

# THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX



## OEDIPUS REX

Blind, lost in the night, endless night that nursed you! You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light—you can never touch me. Creon! Is this conspiracy his or yours? Creon is not your downfall, no, you are your own. O power—wealth and em skill outstripping skill in the heady rivalries of life, what envy lurks inside you! This crown the city gave me. I never sought it, they laid it in my hand.

# THE SPHINX

- Oedipus answers: “man”
  - insufficiently universal: man, but not woman
  - insufficiently singular: Oedipus walks *differently*, misses his own origin
- What Freud does with the Oedipus story follows the same path: a “universal” story (that doesn’t include women); full of insight, yet blind
- two emphases: Bloom (hostility to the father) and Freud (sex with the mother)





# OEDIPAL LIT.

- every generation of poets struggles to outdo the previous generation
- each new poet desires a life free from the influence and control of the symbolic father; struggle is inescapable, like Oedipus
  - flees the father out of 'love' (Polybus, the adoptive father), to be "his own man"
  - destroys actual father (Laius)
- each son becomes a father

# THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

A THEORY  
OF POETRY

*Second Edition*

HAROLD BLOOM

# OEDIPAL LIT.

- *Anxiety* from 1973: couldn't be written today. A masculine theory, written by a man, about 100% male poets and their daddy issues
- theory both insufficiently universal (no women) and insufficiently particular (reduces every poet of every age and place (i.e., England) to same, identical, endless struggle)
- postmodernism: no history, nothing came before

# THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

A THEORY  
OF POETRY

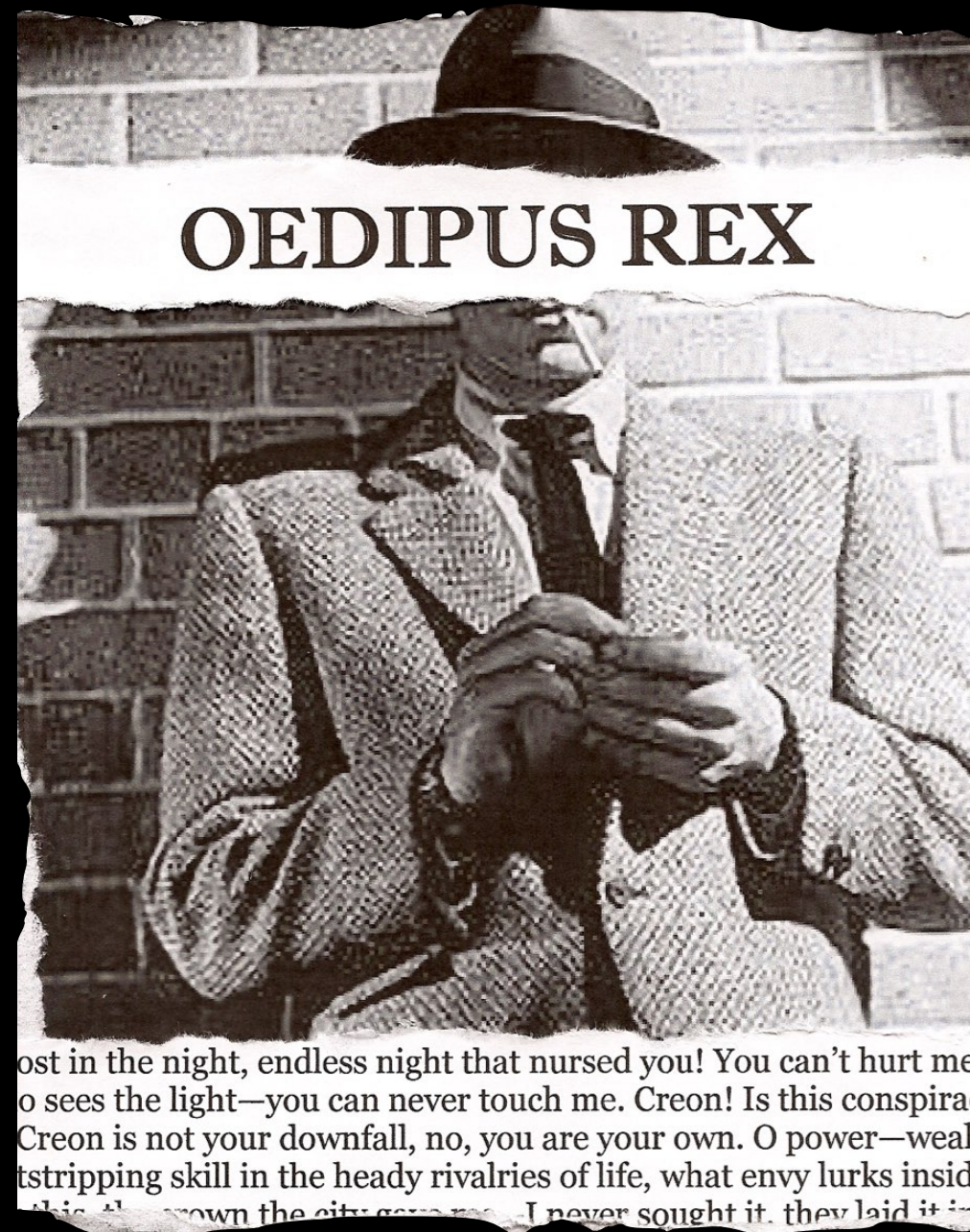
*Second Edition*

HAROLD BLOOM



# OEDIPUS, DETECTIVE

- Oedipus is an exemplary detective: he solves a riddle, he solves a crime
- A *hard-boiled* detective: he pursues the truth to its bitter and unbearable end
- the truth he pursues is of a particular kind; he believes he pursues a knowledge about the exterior world (who dunnit?), but like the best hard-boiled detectives, he learns about himself (*you did it!*) (see *Red Harvest*)
- knowledge *destabilizes* the world and the subject: postmodernism (Oedipa Maas) from 429 BC



lost in the night, endless night that nursed you! You can't hurt me  
to sees the light—you can never touch me. Creon! Is this conspira  
Creon is not your downfall, no, you are your own. O power—weal  
stripping skill in the heady rivalries of life, what envy lurks insid  
this th crown the city gave me. I never sought it. they laid it in



# FREUD

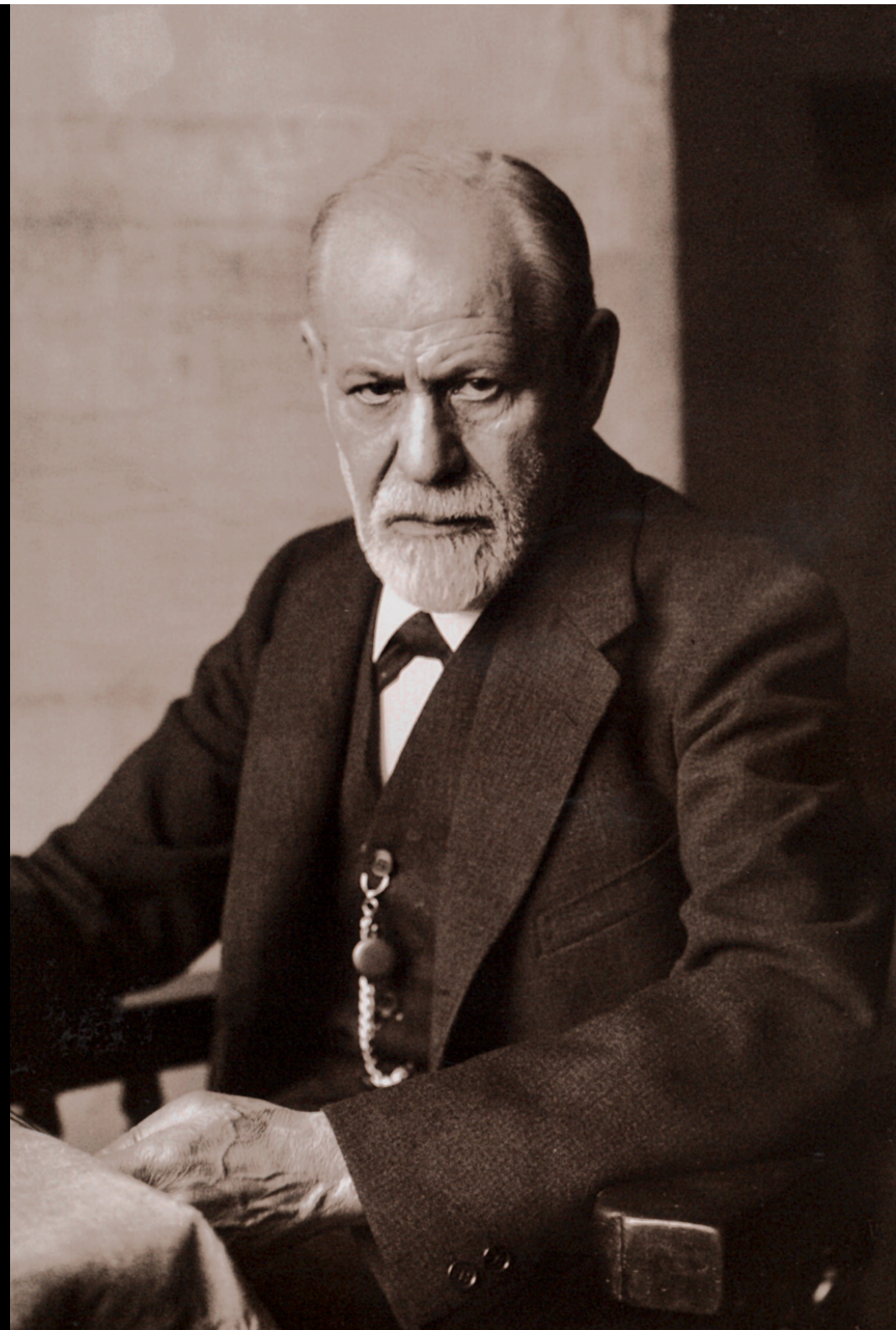
- children (i.e., male children) suffer from an “Oedipus complex”: hostility to father (he takes the mother away), desire to possess mother exclusively
- must learn to relinquish mother as desire; transitional objects; eventually, adult sexuality
- must submit to paternal authority (identify with father)
- understood as psychic structure true in all times, all places, from ancient Greece to 19th c. Vienna





