factors the sickly life style and mechanical social system are also responsible for the unhealthy and sickly relation between mother and son. Such relation is not healthy and cannot happen in healthy and regular or natural life.

### Contrast between Oedipus and Paul

In order to verify the universality of Freud's Oedipus

complex, we may have a comparative look between Oedipus and Paul. It is recognized that Oedipus married his mother Jocasta totally unconsciously. He even so ashamed and afraid of getting married with his own mother that on hearing the Delphic oracle he left his country Corinth to escape from such crime, and finally he is informed that he married his own mother and after being conscious of his relation with his mother he plugs out his own eyes out of remorse, agony and guilt feelings.

On the contrary, Paul makes affair with his mother very consciously feel quite pleased and comfortable of it instead of feeling ashamed or guilty like Oedipus. If it is a universal phenomenon, then why the feelings of the two in terms of same relation are different? Besides it is recognized by every critic that Oedipus was victim of fate Sophocles' aim behind the drama was mainly to the dominant power of fate what the whole ancient society even the Shakespearian people or the people of every time from ancient to modern believed. So where the all Greek or human society view Oedipus is guided or motivated by fate here Freud finds he is guided by sex what Oedipus nor the Greek nor the writer Sophocles himself imagined by his story.

### Contrast between Jocasta and Mrs. Morel

Contradiction between Jocasta and Mrs. Morel also resembles the contradiction between Oedipus and Paul. If Freud's claim is universal then the feelings of Jocasta and feelings of Mrs. Morel irrespective of their relationship with their sons should be same. But unfortunately, this does not happen. Where Jocasta gets totally unknowingly married with her son and after being informed commits suicide out of her agony and shame here Mrs. Morel gets consciously involved in sexual dealings with her own child and feels quite pleased and gratified for it.

### Contrast between Electra and Annie Morel

Freud's female Oedipus complex known as Electra complex has also failure in "Sons and Lovers". Electra's abhorrence of her mother aroused from her sense of taking revenge of her father's murder and mother's relation with that killer. This sort of bitter propensity or reaction is quite usual from any daughter or child when his or her parent is slain. These feelings may rise from affection not from passion.

However, if Electra complex is a universal phenomenon caused by sexual feelings why Lawrence's Annie is totally indifferent? Why he fails to apply it equally in case of Annie? In no stage Annie's feelings resembles Electra's in the novel. She is neither jealous of mother nor feel weak to father. Freud's so-called child sexuality cannot prevent or cause Annie love her father nor abhor the mother. He rather has to show all the children's abhorrence towards their vagabond and characterless drunkard father what is realistic, logical universal and supposed to be as all man naturally admire good and detest bad. Annie as a rational creature of God acts naturally.

### CONCLUSION

It is true that in the history of psychology Freud's view of sexuality has intensive influence upon a number of thinkers. Some of his followers seem to have dedicated all their creativity behind the establishment of Freudian sex theories. But along with modernization of psychology and psychoanalytical process, Freudian sex theories have been losing their appeal or acceptance. Possibly for that very reason, Joseph Jastrow being a follower of Freud says that Freud's Oedipus complex is an indecent and inadequate concept. It is impossible to find any root or origin of this claim.

After constant perusal, we have become able merely to know that it is nothing but a consequence of Freud's imaginative psychoanalysis based on his personal supposition that lacks evidence (Rahim, 2002). Besides this, if we come to conclude Paul's case, his Oedipus complex and its causes are already vivid to us. Paul has not become a normal adult by getting over some

problems like other children. That is not only determined by his mother's abnormal maternity. The reasons are in many ways; some come from the parents; some come from his and brothers, some even from the society, the mechanical civilization, which leads the family tragedy and distortion of personality and devastates people's healthy development on spirits. Hence, it is easy to realize and recognize that Paul's relation with mother is the outcome of many unusual and abnormal causes, what are partial, exceptional and individual rather than universal. Thus, it can be asserted that it is not usual or natural for the people living in a healthy family and environment to have such anomalous and complex emotional problems.

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36. Ahmed S. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory Oedipus complex: A critical study with reference to D. H. Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers" The reasons are in many ways:- Some come from the parents; some come from his and brothers, some even from the society, the mechanical civilization, which leads the family tragedy and distortion of personality and devastates people's healthy development on spirits. Thus, it can be asserted that it is not usual or natural for the people living in a healthy family and environment to have such anomalous and complex emotional problems. 37 Internal journal... Opposite of Oedipus complex. Girls get attached to father and consider mother as rival. 38 Psychoanalytic theory