ESSENCE & CRITIQUE: JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND DRAMA STUDIES
E-ISSN: 2791-6553 ★VOLUME ℵV.I ★ DECEMBER 2025

Leveraging Literature: Proposing the Ajax Complex as a New Framework for Analyzing Mass Shooters

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CITATION

Overton, David "Leveraging Literature: Proposing the Ajax Complex as a New Framework for Analyzing Mass Shooters" *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature and Drama Studies*, vol. V, no. I, Dec. 2025, pp. 17–41, journalofcritique.com.

ABSTRACT

As a long-standing medium, literature—especially dramatic literature—has been a source for understanding values, contributing to culture, and informing scientific theories. Indeed, literature is uniquely situated to make significant impacts on the individual, the community, and beyond. Through its characters, narratives, and symbolic patterns, literature offers archetypes and frameworks that both reflect and shape cultural politics. Literary figures not only embody recurring human behaviors but also provide templates by which individuals and societies can diagnose and describe psychological and social dynamics. In doing so, literature serves as a mirror of human complexity while simultaneously acting as a catalyst for change: dramatizing injustices, reimagining identities, and offering alternative visions of social life. The capacity of readers to engage emotionally and critically with fictional figures allows literature to inspire empathy, challenge entrenched norms, and contribute to collective self-understanding. While the Oedipus and Electra complexes have shaped psychological discourse for more than a century, this article proposes a new Greek myth-based complex as a framework for analyzing mass shooters, aiming to replace existing biased labels: the Ajax complex.

KEYWORDS

literature, Oedipus complex, Electra complex, Ajax, humiliation, mass shooter, lone wolf, violence, archetypes, masculinity, literary psychology, Sophocles, Homer, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*

Introduction: From Tragedy to Heuristic

Literature—and dramatic literature in particular—is rich with characters that invite analysis and present archetypes for correlation with contemporary personalities, behaviors, relationships, and disorders. By considering certain literary figures through the lens of modern psychological, sociological, and behavioral theories, we can gain insight into the timeless nature of human experience while also revealing how the complexities of individual and collective identity have evolved over time. Literary characters often serve as touchstones for exploring the nuanced ways in which behaviors manifest, both historically and in present-day contexts. In this sense, the study of literature offers more than just a reflection of the past; it provides a framework for understanding contemporary trends in human behavior and may provide the basis for the development of "values such as courtesy, effort and gentleness" (Polson 34). This article proposes the Ajax complex, a literary-derived heuristic for analyzing how modern societies narrate and understand acts of mass violence.

Purpose and Scope

The Ajax complex is advanced as a theoretical framework rather than a psychological diagnosis. It complements existing interpretive models such as Freud's Oedipus complex and Jung's Electra complex by centering on themes of humiliation, retribution, and the community's contested response to violence. This study treats the Ajax complex as a cultural and rhetorical tool—a theoretical heuristic intended to provide a framework for examining how narratives of mass shooters are constructed, interpreted, and perpetuated.

Theoretical Foundations: Literature as a Framework for Human Understanding

One of the most compelling reasons to consider literary characters in this capacity is the way they embody universal human experiences and emotions. From Sophocles' "Oedipus" to Shakespeare's "Hamlet" to Dostoevsky's "Raskolnikov," these characters transcend their historical and cultural contexts, representing psychological states and moral dilemmas that

remain relevant in today's world. Hamlet's indecision, existential angst, and internal conflict, for instance, can be seen as an archetypal representation of modern struggles with identity, agency, and the burden of choice. In the context of contemporary psychological discourse, Hamlet's paralysis and his oscillation between action and inaction might be read as manifestations of anxiety, depression, or even a form of narcissism, illustrating how classical figures can be mapped onto modern behavioral patterns and pathologies. In her article, "Classics Have Worth," A. Irene Polson contends that "if the 4,000 youth who committed suicide in 2001 had read Hamlet's soliloquy ('to be or not to be') those 15 to 24-year-olds might have changed their minds as Shakespeare's character did" (34). Perhaps Polson intended her remarks to be hyperbolic, but the observation serves primarily to illustrate her conviction that exposure to great literature can cultivate reflection and emotional resilience.