# FREUD

- Criticism:
  - *not* universal: describes only boys—and only those who become conventionally heterosexual
  - maybe actually specific to intellectual upper middle class 19th c. Vienna, specific parenting?
- Evidence for:
  - anecdotal (“can I marry you, Mommy?”; “he’s looking for a woman like his mother”)
  - Sophocles himself
  - popular culture





“Before this, in dreams, too (as well as oracles),  
many a man has lain with his own mother.”

–JOCASTA, *OEDIPUS THE KING*



What if we dispense with the question of whether Freud was right or wrong about real people, and instead propose that his theories describe the fantasies and anxieties that we articulate, again and again, in our culture? Like plays in ancient Greece, or, say, television shows and films in the present day? Does our *culture* suffer from an Oedipus complex?

\*Me and the GF

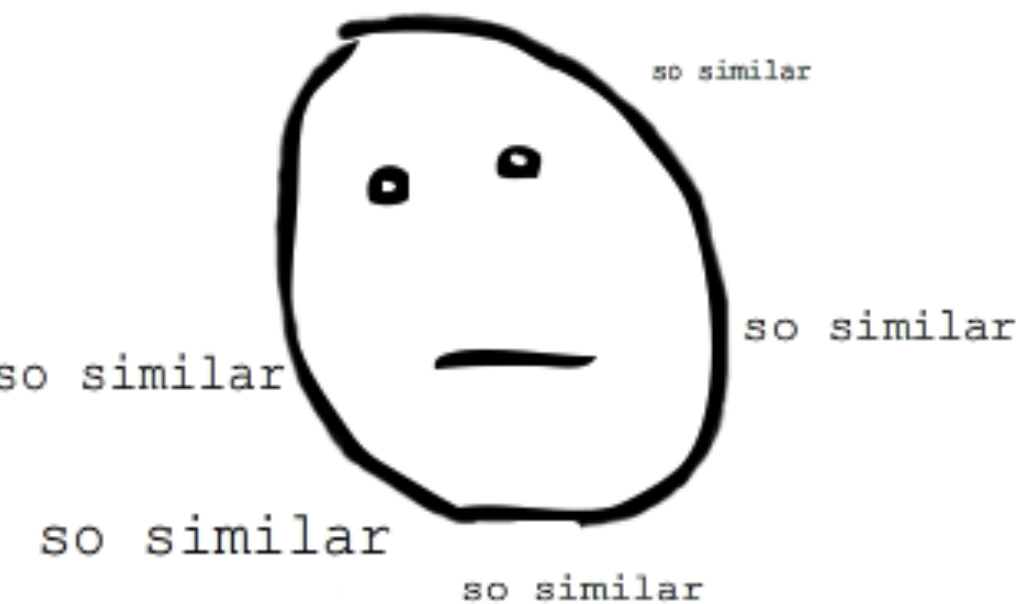
...so yea, oh and I just love sewing my own clothes.



