

# Psychology *for* Screenwriters

Building Conflict *in your* Script

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*Chapter One*

## THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX

The central theory in Freudian analysis is his conception of the Oedipal complex, which is drawn from the myth of Oedipus. Within this seminal paradigm lies the groundwork for many of Freud's greatest ideas, such as his structural model of the psyche, drive theory, castration anxiety, and a host of other theories. Oedipal themes are ubiquitous in movies because they portray the two most basic elements of character development: the integration of **moral wisdom** and the formation of a mature **romantic relationship**. As you write your script, many different elements of plot and character development will arise, but the core issues in the story rarely diverge significantly from these two elements. Whatever happens in the film, the main character is generally aiming at some kind of moral victory, or the character is trying to win over the heart of the person he loves. Many movie plots contain both of these elements. A thorough understanding of the Oedipal complex is an essential base for any writer who wishes to tell a story that addresses these fundamental psychological issues of character development.

The Oedipal complex could be interpreted on either a literal or figurative level. In Freud's "**psychosexual**" perspective, the infant boy desires sexual union with his mother. Freud was outspoken in his theory of "**infantile sexuality**" – the belief that babies and small children have raging sexual desires, just like adults. According to this view, suckling at the breast, hugging, bathing, kissing, and every other intimate act shared by the infant and his mother are inherently sexual experiences. A less literal interpretation sees the Oedipal complex as a metaphor for the son's desire for his mother's love and affection, rather than a desire for sexual union. A comprehensive understanding of Freud's theory requires an inclusive approach that understands the son's desire for mother as a need for love and affection that may be sexually charged, as well. Eventually, the son will grow into a young man and his desires for love and sex will be projected onto another woman. Hence, the resolution

of the Oedipal complex is a key element in the formation of romantic relationships.

#### THE ELECTRA COMPLEX

Freud's ideas have been broadly criticized for being "**androcentric**," (focusing solely on male viewpoints and perspectives). Freud himself was unapologetic about his tendency to explain intrinsically male issues as universal psychological issues. Even though his clinical work was almost exclusively dedicated to analysis with female patients, Freud admitted: "*Despite my 30 years of research... I have not been able to answer the great question that has never been answered: What does a woman want?*" Certainly, the Oedipal complex is an example of Freud's androcentrism. Nevertheless, Freudian revisionists have adopted the "Electra complex" as a female counterpart to the Oedipal complex, in which the infant daughter develops a passionate desire for her father.

#### EROS & THANATOS

The son's conflicted desire for his mother is only one side of the Oedipal coin. The son inevitably realizes that his father is a rival for his mother's love and attention, and that this rival is infinitely more powerful than he is. This **rivalry** results in feelings of aggression and hostility toward the father. Like Oedipus, who killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, the son wishes he could destroy his rival for his mother's love, so he could have her all to himself. According to Freud, the boy's divergent feelings toward his parents (love for mother and aggression toward father), reflect the two basic primal drives – Eros and Thanatos. In keeping with the mythological theme of the Oedipal complex, Eros and Thanatos are mythological figures, as well. As the attendant of his mother, Aphrodite, Eros was a god of love and sex, providing the Greek root to the word "erotic." As the son of Nyx, the Greek goddess of night, Thanatos was the personification of death. In Freudian theory, Eros represents the drives that create and foster life (**love** and **sex**), while Thanatos represents the drives toward death (**hate** and **aggression**). Within Eros and Thanatos are the great dramatic devices that will add spice to any film. If you mix love, hate, sex, and violence with the classical themes of internal conflict, jealousy, and rivalry, you have all the ingredients for an exciting plot.

NEUROTIC CONFLICT AS AN OBSTACLE TO LOVE

In writing your script, it is important to remember that the core of the Oedipal complex is neurotic conflict. As the child grows, he realizes that sexual desire for his mother is socially inappropriate due to the universal “**incest taboo**.” The boy represses his desire for mother, creating an **internal conflict** within his character. In movies, this internal neurotic conflict is usually represented by an **external obstacle** that blocks a character from his object of love and desire.