The correlation between literary characters and contemporary behavior is not limited to individual psychological diagnoses. Literary figures often illuminate broader social dynamics and relational structures that persist in modern life. For example, the power dynamics and social hierarchies that underpin relationships in nineteenth-century novels like those of Jane Austen or the Brontës continue to resonate in today's discussions of gender roles, social status, and personal autonomy. The struggles of characters like Elizabeth Bennet, constrained by societal expectations yet striving for individual agency, reflect ongoing debates about gender equality and personal freedom in the modern era. Austen's characters, while rooted in their specific social milieu, provide a means of interrogating current relational dynamics, such as the influence of social media on self-presentation, the pressures of economic stability in relationships, and the negotiation of power between partners. Scholar Annie Schultz contends that "Many writers of fiction have turned the inner lives of oppressed characters outward in order for readers to glimpse depictions of moral injustices that mirror those of the real world" (*Sitting Still* 187).

Moreover, literature allows for the exploration of archetypes—characters who serve as templates for broader patterns of human behavior. Carl Jung's theory of archetypes posits that

certain figures recur across cultures and time periods, reflecting deep-seated elements of the collective unconscious (*Psychological Types* 528). Characters such as the Hero, the Trickster, or the Shadow appear not only in ancient myth and legend but also in contemporary literature and media. These archetypes provide a lens through which to interpret both individual behaviors and collective cultural phenomena. The archetype of the Hero, for example, can be seen in modern political figures, celebrities, or even influencers on social media, whose narratives of struggle, sacrifice, and eventual triumph resonate with contemporary audiences. In this way, literary analysis serves as a means of examining the psychological and emotional underpinnings of modern leadership, celebrity culture, and the construction of public personas. In his 2001 "Enhancing Response to Literature Through Character Analysis," educator Larry R. Johannessen champions the importance of character analysis in literature and provides a detailed commentary on how teachers might do so which includes identifying values, dealing with irony, and follow-up writing activities (146–9).

Furthermore, the way readers and audiences relate to these characters can also provide valuable information about contemporary emotional and cognitive processes. Research in psychology and cognitive literary studies suggests that the act of engaging with fictional characters allows individuals to practice empathy, simulate social interactions, and explore moral and ethical dilemmas in a low-risk environment. This phenomenon, often referred to as "narrative transportation," (Green and Brock 701) highlights the role of literature and media in shaping not just our emotional responses but also our behavioral expectations and social norms. By identifying with or even criticizing literary characters, readers and viewers negotiate their own values, biases, and desires, making literature a powerful tool for both personal reflection and societal critique. This dynamic interaction between reader and text has long been a subject of interest for scholars seeking to understand how literature not only mirrors but also provides a model into better understanding the human condition. The capacity of literary works to illuminate human nature has deep roots in the Western intellectual tradition, where literature has

been regarded as a lens through which to explore the complexities of behavior, morality, and societal norms. Indeed, Nieli Langer, writing in *The Journal of Educational Gerontology*, asserts that "Literature is a handbook for the art of being human" (593).

Since Aristotle's observation-based approach to understanding human nature, scholars and theorists have expanded inquiry into behavior, cognition, and emotion. Among the most influential contributions to psychoanalysis, Freud's Oedipus complex and Jung's Electra complex have long framed discussions of early psychosexual development. More recent scholarship, however, invites consideration of broader psychic formations and conflicts that extend beyond these classical models while drawing from other literary archetypes.

Building on the methodological precedents of Freud and Jung, this study introduces a third framework—the Ajax complex—derived from Sophocles' *Ajax*. Conceived as a literary and cultural heuristic, it offers an interpretive alternative to prevailing labels for perpetrators of mass violence, such as "lone wolf," "mass shooter," and "terrorist." A brief review of the Oedipus and Electra complexes provides the necessary foundation for this analysis.

Oedipus and Electra as Archetypal Precedents

Freud first referenced Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899/1900), using only a few pages to outline the play's psychological resonance. He observes that "the action of the play…consists merely in a revelation, which is gradually completed and artfully delayed—resembling the work of a psychoanalysis—of the fact that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius [his father], and the son of the dead man and of Jocasta [his mother and wife]" (227). The tragedy's power, Freud contends, "cannot lie merely in the assumption between fate and human will, but is to be sought in the peculiar nature of the material by which the opposition is shown" (227). He posits that a "voice within us" recognizes the horror of Oedipus's fate because "we are all destined to direct our first sexual impulses towards our mothers, and our first hatred and violent wishes toward our fathers" (228). This voice, he adds, is quieted only when we repress these impulses and "forget or suppress our jealousy of our

fathers" (228).