Oh wow! So does my mom, you guys seem so similar sometimes.



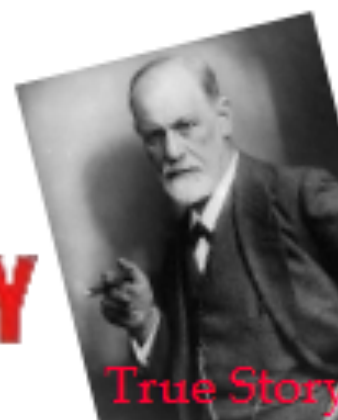
so similar



**OH GOD**



**WHY**



True Story



# POP OEDIPUS

- focuses almost exclusively on incest, not parricide (because overt hostility toward the father is universal in popular culture)
- generally played for laughs today
  - perhaps because that's the only way to discuss it?
  - perhaps because mother-son incest is less threatening than parricide? More threatening?
  - perhaps because we live in the age of "the cougar" and "the MILF"?

## Think of her as your mother.

She only wants what's best for you.  
A cool drink. A good dinner. A soft pillow and a warm blanket.  
This is not just maternal instinct. It's the result of the longest  
Stewardess training in the industry.  
Training in service, not just a beauty course.  
Service, after all, is what makes professional travellers prefer American.  
And makes new travellers want to keep on flying with us.  
So we see that every passenger gets the same professional treatment.  
That's the American Way.

*Fly the American Way*  
**American Airlines**





A "Freudian slip"  
is when you say  
one thing . . .



. . . but mean  
your mother.



I mean  
"another".





# POP OEDIPUS

- In the 1940s through the 1970s, popular culture played with the idea, often semi-seriously, that the basis of men's attraction to women was an original attraction to the mother
- In the 1940s-1970s, a commonplace in US movies; good men successfully negotiated the Oedipus complex; men who did not were weak or weird. At their most extreme, they looked like...

## Think of her as your mother.

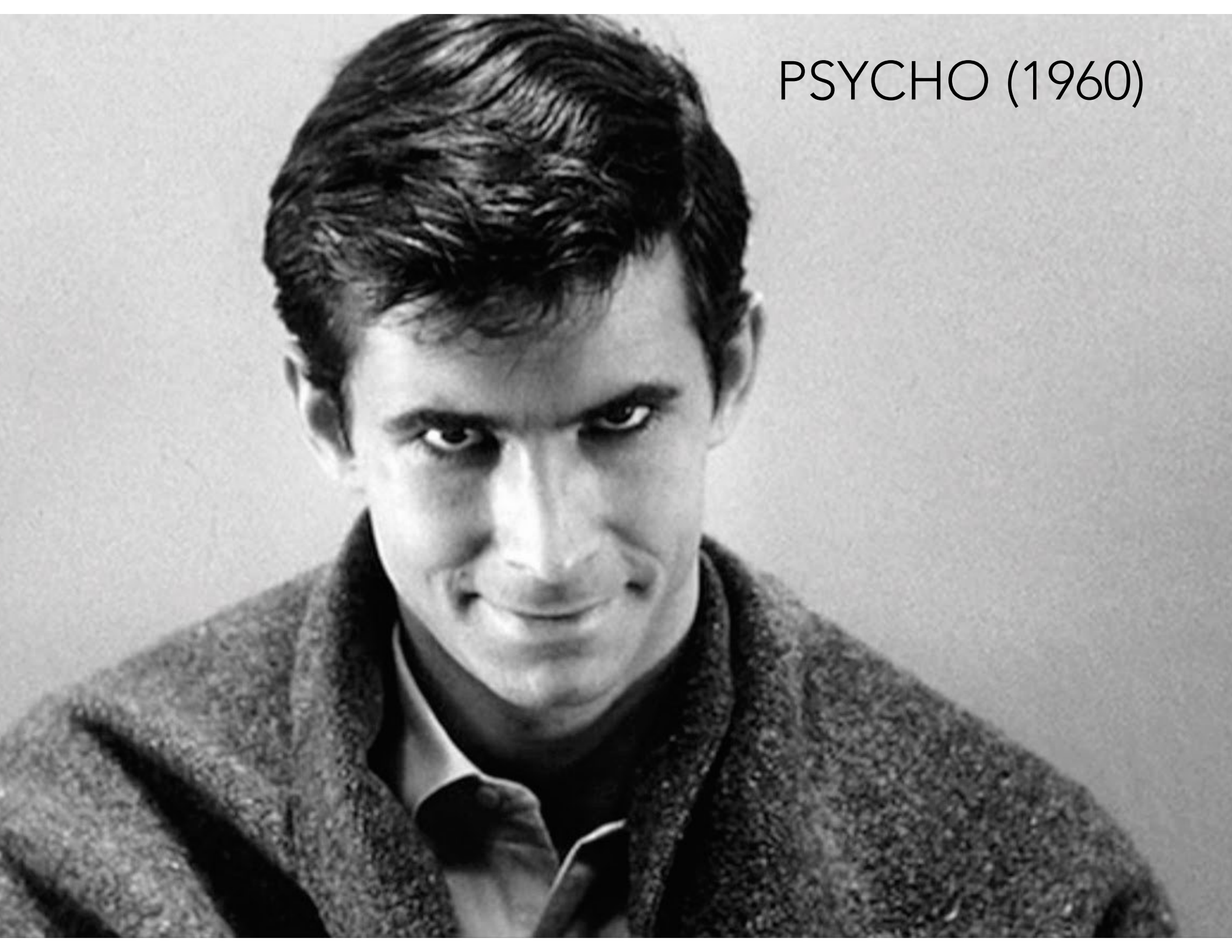
She only wants what's best for you.  
A cool drink. A good dinner. A soft pillow and a warm blanket.  
This is not just maternal instinct. It's the result of the longest  
Stewardess training in the industry.  
Training in service, not just a beauty course.  
Service, after all, is what makes professional travellers prefer American.  
And makes new travellers want to keep on flying with us.  
So we see that every passenger gets the same professional treatment.  
That's the American Way.