Almost every script includes some kind of **love interest**. In romance movies, the love interest is the central plot; but even in other genres, a film may feel empty or lacking if there is no love interest. A movie without love lacks “heart.” Since the parent/child relationship represents the **primary love relationship** in a person’s life, the Oedipal complex is intrinsically symbolic of every romance, and the resolution of the Oedipal complex has an extremely significant impact on every subsequent love relationship in a person’s life. A comprehensive understanding of Oedipal themes is every writer’s touchstone for creating psychologically resonant love stories.

OEDIPAL RIVALRY

Just as the son sees his father as a rival for his mother’s love, film characters often face a rival for their love interest. In *The Graduate* (1967), Ben (Dustin Hoffman) gains Mr. Robinson (Murray Hamilton) as a rival, when he gets involved in an affair with Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft). Later on, the rivalry reappears on a different level, when Ben falls in love with Mr. Robinson’s daughter, Elaine (Katherine Ross), and he tries to run away with her against Mr. Robinson’s wishes. First, Ben is a rival for the love of Mr. Robinson’s wife, and then he becomes a rival for the love of his daughter. Typically, the rivalry theme is not as overtly Oedipal as the rivalry between Ben and Mr. Robinson. In *Gone With the Wind* (1939), Scarlet (Vivien Leigh) experiences a more straightforward rivalry with Melanie (Olivia de Havilland) over the love of Ashley (Leslie Howard).

The rivalry theme is not limited to romantic plot lines. Movie characters often face rivals in their various goals and objectives. In *Jerry Maguire* (2000), Jerry (Tom Cruise) is forced out of his agency by Bob

(Jay Mohr), his obnoxious rival. In sports movies such as *Rocky* (1976) and *The Karate Kid* (1984), the main character is driven throughout the film by a desire to best his formidable rival. Even the horse, *Seabiscuit* (2003), is driven to succeed by his infamous rivalry with “War Admiral,” a bigger, younger, and stronger horse with far better breeding and training. In *Tin Cup*, Roy (Kevin Costner) is competing against his rival (Don Johnson) for both his primary goal (victory in the golf tournament), and the heart of his love interest (Rene Russo). This double whammy approach to rivalry themes is a typical device in scripts that want to build high levels of conflict between the hero and his rival. In the end, the hero can claim victory over his rival by winning both the championship, and the love of the beautiful maiden.

#### FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Some movies depict a somewhat literal version of the Oedipal complex, in which a boy actually wants to have sex with his mother. In *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), a young son is seduced by his middle-aged mother into an illicit incestuous affair. And in *Tadpole* (2002), a high school boy desires a sexual relationship with his stepmother. But more often than not, the mother complex is displaced onto an unrelated mother figure. In *The Graduate*, Ben is seduced by an older woman who is his mother’s close friend, Mrs. Robinson. And in *Harold and Maude* (1971), Harold (Bud Cort) enters a sexual relationship with Maude (Ruth Gordon), a woman 60 years his senior. In all of these cases, the heroes seem to impart a sense of **emotional neediness** and **immaturity**. They are little boys in men’s bodies, who are looking for a mother figure to take care of their emotional needs, and an enticing woman to satisfy their sexual desires.

A key element in all of these love stories is the forbidden fruit factor. Just as the opposite sex parent is forbidden to the child as an object of sexual desire, sex with the older woman is a figurative violation of cultural taboos. The forbidden fruit factor is an extremely common element in love stories. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the most famous love story ever told, is about two teens falling in love, even though marriage between them is forbidden by their feuding families, the Montagues and Capulets. When writing a love story with a forbidden fruit element, keep in mind that these stories typically resolve in **tragedy**.





*Forbidden Fruit*: The title characters (Bud Cort and Ruth Gordon) consummate their love in *Harold and Maude* (1971)

Romeo and Juliet commit suicide. Oedipus, when realizing that he married his mother, gouges his own eyes out, and Jocasta commits suicide. Ben and Mrs. Robinson's relationship in *The Graduate* ends with the two hating each other, and Harold and Maude's relationship ends with Maude committing suicide. While the ever popular "love conquers all" denouement tends to work in plots with external obstacles to love, the forbidden fruit plot line almost always ends in tragedy, because the internal conflict is born out of the illicit nature of the relationship itself. In order for the conflict to be resolved, the romantic relationship must end or transform itself into something else.