Freud's reading thus shifts *Oedipus Rex* from a meditation on fate to an exploration of repressed desire. The tragedy dramatizes universal psychic forces as "murderous rage and forbidden desire" that remain active within all human behavior. For Freud, its enduring relevance lies in the imperative "to recognize our own inner self, in which these impulses, even if suppressed, are still present" (228). By mirroring psychoanalytic revelation, Sophocles' play exemplifies how literature can expose hidden dimensions of consciousness and compel self-examination.

Freud's contemporary, Carl Jung, proposed a female counterpart to the Oedipus complex—the Electra complex—which he first outlined in *The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (69). Drawing on Greek tragedy, Jung interpreted *Electra*'s devotion to her father, Agamemnon, and hostility toward her mother, Clytemnestra, as the psychic inversion of Oedipal desire. He writes that "in the daughter, the typical affection for the father develops, with a correspondingly jealous attitude toward the mother. We call this complex, the Electra-complex" (69). This formulation mirrored Freud's model while introducing a framework for examining female sexuality through a literary archetype.

Freud, however, rejected the analogy, arguing that "we are right in rejecting the term Electra complex which seeks to insist that the situation of the two sexes is analogous" (*Interpretation of Dreams* 229). Jung himself later moved beyond the theory, emphasizing "anima and animus as the innate structures of sex and gender" (*Anima and Animus* 186). Despite subsequent critiques that the Oedipus and Electra complexes are heteronormative and reductive, both remain enduring archetypal referents—literary models through which patterns of desire and identification may still be examined.

Ajax in Classical Context

Sophocles' *Ajax*, generally regarded as his earliest extant tragedy, revisits a hero renowned from

Homeric epic as the second-greatest Greek warrior after Achilles (*Iliad*; *Odyssey*). Preceding the events of Sophocles' play, Ajax's valor is repeatedly affirmed: he duels Hector to a draw, protects Patroclus's body "as a lion stands over its young" (*Iliad* 17.133), and aids Odysseus in recovering Achilles' corpse for burial. When Achilles' divine armor is awarded to Odysseus for rhetorical skill rather than martial strength, the Greek commanders signal a cultural shift from heroism defined by brute force to one governed by eloquence and intellect. As Eric Bronson observes, Ajax "can't convince himself that it's a future worth living for," while Odysseus "represents the new democratic way of life where nothing is fixed and everything, even friendship, is always negotiable" (120). The heroic age wanes; the age of reason and persuasion begins.

Sophocles opens *Ajax* with Athena and Odysseus, marking the only instance in his surviving works where a god appears visibly onstage. Athena reveals to Odysseus that she has maddened Ajax, who, intending to kill the Greek leaders, has instead slaughtered the army's livestock: "He fell upon the horned throng dealing death and hewing them to the earth around him" (Sophocles 4). In her chilling account, "while the man raved in the throes of frenzy I still urged him and hurled him into the toils of doom" (4–5). Athena then cruelly summons Ajax forth to be mocked before Odysseus, who protests in vain: "I wish that I were far from here" (5).

Ajax appears carrying the carcass of an animal he believes to be a slain enemy. He praises Athena for aiding his vengeance and vows to "crown [her] shrine with trophies of pure gold for this prize" (5). When she asks about his victims, he boasts that those who humiliated him "will never again dishonor Ajax" (6). The episode exposes both his delusion and the gods' indifference to human suffering.

As the play unfolds, Tecmessa recounts the aftermath of Ajax's madness: "He seized a two-edged sword and was eager to go forth on an aimless path," slaughtering "bulls, shepherd dogs, and fleecy prisoners" before regaining reason and collapsing in shame (10). Overcome by humiliation, Ajax laments the "mockery" awaiting him and cries, "Woe is me! Woe is me!" (12).

His despair culminates in suicide—an act performed at the seashore after invoking Zeus, Hermes, and the Furies.

