A Psychoanalytical Criticism of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*

THESIS: Sigmund Freud’s studies became key turning points when he entered into the field of psychoanalysis. Many of his theories even became major parts of literary criticisms. When he first read Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, it immediately became apparent that this drama would become a large part of his studies. The tragedies and misfortunes of *Oedipus Rex* opened new doors to the applications of his theories and the subject of the Oedipal Complex still studied to this day. This connection between Freud and the *Oedipus Rex* offer an excellent case of psychoanalytical criticism to further study and examine.

I. In order to study any Freudian theory accurately, it is essential to examine Oedipus the King under the scope of the three main areas of the mind as observed by Freud. These include the id, the ego, and the superego.

A. The id is the area of the mind that controls the motives and drives of a character. Oedipus reveals the drives of the id when he is informed that he must kill the murderer of the previous king. In doing so he leads into the stage of the ego.

B. The ego is the area of the mind controlling the Freudian defense mechanisms such as avoidance, denial, rationalization, and multiple others that will be described later in further detail. Many of these mechanisms are used as Tiresias informs Oedipus of his true fate.

C. The superego is the part of the mind which controls judgment of both oneself and others. This is formed from the Oedipal Complex which will also be described later in-depth and which controls Oedipus’s self-conscious awareness and self-afflicted pain.
II. After relating Oedipus to the Freudian portions of the unconscious mind, we can focus on the specific defense mechanisms. The mechanisms are ambivalence, avoidance, denial, fixation, identification, projection, rationalization, reaction formation, regression, repression, and suppression.

A. Fixation, identification, regression, and suppression are all apparent throughout the life of Oedipus as he, according to Freud, unconsciously knows the truth of his fate and his attachment to that.

B. Ambivalence, avoidance, denial, projection, rationalization, and repression are all apparent as Oedipus tries to avoid the truth and blame others in order to avoid inflicting pain on himself.

III. With a proper understanding of the basics underlying Freudian theories, it is now possible to approach the actual theories specifically.

A. First and foremost is the Oedipal Complex. Freud theorized that both young boys and girls develop into a stage of jealousy towards their father due to the affection he receives from the mother. As Freud once stated concerning this complex, “the result is a murderous rage against the father…and a desire to possess the mother” (Richter 1016).

B. Without knowing it, Oedipus kills his own father due to a prophecy. He then marries his mother. This complex brings in the defense techniques such as repression in which he evolves a subconscious knowing that he has resolved his Oedipal Complex.

IV. As a plague settles over Thebes, a “resurgence of “shadowy memory” and its repression” becomes apparent as Tiresias hints at the true fate of Oedipus (Gray 1). Subconsciously he knows the truth and feels its approach.
A. This then leads to a second Freudian theory of the “truth as dreadful, yet we are driven to expose this dreadful truth” (Gray 1).

B. Oedipus cannot stop himself from questioning Tiresias further until the dreadful truth is revealed, the truth that he subconsciously was expecting.

V. Next is the Freudian thought that “the flooding pain of memory, never to be gouged out” is exposed (Gray 1).

A. It is obvious once this truth is revealed that Oedipus will never be the same. Even Jocasta flees knowing that what once was will never be the same.

B. The pain of this revelation leads into the theory of self-tormenting.

VI. The process of self-tormenting is believed to be a large thesis of psychoanalysis as painful memories and past events lead to more pain that is then inflicted by oneself.

A. Oedipus gouges out his very own eyes in an attempt to punish himself for what has been done.

B. He also feels the need to abandon himself from the rest of Thebes for what has been done and cannot be changed.

VII. The theories of Freud were completely altered after his first reading of *Oedipus Rex*.

Because of this, it is a key example of psychoanalytical criticism still in the present day.