#### ADULTERY

The most common application of the forbidden fruit theme is seen in the adultery plot. This conflict is even stronger when the love object is married to a close friend. The adultery theme is figuratively Oedipal, because it replays the same basic emotions. The character desires someone who is morally and socially taboo. The character is also thrust into rivalry with the love object's spouse, just as the son is pitted into rivalry against his father. The adultery plot line is somewhat tricky to resolve, because while audiences tend to sympathize with the forbidden fruit theme, they also respect the sanctity of marriage. But your character can have his cake and eat it, too (he can win the girl while avoiding massive

punishment), if it is established that his rival is undeserving of the love object. In *Titanic* (1997), the audience is pleased when Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) wins over Rose's (Kate Winslet) heart, because her fiancé (Billy Zane) is a mean and insensitive snob. Similarly, in *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), it's okay for Danny (George Clooney) to steal Tess (Julia Roberts) away from her fiancé (Andy Garcia), because he is clearly a controlling, manipulative, and rich jerk, who is not nearly as cool as Danny. When the rival is established as a **bad guy** or loser, the love story can end in triumph for the main character.

It is difficult to write a triumphant love story when the rival is not established as a bad guy. In *Unfaithful* (2002), Connie (Diane Lane) indulges in a passionate adulterous affair, even though her husband Edward (Richard Gere) is an attractive, loving, and all-around nice guy. Connie's conflict is doubly troubling, because on top of breaking a taboo, she is hurting the man she loves. The tables are turned in this film, as Edward discovers the relationship and finds himself in the precarious position of being a rival for his own wife's love. Now Edward is Oedipus, driven by love and desire to seize Jocasta, and driven by hatred and rage to kill Laius. The twin passions of Eros and Thanatos overpower Edward and he kills Connie's lover. While the adultery and subsequent murder function well in the story, the absence of punishment for Connie constitutes a hole in the plot. Screenwriters must be aware that the primal Oedipal themes (love, hate, sex, and violence), need little justification because they are self-explanatory. However, the more subtle themes of **punishment** and **retribution** need to be carefully structured and woven into the plot. *Unfaithful* was set up as a tragedy, but the filmmakers backed out in the end. They were probably afraid to punish the heroine of the film too harshly, since she was the character that viewers identified with. Nevertheless, sophisticated audiences are subconsciously aware of the dramatic structure of tragedies, and they know when a film cheats them out of an emotional wallop in the end.

#### CASTRATION ANXIETY

While Oedipus himself was able to kill his father, the little boy in the throes of an Oedipal complex has no chance against his massive rival. Furthermore, since the son harbors feelings of aggression toward his father, he also assumes that his father harbors similar aggressive feelings toward him. This assumption is confirmed when the father punishes or spansks his son for naughty behavior. According to Freud, the young boy

fears that his father wants to eliminate him as a sexual rival by castrating him. Even the staunchest Freudians typically apply a figurative interpretation to the concept of “castration anxiety,” focusing on the feelings of **powerlessness** and **impotence** that a small boy feels in the presence of an angry and violent father. These early childhood fears were exploited to the maximum degree in *The Shining* (1980), in which a psychotic axe-wielding father (Jack Nicholson) chases his son through a haunted hotel. The little boy in this film is literally afraid that his father is going to chop him into pieces.

#### POWERLESSNESS

Powerlessness in the presence of danger is an extremely terrifying experience that can be used to elicit gut reactions of fear in audiences. Horror films often employ the device of an evil man, monster, or psycho stalking a helpless child or a maiden in distress. Even though “Slasher” films like the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* movies overused this device for decades, the device still retains the power to terrify. Horror movies utilize a similar device when the menacing figure attacks his victims in states of **defenselessness**. In “Slasher” films, there is always a scene in which a victim is attacked in bed, in the bath, in the shower or while having sex. At these moments, the victims are powerless to defend themselves. Incidentally, they are also naked – their genital regions precariously exposed to the slasher – who is invariably wielding a knife. Castration anxiety in these scenes is related to a literal fear of the character having his genitals slashed off.