The play's resolution centers on the moral debate over Ajax's burial. Menelaus and Agamemnon seek to deny him funeral rites, while Odysseus, his former rival, argues for compassion and respect. Ultimately, Odysseus persuades them, assisting Teucer in the burial. The tragedy closes not with divine retribution but with human reconciliation, suggesting that moral discernment and empathy, not heroic valor, define the emerging ethical order of the Greek world.

If any Greek mythological or literary figure parallels the psychological and behavioral trajectory evident in contemporary acts of mass violence, it is Ajax. His progressive descent—from humiliation to delusion, rage, and ultimately self-destruction—mirrors the staged escalation often observed in perpetrators of mass shootings. Unlike Achilles, whose violence is sanctioned within the heroic codes of warfare, or Orestes, whose matricide is divinely contextualized and ultimately absolved, Ajax occupies a uniquely human and unredeemed position. His actions arise not from divine command or collective justice but from wounded honor and psychological collapse. For this reason, Ajax offers the most compelling classical analogue for examining the internalized rage, isolation, and moral disorientation that characterize modern acts of retaliatory violence.

The Ajax Complex Explained

The Ajax complex is a literary-derived heuristic describing a six-stage narrative arc (described below) of humiliation leading to violence and collective response. It is not predictive or diagnostic but interpretive, offering a framework for understanding how societies narrate acts of violence.

Valorizing Violence: A society that valorizes aggression or provides ready access to violent scripts creates conditions where violent solutions appear conceivable.

Establishing Accomplishment and Identity: The perpetrator's prior history of accomplishment or

recognized competence—academic, social, or occupational—that intensifies the psychological impact of subsequent humiliation or perceived injustice.

Experiencing Humiliation and Betrayal: An incurred slight or betrayal (real or perceived) that causes the person embarrassment and/or humiliation.

Seeking Retribution and Restoration: A prompting to revenge or retribution (real or perceived) that comes from the self or from an exterior force, as in "god" or "voices in one's mind" as a means to restore dignity and/or status.

Enacting the Violent Act: The act of violence itself wherein the target(s) and/or innocents are slain which may be targeted or indiscriminate.

Reckoning with Aftermath and Memory: The collective aftermath of violence—its psychological and social fallout for victims, perpetrators, and their communities—manifested through processes of reconciliation, ethical reckoning, and cultural response in forms such as media framing, public memorials, and policy debate.

Valorizing Violence

The first aspect of the Ajax complex begins with the culture that surrounds maleness. In his chapter, "Deep Plays: Theatre as Process in Greek Civic Life," Paul Cartledge identifies the battlefield as the "true site for the display of Greek manhood and masculine prowess" and a place where men may enact "their essential natures" (13). Since the culturally sanctioned aggressiveness of men was celebrated in "war and athletics" by the Greeks, it's only logical that young boys would imitate—and likely be rewarded—for such behavior and perpetuate a cycle of male aggression (14). The question for the purposes of articulating an Ajax complex becomes: Does the aggressor live in a culture where male aggression is celebrated? Certainly for Ajax, he did. Not only did Greece celebrate male aggression with competitions and displays, but Ajax, in fact, has just come out of a decade-long war in which his accomplishments were crucial for the Greek army to win the war. Studies in anthropology, psychology, and sociology find that male

aggression is common but its expression and acceptance vary in degree from culture to culture. Some cultures may encourage or tolerate aggressive behavior, while others may strongly condemn it. It is also worth noting that aggressive behavior is not solely a male trait. Women can also exhibit aggression though the manner in which it is displayed can vary.

The most commonly used tool to measure aggression in groups of people within specific cultures today is the Buss-Perry "Aggression Questionnaire" developed and first administered in 1992 with results published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. In their findings, researchers Arnold H. Buss and Mark Perry found that their sample of college-attending men in the United States of America ages 18 to 21 scored higher on three of the four named areas of aggression: Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, and Hostility, but there was virtually no difference for gender on the area of Anger (452). Citing violent deaths and aggression in the United States, Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway summarize their findings in their 2019 article, *Violent death rates in the US compared to those of the other high-income countries, 2015*, as follows:

