

A Brief Analysis of the Oedipus Complex as Reflected in the Film *Dam Street*

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.09.09

Abstract

The “Oedipus Complex” first appeared in Sophocles’ famous tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, also known as the “maternal love complex,” characterized by the desire to “kill the father and marry the mother.” This concept, proposed by Freud, has been widely used in various fields. This paper briefly analyzes how the Oedipus Complex is reflected in the film *Dam Street* by examining the subconscious of the characters.

Keywords: Oedipus Complex, Freud, *Dam Street*

1. Explanation of the Oedipus Complex

The Oedipus Complex, also known as the maternal love complex, refers to a boy’s repressed desire to love his mother and eliminate his father. Freud believed that between the ages of 3 and 5, a child’s personality development enters the phallic stage. At this time, the boy develops a strong attachment to his mother, viewing her as his first love object, and sees his father as a competitor, exhibiting aggressive tendencies. The famous Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* illustrates this concept.

Freud said: “These primitive desires from childhood are satisfied in Oedipus, while we recoil from them with all our might, allowing these primitive desires to be repressed.” These “primitive desires” refer to the wish to “kill the father and marry the mother.” During the phallic stage, a child may experience “castration anxiety” and develop a strong dependence on

his mother’s affection, leading to an unconscious hatred of his father and a desire to replace him and remain close to the mother. This represents human instinct and sexual desire. Oedipus was the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes. Upon his birth, an oracle revealed to his parents that he would one day grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Fearing this prophecy, they abandoned Oedipus. As an adult, Oedipus unknowingly encountered King Laius, his biological father, on a road. Without recognizing him, Oedipus killed Laius during an argument. Later, Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx and saved the city of Thebes, his birthplace. The citizens of Thebes elected him as their king and offered him the hand of Queen Jocasta, his biological mother, in marriage. Oedipus and Jocasta had two sons and two daughters together, living in harmony and ruling wisely.

One day, a plague struck Thebes, plunging Oedipus and his people into despair. They sought help from the gods, and an oracle proclaimed that the plague would only end when the murderer of King Laius was expelled from the city. After a shepherd revealed the truth, it became clear that Oedipus was the murderer of Laius, his own father, and that he had unknowingly married his mother and fathered children with her. Faced with this ethical and moral dilemma, Oedipus was horrified by his actions. Overwhelmed by guilt and believing he could not escape his fate; he gouged out his own eyes and went into exile.

Art, with its focus on humanity, ultimately seeks to convey deep care and understanding of the human condition. The "Oedipus Complex," as a manifestation of human sexual instincts, is also reflected in many famous works, revealing the most primal and genuine desires within the subconscious mind. For example, in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, the son Paul is unable to break free from his mother's psychological control throughout his life. He is deeply infatuated with her, surpassing maternal love and reaching a form of romantic attachment. Paul even said, "I always loved her as a lover." When his coal-miner father was injured and nearly died, Paul was inexplicably joyful and told his mother, "Now I'm the only man in the house!" This work is considered a reflection of Lawrence's early life, as the author once wrote in a letter: "The love between my mother and me was profound, like that of a married couple, surpassing the bond between mother and child. We knew everything about each other, and this instinctive connection reached its peak."

Art is a reflection of human nature, and its ultimate goal is to show profound concern for humanity. As a representation of human instinct, the Oedipus Complex is reflected in many famous works, revealing the most primitive and authentic desires hidden in the subconscious. For example, in Cao Yu's renowned Chinese drama *Thunderstorm*, Zhou Ping has an affair with his stepmother, Fanyi, which reflects the Oedipus Complex. Zhou Ping harbors deep resentment toward his father, Zhou Puyuan, wishing for his disappearance, which symbolizes the desire to "kill the father." Additionally, his relationship with his half-sister Sifeng further intertwines multiple generations' fates, eventually leading to their collective

downfall.

2. Overview of the Chinese Film *Dam Street*

The film *Dam Street* is set in a small town in Sichuan during the 1980s and tells the story of a 16-year-old girl, Xiaoyun, who lives with her mother after her father passed away when she was young. Xiaoyun has a relationship with Wang Feng, a boy from her school, which results in her becoming pregnant. Desperate to hide her pregnancy, she is eventually exposed when changing costumes for a school performance, leading to both Xiaoyun and Wang Feng being expelled from school. Wang Feng leaves town to study carpentry, while Xiaoyun stays behind. The conservative atmosphere of the 1980s made premarital pregnancy a social disgrace, especially for minors. Xiaoyun's mother arranges for a childless couple to adopt the baby once it is born. When Xiaoyun gives birth, she is told that the baby has died, leaving her heartbroken as she grows up in a sorrowful youth. Ten years later, Xiaoyun becomes an actress in the local Sichuan opera troupe. However, traditional Chinese culture is being eroded by modern trends, leaving Xiaoyun performing popular songs in opera costumes, further lowering her social status.

One day, she meets a 10-year-old boy named Xiaoyong, who comes to her home for tutoring. In their second meeting, Xiaoyong secretly watches Xiaoyun bathe and is caught in the act. As time passes, their relationship grows closer, with Xiaoyong frequently visiting Xiaoyun, even being teased by others as her "little lover." Xiaoyun is romantically involved with an older married man, Liu Wanjin, but is publicly humiliated by his wife. Xiaoyun's best friend, seeking wealth, becomes involved with a wealthy man who also attempts to seduce Xiaoyun. In a dramatic twist, it is revealed that Xiaoyong is actually Xiaoyun's son, born a decade earlier. Xiaoyun's mother and Xiaoyun are devastated upon learning the truth. Unable to bear the pain, Xiaoyun marries Liu Wanjin, but the marriage is interrupted by chaos, leading Xiaoyun to leave town in despair.