*Fly the American Way*  
**American Airlines**





PSYCHO (1960)



# PSYCHO (1960)



# THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (1962)





# POP OEDIPUS

- Mother-son intimacy often played for laughs, as in *Back to the Future* (1985): Marty McFly is sent into the 1950s by a newly invented time travel machine. This “past in the future” is an Oedipal fantasy
  - Marty witnesses, again and again, his youthful father undergoing the most extreme humiliations
  - his mother is more than attracted to him; her interest is specifically sexual. She looks at him like this...







*Back to the Future (1985)*





# ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

- Or, see *Arrested Development* (2003-06; 2013-19)
  - Buster and his mom, Lucille, live together and are far too close
  - Buster dates one of his mother's friends who is the same age as his mother—also named Lucille
  - Buster loses his hand to a "loose seal" (Lucille); castrating mommy made literal



# BALBOA BAY WINDOW

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LADIES WHO LUNCH-- A LOT

## Why I want to marry my mother

by Buster Bluth, age 10

**Also**

BEST KEPT SECRETS OF A LYCRA SWIMSUIT

THREE BAY WINDOWS

Extend your floor space and increase your view by adding bay windows

TO EAT OR NOT TO





*"The Marta Complex," Arrested Development (2003)*



# ARCHER

- Or, in *Archer* (2009–), the sides of the Oedipus complex are fused into one: hostility toward the parent and love for the parent are both aimed at Mallory Archer, Sterling Archer's mother
- This is precisely how Freud claims emotions work: love always comes with resentment (you have power of me), hatred with fascination (true hatred is consuming)
- Watch to see how Archer's body responds to love and hate for the same person





Archer (2009)



# POP OEDIPUS

- Sometimes, it's serious: on some level, *Game of Thrones* attempts to return us to our cultural origins, often as Greek tragedy
  - the inevitable workings of fate that spare no one, not even ostensible heroes
  - everyone's story ends badly
  - parricide, fratricide, infanticide (the Red Wedding) —*family blood* typical of Greek myth
- kill your father, love your mother









*Game of Thrones*, "The Wolf and the Lion" (2011)





*Game of Thrones*, "The Children" (2014)



So, yes,  
our culture suffers from an  
Oedipus complex.



# CAVARERO

- Cavarero argues that Oedipus makes two mistakes:
  - he fails to include women in the 'universal' answer "man"
  - he doesn't recognize himself and his particular difference from that abstract universal
- he these things because he does not know his own story
- our stories are never complete without knowledge of our birth
- the story of our birth can only come from our mother



## Relating Narratives

Storytelling and selfhood

Adriana Cavarero

“Know thyself” means “know your mother.”

The answer isn't “man,” it's everyone's entangled relationship with their parents. And to be fair, that's kind of the point that Sophocles is trying to make.



NEXT UP:  
HOMER'S *THE ODYSSEY*  
BOOKS 1, 5, 9