The US firearm homicide rate is 24.9 times higher than in other high-income countries.
The US firearm suicide rate was 9.8 times higher than in other high-income countries.
83.7% of all firearm deaths occurred in the US.
91.7% of women and 98.1% of all children killed by firearms were in the US.
Firearm homicide rates in low-guns states were 13.5 times higher than other countries. (20)

Establishing Accomplishment and Identity

The second aspect of the Ajax complex merely requires a person who has acquired some measure of success. The success could be as nominal as getting a good grade on a spelling quiz or being the valedictorian of their graduating class. Indeed, any success that is acknowledged by another person and holds importance in the mind of the recipient is valid which in effect means: everyone. This broad and general assertion speaks to today's underlying fear that a mass shooting

could happen to anyone, anytime. The degree or nature of accomplishment—great or small—matters chiefly because it grounds self-worth, thereby magnifying the impact of a subsequent slight or betrayal. This second point of accomplishment or success is the one that friends or relatives of the perpetrator will refer to in an effort to assert the perpetrator's former normality and stability. It is also the aspect wherein that same friend or close relative will begin to assert their own innocence or non-advocacy of the violence.

As outlined above, Ajax's accomplishments during the Trojan War are sufficient to establish their noteworthiness.

Experiencing Humiliation and Betrayal

The third aspect of the Ajax complex involves an incurred slight or betrayal—real or perceived—that causes the person embarrassment and/or humiliation. It is highly likely that most people have all experienced feelings of embarrassment and humiliation—universal emotions that play a significant role in shaping human behavior. These feelings are often deeply tied to one's sense of identity and self-worth, and, while most individuals manage such emotions through adaptive strategies, it is important to acknowledge the dangerous potential they can harbor when unresolved. Physician-Psychologist Evelin Gerda Lindner plainly argues that "all human beings yearn for recognition and respect; their denial or withdrawal is experienced as humiliation" (*Humiliation* 59). Lindner's research also advises that humiliation, in particular, can provoke intense emotional responses, as it often involves a perceived loss of dignity or status in the eyes of others (59). In some cases, humiliation may lead to feelings of helplessness and shame, which individuals might cope with through either withdrawal or aggression.

In the context of mass shootings, the link between perceived humiliation and acts of violence becomes particularly salient. Some perpetrators of mass violence have been found to harbor deep-seated feelings of humiliation and social rejection, which may contribute to their desire for retribution (Leary et al. 202). Thus, while feelings of embarrassment and humiliation

are nearly universal, the way in which one chooses to cope with these emotions can be crucial. For a minority of individuals, such feelings can fester and, when combined with other risk factors, may lead to catastrophic outcomes, speaking to the pervasive fear that mass shootings can occur anywhere, at any time. It is during this aspect of the Ajax complex where mental health care is crucial but often not received. In Ajax's case, his wife, Tecmessa, and half-brother, Teucer—along with the chorus of sailors—attempt to assuage his tormenting thoughts, but are ultimately unable to stop him from bringing about his own demise.

Seeking Retribution and Restoration

The fourth aspect of the Ajax complex involves a prompting to revenge or retribution (real or perceived) that comes as a "call" from the self or from an exterior force, as in "god" or "voices in one's mind." This aspect is possibly the most complex and has received much attention over many years and connects to many facets of theories of aggression. The process by which an individual resolves to enact violence as a response to perceived humiliation or embarrassment often involves complex psychological, social, and cognitive mechanisms. While each case may differ, certain patterns of thought and justification can be observed, especially in individuals predisposed to violence. Research suggests that individuals who act violently in response to humiliation typically undergo a process of cognitive restructuring, where violent behavior becomes a justified means of regaining control, power, or dignity. In his book, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes*, James Gilligan recounts how a man he interviewed justified killing his wife because she humiliated him on their twentieth-anniversary by mocking the man's inability to provide financially. The woman called her marriage to the man a "waste," and that night, feeling completely justified, he strangled her with a leash (87). Gilligan further reports that the man showed no remorse and communicated his innocence "despite the fact that he…was found guilty" (87).

