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Oedipal Connotations in Tim Winton's *An Open Swimmer*

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Abstract

Oedipus Complex has brought a lot of controversies in the field of modern psychology and literature. Sigmund Freud suggested the term Oedipus Complex in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and described it as a feeling of intense love of a child toward the mother. The intense love and touch of the mother gradually develops a sexual desire in the mind of the child and it clings abnormally with the mother. The other symptoms that are associated with Oedipus Complex are repression, guilt and dreams. Dreams act as a sign of concealed and conflicting desires. Oedipal symptom plays a crucial role in the life of Jerra Nilsam, the protagonist in Tim Winton's *An Open Swimmer*. Tim Winton is an Australian writer and as a child prodigy, he wrote his first novel *An Open Swimmer* at the age of 21. The main theme of the novel is the metamorphosis of Jerra from childhood to adulthood. Jerra searches for a meaningful life but he is plagued with repressed guilt about sexual depravity.

His relationship with Aunt Jewel (mother next door) and his dreams to conceal his sexual desires appear to correspond to Oedipus Complex.

Keywords

Sigmund Freud; Oedipus Complex; Dreams, Australian Literature; Tim Winton; *An Open Swimmer*.



Tim Winton is an Australian novelist and short story writer. He was born on August 4, 1960 in Western Australia. As a child prodigy, he published his first novel, *An Open Swimmer* (1982) at age 21, and it won the Australian Vogel Prize Award, an award for authors under 35. He was only 24, when he first won the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most significant literary prize for *Shallows*, a novel concerned with whaling and anti-whaling. In 1991, he won the prize again for his novel *Cloud Street*, often claimed as Australia's greatest novel. He has twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize for his novels *The Riders* and *Dirt Music*.

An Open Swimmer is a coming of age novel, which weaves past and present in time. The main theme of the novel is about the search for meaning in life. Jerra Nilsam, the protagonist lacks something in his life and he is certainly not clear about it. His best mate Sean completes his degree and chooses a job in the city while Jerra is a dropout and still under the wings of his parents. Jerran's parents want him to make something of himself. They wish a job and a girl for him as a good start in his life. However, Jerra's past and the memories of Aunt Jewel, Sean's mother torment him badly. This seems to be an impediment for his move into the best future. The novel opens with Jerra and Sean go camping at the beach on the south coast of Western Australia. Once Jerra and Sean were close friends but their relationship get eroded as their choice of future has diverged. In the camp Jerra's dreams are troubled by guilt ridden sexual memories of Aunt Jewel's death by suicide.

Jerra's relationship with Aunt Jewel (mother next door) appears to represent to Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex with many associated symptoms including repression, guilt, anxiety and conflicts with the inner-self. Freud's Oedipus Complex is predominant with sources of human conduct, feeling and thought in unconscious state particularly in dreams. The dreams are prevalently sexual in character. Freud's Oedipus Complex symptoms clearly suits Jerra's character.

Freud formulated the Oedipus Complex as a way of explaining infantile love. He first proposed the concept of Oedipus Complex in 1899 in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The term was first coined after the name of the character in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus, the king loves his mother accidentally because they do not know that they are mother and son. He kills his father and wins the hand of his mother. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is also analyzed from the critical theory of Oedipus Complex. Hamlet does possess some qualities and symptoms of Oedipus, the king. Hamlet's desire to sleep with his mother and his desire to avenge his father's death and for his delay in killing Claudius is associated with the symptoms of Oedipus Complex. Twentieth century novelist D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is more or less autobiographical and portrays the theory of Oedipus Complex. Lawrence used Freudian theory and characterized Paul Morel upon it. Paul's overwhelming love for his mother Gertrude prevents him to develop any kind of emotional attachment with any other woman. Like Oedipus Rex, Hamlet and Paul Morel, Jerra Nilsam in Winton's *An Open Swimmer* shows overwhelming affection towards Aunt Jewel (mother next door) and this may be analyzed how the unconscious vital force controls the conscious life of Jerra.