3. Manifestation of the Oedipus Complex in the Film *Dam Street*

Xiaoyong's father was Wang Feng. Wang Feng went away to work and tragically died in an accident. His ashes were kept in an urn at home. Wang Feng's death can be understood as occurring after Xiaoyong's mother, Xiaoyun,

became pregnant with him, forcing Wang Feng to leave the family, eventually dying far from home. Although Xiaoyong's birth was not the cause of Wang Feng's death, one could interpret the son's existence as metaphorically "killing" the father.

Xiaoyong did not know who his father was. When he grew older, he took a bone from his father's urn and played with it like a toy airplane in the living room. This act can be seen as Xiaoyong not viewing his father's death as a source of grief. His life had never included the presence of a father figure, whether it was Wang Feng or his uncle. In fact, the father's role had always been absent from his family.

The Oedipus Complex is evident in several scenes within the film. One notable moment is when Xiaoyong watches Xiaoyun bathe through a hole in the window. His eyes widen with shock, but as a 10-year-old, Xiaoyong has not yet reached sexual maturity, so this behavior cannot be attributed to physical desire. Instead, his unconscious libido drives his fascination with Xiaoyun, marking the beginning of his unconscious attraction to her. Later, when Xiaoyun catches Xiaoyong, she punishes him by making him wash her clothes. As Xiaoyong holds Xiaoyun's underwear, his gaze lingers, symbolizing Xiaoyun as his sexual awakening. Though there is no physical contact, their interactions are driven by libido, which fuels their connection. That night, Xiaoyong draws Xiaoyun's naked body on a handkerchief and lovingly holds it close, an expression of his primal and unconscious desires — exactly what Freud described in his theory of the Oedipus Complex.

Another significant aspect is Xiaoyong acting as a "protector" of Xiaoyun. When Xiaoyong and his friends sneak into a theater to watch Xiaoyun perform, one of his friends calls her a derogatory name, prompting Xiaoyong to push him in anger, declaring: "If Sister Yun is a loose woman, then all women are!" Xiaoyong also goes to great lengths to catch fish for Xiaoyun after learning she likes fish, even using his mother's knitting needle as a makeshift spear. This act of care and affection touches Xiaoyun deeply. In one scene, Xiaoyun storms out after a fight with Liu Wanjin, only to find Xiaoyong waiting for her outside, demonstrating his growing sense of responsibility for her. During another conflict, when Xiaoyun is publicly beaten by Liu Wanjin's wife, Xiaoyong fights alongside Liu Wanjin's

son, trying to defend Xiaoyun, though he is too small to overpower the adults. These scenes show Xiaoyong's deep love for Xiaoyun, even if he can only offer her emotional support rather than physical protection.

In addition to protecting his biological mother, Xiaoyun, Xiaoyong also protected his adoptive mother, who was actually his biological aunt. As the only male in the family, Xiaoyong helped his adoptive mother with household chores and shared the burdens of daily life. At the same time, the departure of his adoptive father was also linked to Xiaoyong's presence. Although he did not "kill" his adoptive father, this departure can still be seen as a form of disappearance from life.

Xiaoyong's existence brought loss to those around him: his adoptive mother lost her family due to his presence, Xiaoyun lost the first half of her life because of his birth, and Xiaoyun's mother lost her daughter because of him. As Xiaoyong grew into manhood, he took on the responsibility of protecting the three "mothers" in his life.

The "marrying the mother" aspect of the Oedipus Complex is portrayed through Xiaoyong's symbolic actions. In one scene, Xiaoyun brings Xiaoyong to a gathering with her friends, where they joke about Xiaoyong being her partner. They even go as far as making Xiaoyun and Xiaoyong drink a "wedding toast," an informal but symbolic marriage ritual. In another scene, Xiaoyong jokingly tells Xiaoyun that in the next life, he would want to marry her, demonstrating his unconscious desire to replace her husband and be with her. Although Xiaoyong and Xiaoyun never engage in a physical relationship, the emotional intimacy and symbolic gestures confirm their "marriage."

Finally, the film reflects the "killing the father" aspect. Throughout his life, Xiaoyong grows up without a father figure, believing his father was a military officer who abandoned his mother (Wang Feng's sister). His father's absence and his mother's divorce due to Xiaoyong's presence represent one form of "killing the father." Another form is Xiaoyong's disrespect for his biological father, Wang Feng, when he unknowingly plays with his father's ashes, representing a symbolic violation. Xiaoyong indirectly "killed" his biological father by causing him to leave and die away from home. Additionally, Liu Wanjin, as Xiaoyun's lover,

plays a “father” role, and Xiaoyong’s resentment toward him reflects his desire to eliminate Liu Wanjin and take his place. Though Xiaoyong cannot physically challenge Liu Wanjin, he tries to fight for Xiaoyun’s honor, demonstrating the emotional conflict between the “son” and “father.”

4. Conclusion

The film *Dam Street* boldly addresses the complex emotional dynamics between mother and son, pushing boundaries in cinematic storytelling. As a form of art, film aims to express profound concern for humanity, exploring and affirming human nature. The Oedipus Complex, as a representation of primal human desires, holds universal significance and requires thoughtful exploration. The film *Dam Street* uses its narrative to manifest the Oedipus Complex, while the theory itself is also illuminated through the film. Freud’s concept is central to the film’s core, making *Dam Street* a notable work underpinned by psychoanalytic theory.

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