Humiliation, as distinct from mere embarrassment, can be a particularly potent trigger for

violent responses. According to the work of sociologist Thomas Scheff in his *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism, and War*, humiliation involves the "perception of public degradation," which threatens the individual's social identity and self-esteem, potentially festering as "feelings of shame and rage" (8). Scheff further observes that to identify a person in the throes of such turmoil is more of an "art" rather than a "science" (8). When this perception festers, it can transform into feelings of rage, especially if the individual feels powerless to restore their sense of worth through non-violent means. In this way, violence becomes a perceived solution—a way to reclaim lost status or to assert dominance over those perceived as responsible for the humiliation. Certainly for Ajax, he felt powerless to change his situation even after his wife begs him to hear her pleas and not do anything rash or kill himself (Sophocles 12).

Another position that is useful to consider is the cognitive dissonance theory as defined in Leon Festinger's 1957 *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* which is, "the existence of non-fitting relations among cognitions" that may serve as the impetus for action suggests that individuals experience psychological discomfort when their beliefs or values conflict with their actions (3). To resolve this, they may reframe their beliefs to justify actions that would otherwise seem morally unacceptable. In the case of violence as revenge for humiliation, the individual may begin to see violent action not as wrong, but as necessary or even righteous. They may come to view themselves as a victim whose suffering warrants retaliation. This restructuring of thought allows them to resolve internal conflict about violence by framing it as a means of restoring justice. Researchers Cindy L. Anderton et al., argue that there is a relative relationship between the strength of one's beliefs and the degree to which a person has been wronged (whether perceived or actual), stating that "the greater the degree of the dissonance experienced by a person, the more motivated that person is to act in some way that will reduce this psychological discomfort created by this dissonance" (*Revisiting Festinger's Theory* 265). That Ajax was a mighty warrior and was then reduced to a laughing-stock is too great a discord in his mind for him to move beyond the humiliation of not winning Achilles' armor and his embarrassment over

the fact that he slaughtered innocent livestock when he had intended to kill his fellow Greek soldiers.

Albert Bandura's concept of "moral disengagement," as articulated in his 1999 *Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities*, is another useful framework for understanding how individuals justify violent behavior (193). Bandura argues that people can commit aggressive acts when they disengage from the moral standards that typically regulate behavior and cautions that this type of behavior is on the rise (193). This process can involve mechanisms like dehumanizing the victim, shifting blame to external forces, or minimizing the harm caused (194). In cases where humiliation is the trigger, the aggressor may dehumanize the person or group they blame for their emotional pain, viewing them as deserving of retribution. By doing so, they diminish feelings of guilt or remorse. Since the Greek Atreidae awarded Achilles' armor to Odysseus, they are, in the mind of Ajax, his newfound enemies and the ones who, by Ajax's way of thinking, should suffer.

Researchers Jeffrey Swanson et al., disclose findings in their 1996 study, *Psychotic Symptoms and Disorders and the Risk of Violent Behaviour in the Community*, showing that in some cases, individuals who commit acts of violence report feeling driven by external forces, such as "hearing voices," experiencing "delusions," or believing that a "higher power" is commanding them to act (309). Those researchers note that these sorts of behaviors are particularly relevant in individuals suffering from certain psychiatric disorders, such as schizophrenia or delusional disorders. Research indicates that a small subset of violent individuals may experience auditory hallucinations or delusions of grandeur, in which they believe they are acting on divine instruction or under the influence of supernatural forces (309). For these individuals, violent actions may be perceived as morally justified or even divinely ordained, giving them a powerful sense of purpose that overrides typical moral constraints (309–310). Sophocles begins *Ajax* with Athena celebrating the madness and delusions of Ajax and further admitting that it was she who caused him to behave so; and while there is no instance

where contemporaries refer to Ajax as being afflicted with psychiatric disorders, he certainly was motivated by a higher power.

Cultural narratives and social environments can also shape how individuals interpret their experiences of humiliation and how they choose to respond. In cultures or subcultures where honor and respect are highly valued, and where retaliation is viewed as an acceptable means of restoring honor, individuals may feel socially sanctioned to engage in violent behavior. The honor culture framework suggests that individuals may view violence as a necessary response to restore their social standing after a perceived slight or humiliation (Nisbett and Cohen 2). Here, violence is not only a personal resolution but a socially reinforced action. Certainly, Ajax behaves from within the older code of honor that was upheld and celebrated by the Greek army especially during pre-Trojan War times. But again, a newer culture of rhetoric and argument has begun to eclipse the old-world order.