According to Freud, young male children develop regression towards their mothers. The mother's love and touch gradually cultivate a desire for sleeping with her in the male child who clings abnormally on her for excessive love. The child also sees the father as an obstacle and it develops a desire to get

rid of the father. The other symptom that relates to Oedipus Complex is dreams. Freud suggests dreams as a symbolic fulfillment of unconscious wishes and they are always symbolic. Oedipus Complex symptoms such as repression, guilt, anxiety and sexual desire play a crucial role in the life of Jerra. His love for ocean becomes an outlet for his love for Aunt Jewel and it is a symbol to represent the desire in all its forms. He often has dreams of diving into the ocean that represents his sexual desires with Aunt Jewel. The ocean acts as an outlet for his paralyzing love and the dreams act as a source of sexual fulfillment.

The primary Oedipal symptom that Jerra acquires is the overwhelming affection for Aunt Jewel. From early in his life, Jerra is a close friend of Sean and they lived like blood brothers. It is evident that Sean's mother is mother-like to Jerra. Nevertheless, their relationship is uncommon and abnormal. Jerra spends much of his time in pleasing Jewel and always attempts to strengthen his love by trying to retain her love for him. When Jewel complains about Sean's love for her, Jerra tries to show her that his love and Sean's love is not the same as he always spends more time with her. The following lines show the Jerra's intense love for Jewel.

'Sean does n't love his Mum'

'Yes, he does'

'Has he ever said it?'

'Nah, boys don't say it.'

'I've heard you say it.'

'Well, I'm a bit strange, 'cause I hang around with you'. (47)

Aunt Jewel too shows a special care for Jerra rather than she shows for Sean. She encourages Jerra to write poetry and she is the first critique of his poems. While studying in a boarding school, Jerra communicates Jewel through letters and his letters mostly carry the poems, he attempted. The poems are sensual and Jewel criticizes it as quite sexy. Their relationship is not only uncommon

but also abnormal. Jewel also exploits him for her sexual pleasures and in order to enhance her love, she encourages him and writes, "It's beautiful when it happens. O, of course. Of. Course. Do not be afraid, my Jeremiah. I think you always wanted...Yes. This is indestructible! We are!" (84). The abnormal fixation between them results in tragedy.

The next symptom that relates Jerra's Oedipus Complex is hostility. As he grows older, his feeling for Jewel becomes too intense and he becomes hostile toward Sean and his father, Jim. Jim used to beat Jewel for some reasons and she becomes mentally ill and commits suicide. After her death, Sean and his father happen to live in Jerra's house. Nevertheless, Jerra shows Machiavellian attitude towards his best mate and his father. He compares Jim to a snake and Sean to a fox with rabies. Jerra's hostility is due to the threat he perceives for his love object-Jewel.

Another symptom that relates Jerra's Oedipus Complex is his dreams. His sexual desire and guilt are associated with his dreams. In the camp, Jerra is haunted by the memories of Jewel and thus he frequently dreams of her and it is concerned with sexual desires. His dreams are symbolized by diving deep into the ocean. "Deeper than he had anticipated. Strands of weed brushed his cheek in the dark, and he felt his way down the rock bit cold on his hand...He rolled it over, the legs fanning wide, and saw the open slit reflecting green on the backs of his hands...Navel a stab hole..." (96). Jerra expresses his guilt over the suicide of Aunt Jewel in his dreams.

When Aunt Jewel died, he had no outlet for his obsession. He is not able to love Judy whom he meets. Because of his obsession with Jewel, he does not show affinity towards any other woman. As Freud suggested transference as the compulsion to repeat emotion, Jerra's search for pearl inside a big fish normally has become the outlet for his obsessive love, as it is associated with ocean. Jerra's repressed love for Aunt Jewel is transferred to ocean love for the search of pearl. It is obvious that Jerra is obsessed with ocean from the first

time he goes with his father for fishing. Finally, he realizes that search for pearl inside the brain of a fish is a myth and it is a fisherman's superstition and also sexual desire and illicit affair with mother next door is immoral. Jerra's relationship with Aunt Jewel and his affinity towards the ocean is related to Oedipus Complex. In interpreting the case study of Hans phobia of horses, Freud suggested that the horses in the dreams symbolize his father as the boy was afraid that his father would castrate him for desiring his mother. In the case of Jerra, he is manic of the ocean as it symbolizes his hidden desire and also an outlet for his grumbling love.

Based on Freudian background, Jerra's overwhelming affection and relationship with the mother next door leads to his Oedipus Complex. Though Jerra tries to explore the unknown meaning in his life, he is stained with faults and his life swift away right in front of him. It is also too late for Jerra to resurrect his life. However, the abrupt death of Jewel causes him unconscious conflicts, which results in search for a meaningful life.

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