

# “Nathaniel Branden’s Oedipus Complex” by Susan Love Brown

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Topics: *Family, Love and Sex*

Because it is so titillating and provocative, Brown’s piece on Branden’s sexuality is the most memorable part of the opening section. Even its title—“Nathaniel Branden’s Oedipus Complex”—invites controversy.

Brown is concerned with Branden’s memoir, *Judgment Day: My Years with Ayn Rand*. “I am,” she submits, “primarily interested in the narrative truth that Branden himself has constructed and how it lends itself to an oedipal interpretation.” Although Branden was a psychologist, or perhaps because he was one, Brown’s invocation of Freud seems both fitting and surprising. Freud, like Branden and Rand, was educated in philosophy. But Freud’s oedipal theories remain divisive and contested, not to mention opposed by both Branden and Rand. At least since Richard Webster’s publication of *Why Freud Was Wrong* in 1995, and probably much earlier, consensus among psychologists has held that Freud’s theories, many of them anyway, have been discredited. Yet Brown gives them full and unequivocal expression in her treatment of Branden.



Having left behind the phallic stage, transfixed by an unconscious castration anxiety, aroused by his loving mother and threatened by her loyal closeness to his father, the sexualized developing male child, in Freud’s paradigm, represses his feelings towards his mother or transfers them onto another female, one who is more appropriate for pursuit. When he reaches puberty, his excited feelings for his mother are reanimated; if left unresolved, they can cause

eventual adult neurosis, the fading memory of the unattainable, ideal young mother serving as the inescapable fixation that blurs perceptions of reality. The thematic suggestions of this Freudian scheme characterize Brown's curious approach to Branden.

That Branden would describe his mother affectionately in his memoir should come as no surprise. Absent any evidence of abuse or neglect, most adult males probably have articulated love for, and devotion to, their mothers. Whether these feelings amount to oedipal sexual attraction in the Freudian sense is open to debate. Branden was a psychologist and so wrote with a vocabulary specific to his discipline. "One consequence of my repression," he said, "was that sometimes I failed to see that girls I liked returned my feelings." Brown picks up on the word "repression," hypothesizing about Branden's "unresolved feelings about his mother" that implicated "his feelings toward his father." Either Brown is on to something, or she overreads and overstates what was merely the retelling of an ordinary adolescent incident with no symbolic significance. The value of Brown's analysis on this score is only as valuable as Freud's theories are credible.

Branden moved out of his parents' house when he graduated high school, as is customary for young adults of that age. Brown sees in this natural transition the carnal workings of an oedipal force that explains, in part, his budding relationship with Barbara Weidman, who became his first wife. Brown claims that, through Barbara, Branden "insinuat[ed] himself into a surrogate family and, out of that, tr[ie]d to construct an ideal family within which he could at last resolve his Oedipal complex." It so happened that Branden read *The Fountainhead* during this time of alleged psycho-sexual fantasy and stimulation, and Brown attributes his interest in the novel, not to his own agency, will, intelligence, or curiosity, but to instinctual sexual fixations that were mostly out of his control and subject to random events and chance relationships, such as the one with Rand and her husband, Frank O'Connor.

Brown's theorizing about Branden's "genital stage" (a Freudian term she avoids) raises compelling questions: were Rand and O'Connor—who were around the age of Branden's parents—surrogates for Branden's natal family on whom he could project his sexual energies? Did Branden's relationship with Barbara reenact the power plays between his own father and mother? Did Branden attempt to push away O'Connor as a male child in the phallic stage struggles through his rivalry with his father? Was Rand's dedication of *Atlas Shrugged* to both Branden and O'Connor a signal that Branden had achieved sexual equality with Rand while supplanting O'Connor as Rand's romantic interest?

Brown suggests that, through his affair with Rand, "Branden had effectively slept with his 'mother' and vanquished his 'father.'" These and other stimulating conclusions demonstrate how Brown provides a unique and intriguing perspective even if her psychological hypotheses are ultimately untestable and thus unprovable. Rand's admirers may take issue with Brown's portrayal of Rand as increasingly needy and dependent on Branden's

affections as he grew apart from her. They may not like the effort to superimpose Freudian paradigms on complicated human experiences from long ago. But they cannot deny the magnetism of Brown's analysis.

This article is the second installment of Allen Mendenhall's review of the latest issue of the Journal of Ayn Rand Studies. Read his first installment here (</commentary/commentary-blog/6148-the-legacy-of-nathaniel-branden>).

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