The "frustration-aggression hypothesis" (Dollard et al. 27) posits that when individuals are thwarted in their goals or feel blocked from achieving a desired outcome, they may experience frustration that can manifest as aggression. Humiliation, in this context, can be seen as an obstacle to one's social or emotional well-being, provoking frustration that may lead to aggressive behavior. If the individual feels that non-violent means of addressing the humiliation are unavailable or insufficient, they may turn to violence as a way to "vent their frustration" and "regain a sense of control" (27). Even after Ajax speaks with and touches his son, Eurysaces, as a means of saying 'farewell,' Ajax goes to the seashore fully intent on suicide.

Individuals, then, who enact violence in response to humiliation or embarrassment often go through a process of cognitive and emotional transformation, wherein violent action becomes justified as a means of restoring dignity, power, or justice. This may involve cognitive restructuring, moral disengagement, cultural reinforcement, or even delusional beliefs. While not all individuals who experience humiliation will resort to violence, those who do often perceive violence as a necessary and justified response to their emotional injury.

Enacting the Violent Act

The fifth aspect of the Ajax complex is the deed itself wherein the target(s) and/or innocents are slain which may or may not include a primary target. For Ajax, his primary target was Odysseus, but in the act of seeking revenge and retribution, Ajax killed a variety of livestock all of which he thought were Greek soldiers. In constructing the theory of an Ajax complex, it is not necessary that a person have a specific target; rather, it may be a random or spontaneous act of violence. These incidents may reflect the perpetrator's desire to enact chaos or gain notoriety. A recent example of this is the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, where Stephen Paddock opened fire from his hotel room onto a crowd at a music festival. Paddock killed 60 people and wounded hundreds more, but investigators found no clear motive or demographic group that he was targeting specifically. Instead, it appeared that the attack was planned for maximum casualties, with the victims chosen indiscriminately because of their presence at the event.

Another type of mass killing with no specific target involves perpetrators who are driven by a desire for notoriety or a form of "suicide by mass murder." These individuals often view the act of mass murder as a way to leave a lasting legacy, regardless of who the victims are. As a good example, the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, though often considered a school-targeted attack, also showed signs of broader nihilistic goals. Reporting for *Time* magazine, journalists Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche detailed how the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, fantasized about creating widespread chaos and destruction, even planting bombs in the cafeteria to maximize casualties indiscriminately and how the two boys were, in their words, going to "kick-start a revolution" (*The Columbine Tapes*).

Reckoning with Aftermath and Memory

The sixth aspect of the Ajax complex concerns the fallout experienced by victims and their contacts, perpetrators and their contacts, and the broader culture in which such violence

occurs. While specific examples of individual or societal outcomes lie beyond the scope of this examination, recurring themes identified across numerous studies include shock and disbelief, relief, guilt, remorse, and indifference. Likewise, the responses to an act of violence—whether expressed by those directly affected or by society at large—warrant continued scholarly attention and consideration.

At the same time, this discussion of the *Aftermath and Memory* stage remains necessarily brief, as it is not the purpose of this study to analyze or evaluate the various ways in which societies respond to mass violence—through legislative reform, public memorialization, or the preservation of the status quo. Rather, this stage represents the next logical and inevitable phase within the cycle articulated by the proposed Ajax complex. The forms that aftermath and memory take—be they calls for justice, policy change, or symbolic gestures of mourning—are inherently variable and unpredictable. What can be asserted, however, is that both *Aftermath* and *Memory* endure as essential components of the social and ethical continuum that follows such acts, shaping how communities reckon with loss and construct meaning in the wake of violence.

Reframing Violence: The Ajax Complex as an Interpretive Heuristic

Widespread familiarity with the Oedipus complex (and, to a lesser extent, the Electra complex) enables critical engagement—whether through agreement or refutation—while providing a means of identifying subconscious or conscious desires deemed inappropriate. In a similar way, familiarity with the Ajax complex offers an articulated rubric for recognizing inappropriate trajectories and for dissolving an emergent Ajax complex, thereby enabling individuals to acknowledge aggressive or even homicidal impulses. Consequently, the framework offers therapists and behavioral specialists a basis for interventions that promote constructive outcomes for affected individuals.