#### ROLE REVERSAL

A role reversal in which a **caregiver** becomes a menacing figure is particularly terrifying. The young boy experiencing an Oedipal complex expects his father to love and take care of him. When he suspects his father of wanting to kill him, he has no defense and no one to run to. In *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), the menacing figure (Robert Mitchum) is even more terrifying because the helpless children that he is hunting are his stepchildren. In *Flowers in the Attic* (1987) and *Mommie Dearest* (1981), the menacing figures are the children’s mothers. And in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *Suspicion* (1941), and *Gaslight* (1944), frail and frightened women suspect that their menacing husbands are plotting against them. *Misery* (1990) is an especially horrifying film, because a woman who starts out as a caring nurse (Kathy Bates), gradually turns

into a sadistic and brutal psycho. Meanwhile, her powerless victim (James Caan) is confined in the **emasculated** positions of a sickbed and wheelchair. A role reversal in which a caring figure becomes menacing elicits fear because it defies the viewers' expectations, while also creating the sense that the victim is trapped with no one to help and nowhere to run. On an unconscious level, the role reversal recalls childhood fears of parental punishment.

#### BODY SWITCHING

Several films have used the "body switching" scenario to generate literal role reversals between parent and child – typically to a comical effect. In *Freaky Friday* (1976 & 2003), mother and daughter are magically transfigured into each other's bodies. The same device was employed in a male version of this plot in *Like Father, Like Son* (1987). In each case, children experience a sense of **freedom** and **release** when they are suddenly elevated from their state of second class citizenship as mere kids, and get to indulge in all the privileges of adulthood. Josh (Tom Hanks) in *Big* (1988) initially revels in his newfound independence when his wish is granted by a magical carnival game, and he grows big overnight. And Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) in *Home Alone* (1990) relishes his freedom from his restrictive elders when he suddenly finds himself unfettered in his big house, all alone.

Parents also experience a psychological release when their adult roles as responsible parents and workers are relinquished, and they can enjoy being careless kids again. These movies tend to be successful because they key in to fantasies that reach a crossover audience. Both parents and kids can experience vicarious pleasure by identifying with these role-switching characters. However, the simplicity of the plot device leaves little room for variation in the resolution of the story. In the end, parent and/or child must return to their original states, having learned valuable lessons from their time spent in the others' shoes. They both gain a sense of respect for each other's struggles, (i.e., "the grass is always greener..."). And they also learn to work together and cooperate in order to rectify their freaky predicament.

THE POSSESSIVE PARENT

Role reversal and body switching themes in movies address a real psychological need in parent/child relationships. Parents and children often do not see eye-to-eye on many crucial issues. Though there are an infinite number of ways in which parents and children can disagree, these conflicts can typically be broken down to the fundamental issue of **independence**. Children want the freedom to determine their own lives. Parents, in their desire to protect their children from the perils of the adult world, may display their care through **possessiveness** – a desire to control every aspect of their children’s lives. This basic conflict is Oedipal in nature, because it recalls the parent’s desire to monopolize the emotions of their children, and the child’s emerging need to escape from the claustrophobic state of love and fear within the Oedipal relationship. Nowhere is the conflict of parental possessiveness more apparent than in stories in which daughters wish to marry suitors against their parents’ wishes. In these situations, the young suitor and possessive parent become true rivals, as the daughter is torn between an infantile love for the parent and a passionate love for her suitor.

In *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), Tevye’s inability to accept his daughter’s choice of a goy for her suitor leads Tevye (Topol) to denounce his daughter, losing her love forever. The conflict can be a source of terror, as well. In *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates’ (Anthony Perkins) mother was so overpowering and possessive that she devoured Norman’s identity and controlled his psyche, even after her death. When writing your script, remember that the Oedipal themes of rivalry and possessiveness are excellent sources for internal conflict, violence, and drama. Originality does not require finding new sources of conflict – it merely demands unique and creative ways of expressing these ancient mythical themes.

## CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY POINTS



- *The Oedipal complex*, in which the infant boy feels psychosexual love toward his mother and jealous aggression toward his father, provides the basic template of neurotic conflict. Neurotic conflict can be represented externally as conflict in the script, when the characters want what they should not have, fear awesome powers, desire love, hate tyranny, experience sexual desire, or express violent aggression.
- *The Electra complex* can be interpreted as the female version of the Oedipal complex, in which the infant girl experiences psychosexual love for the father, and feels jealous aggression toward her mother.
- *Eros and Thanatos*, respectively, are the primary drives toward life and death. Eros represents the need for love, sex, and affiliation; Thanatos represents the urge toward aggression, violence, and destruction.
- *Neurotic conflict* in the Oedipal complex arises from the “incest taboo” – the illicit desire for mother. This theme is commonly represented as an obstacle to love in films in the ubiquitous “forbidden fruit” plot line.
- *Adultery* is an example of a popular “forbidden fruit” plot line, in which the illicit desire for a married man or woman recapitulates the infant’s illicit desire for sexual union with his mother.
- *Oedipal rivalry* between the infant son and his father over the love and attention of the mother is recapitulated in film in the rivalry plot line between the hero and another character over the heart of a mutual love interest.
- *Castration Anxiety* is the infant son’s fear of his father.
- *Powerlessness* makes the infant son’s castration anxiety even more intense, as the small child is powerless and defenseless in the presence of his adult father.
- *Role reversals* in films, such as when a nurturing caregiver becomes a menacing figure, recall the Oedipal fears of early childhood, in which the small child fears that the same sex parent will destroy him.
- *Body switching* is a popular theme in films because it indulges two fantasies. The child’s fantasy of becoming a powerful and independent adult is indulged, and so is the adult’s fantasy of returning to a state of childhood, in which there are fewer obligations and responsibilities.

- *The possessive parent* is a universal figure in movies. The parents try to control their children's lives because they love and care for them, while the children crave freedom and independence.

## CHAPTER ONE EXERCISES



1. Analyze the Oedipal themes in the following classic films: *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *White Heat* (1949), *Psycho* (1960), *The Graduate* (1967), and *Chinatown* (1974).
2. Identify at least five more films in which a major aspect of the Oedipal complex is symbolically represented.
3. Now identify five films in which the Electra complex is symbolically represented.
4. Identify five films in which the hero must overcome powerlessness in order to succeed.

## ADDRESSING OEDIPAL THEMES IN YOUR SCRIPT



1. Is there a love interest in your script? If not, do you think adding a love interest would add drama to your story?
2. If there is a love interest in your script, is there a conflict between the characters? Could this conflict be intensified by adding Oedipal themes such as the "forbidden fruit" factor, a rivalry, or an obstacle that must be overcome?
3. Does the hero in your script have a rival? If not, consider how a rival may add conflict or tension to your plot.
4. If the hero in your script does have a rival, could this rival be developed to a higher degree? Consider tying the hero's rival in with the primary love interest, and how this may increase tension in your plot.
5. Are you writing a script or scene that should be scary? If so, can you employ the "castration anxiety" themes of powerlessness or role reversal to make the menacing figure more terrifying?
6. Does your script contain a parent/child relationship or love relationship? If so, could conflict be added to this relationship by including the theme of possessiveness?

**THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX AT A GLANCE**

ELEMENTS OF THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX	CHARACTERISTICS	CHARACTER MOTIVATIONS	EXAMPLES IN FILM
Eros & Thanatos	The primal drives toward sex and aggression	Love & Hate Sex & Violence Revenge & Spite	<i>Duel in the Sun</i> <i>Natural Born Killers</i> <i>Death Wish</i>
Oedipal Rivalry	Aggression toward the father	Rivalry for Love Rivalry for a Goal	<i>Gone With the Wind</i> <i>Rocky</i>
Incest Taboo (Forbidden Fruit)	Guilt over sexual desire for mother	Incestuous Desire Adultery	<i>Tadpole</i> <i>Unfaithful</i>
Castration Anxiety	Fear of the father	Powerlessness Role Reversals	<i>The Shining</i> <i>Freaky Friday</i>
Parental Possessiveness	Parental desire to control the lives of their children	Possessiveness Drive toward Independence	<i>Fiddler on the Roof</i> <i>The Wild One</i> <i>Rebel Without a Cause</i>