Indeed, the need for new perpetrator labels is addressed by scholars Maggie Campbell-Obaid and Katherine Lacasse in their article, "A Perpetrator by Any Other Name: Unpacking the

Characterizations and Consequences of the 'Terrorist,' 'Lone Wolf,' and 'Mass Shooter' Labels for Perpetrators of Mass Violence." In that article, Campbell-Obaid and Lacasse determine that "non-White or Muslim perpetrators seem more likely to be called terrorists" and that "White or Christian perpetrators…are instead more likely to be labeled lone wolves" (426). Similarly, Vito D'Orazio and Idean Salehyan contend that labels for perpetrators of acts of violence carry connotations that need closer examination and posits that "Whites are more likely to be called 'mass shooters' [than Arabs or Muslims]" (*Who is a Terrorist?* 1017).

The Ajax complex, conceived of by means of a literary work, begins to build a general rubric that may help provide a foundation upon which to examine acts of violence on micro and macro levels while simultaneously displacing the labels of "lone wolf," "terrorist," and "mass shooter" that have become encrusted with bias.

As outlined above, the six stages delineate the structural and psychological progression of the Ajax complex, providing a literary heuristic for examining acts of violence with greater nuance and ethical precision. The following table summarizes these stages for clarity and reference (see table 1).

Table 1

Source: Author's formulation of the six stages of the Ajax complex, adapted from Sophocles' *Ajax*

Stage	Heading	Core Description	Cultural or Contemporary
1	Valorizing Violence	A society that glorifies aggression or	Cultural narratives of
2	Establishing Accomplishment	A prior history of accomplishment or	Achievement-based iden-
3	Experiencing Humiliation and	A real or perceived slight or betrayal	Public shaming, social
4	Seeking Retribution and Resto-	An internal or external prompting to-	Justification of violence
5	Enacting the Violent Act	The moment of violence itself, whether	Mass shootings, acts of
6	Reckoning with Aftermath and	The collective aftermath of violence –	Memorialization, media

Acknowledging Limitations and Conclusion

The application of literary archetypes to real-world behavior necessarily involves interpretive, not empirical, reasoning. As heuristic models, such archetypes illuminate patterns of meaning and cultural narrative rather than predict or explain individual psychology. Freud's Oedipus complex and Jung's Electra complex—each derived from tragic literature—proved influential precisely because they offered metaphoric frameworks for understanding psychic conflict, yet both faced substantial criticism for their reductionism, cultural bias, and lack of empirical grounding. The Ajax complex should be understood in similar terms: not as a psychological diagnosis or causal theory, but as a conceptual tool for exploring how societies narrate and interpret acts of violence. Its value lies in clarifying the symbolic and rhetorical dimensions of such narratives, while acknowledging the ethical need to avoid romanticizing perpetrators or pathologizing human suffering.

Although it may be tempting to extend this method by drawing upon the wealth of Greek myth and tragedy to devise additional archetypal "complexes," such extrapolation exceeds the present aim. Yet it is precisely from this fertile imaginative ground that ancient Greek philosophers cultivated their own theories—reflecting what Alfred North Whitehead famously observed, that "the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (Whitehead 39). Indeed, while philosophers preceded Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, it may be argued that Greek tragedy itself served as a catalyst for the kind of rigorous observation and philosophical inquiry that continues to inform intellectual and moral discourse today.

In conclusion, literary characters offer a rich terrain for theorizing about contemporary human behavior. By exploring the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of these figures, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which literature both reflects and shapes the complexities of modern life. Whether through the analysis of universal archetypes, the interrogation of power dynamics in relationships, or the consideration of how readers emotionally engage with fictional figures, literature provides a valuable framework for

examining current trends in human behavior. As we continue to navigate the shifting landscape of identity, morality, and social interaction, literary figures remain vital touchstones for understanding the evolving human condition.

In this light, the Ajax complex stands as a viable theoretical model—one that bridges literary archetype and contemporary behavioral analysis. While not predictive in a clinical sense, it offers a structured vocabulary for articulating the moral, psychological, and cultural dimensions of violence. As such, it contributes to the broader interdisciplinary conversation between literature and the human sciences, reaffirming the enduring relevance of tragic insight to modern inquiry.

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