

**UNEARTHING COMMON UNCONSCIOUS THROUGH
DRAMA: AN ARCHETYPAL READING OF TRACIE
CHIMA UTOH'S *COULDRON OF DEATH***

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Abstract

The recurrence of similar characters and thought in play texts written by diverse playwrights who lived at different times and spaces motivated this research. Although these play texts are written by varied authors, they apparently appear to share significant similarities in terms of character-type and thoughts. It thus becomes imperative to investigate the factors and situations that inform the creation of play texts that seem to be archetypal in theme, thought, character and narrative. Using Carl Jung's ideas of psychoanalysis, the researcher investigated the essence of archetypes and "collective unconscious" in Tracie Chima Utoh's *Cauldron of Death*. The researcher discovered that the archetypes found in Utoh's *Cauldron of Death* exist in the "collective unconscious" of the playwright. Coincidentally, these archetypes have proved to be innate, hereditary and universal. The researcher therefore, concludes that the archetypal characters found in *Cauldron of Death* are models of real people who exist in all places at all times among peoples from all over the world. They serve as the basic foundation and impulse for the playwright's creation of the play.

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Introduction

Commonality among narrative, symbols, images and character types of diverse playwrights from diverse time, culture and space appear to abound in dramatic texts. Play texts from different continents and periods may portray extremely varied cultures but may invariably share some symbolic and situational similarities. For instance, there appear to be a recurrence of such psychological characters as depraved father, good mother, the temptress and inheritance in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghost* as well as Tracie Chima Utoh's *Cauldron of Death* and these are varied dramatic texts from Classical Western plays and Contemporary African dramas respectively. The crux of this research is thus to investigate motivations behind the creation of play texts that are archetypal in the theme, characters and narrative.

Recognizing plot patterns and symbols associations found in other play texts, one is bound to observe that the meaning of a dramatic text cannot exist solely on the page of the work, nor can a dramatic work be treated as an independent entity. Therefore to grasp the meaning of a dramatic text, the play text must be analyzed in relation to the society that informed it. For instance, the Nigeria socio-cultural structure and contemporary family life are major forces to understanding the play *Cauldron of Death*. Coincidentally however, there appears to be similarities among the characters, situations and settings of *Cauldron of Death* which exist in a number of other plays text. The "fall" of the main character Junior in *Cauldron of Death* may be considered similar to the fate of the main characters in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, William Shakespeare's *King*

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Lear and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* among others. The similarity in the portrayal of a dramatic character is characterized by the playwright's collective unconscious which attempts to project dramatists as "Carriers" of communal unconscious. However, collective unconscious cannot be approached directly but through archetypes which embody it. In other words, collective unconscious can be found in archetypes which Carl Jung according to Dobie defines as "...universal images that existed since the remotest times." (59) Dobie explains further that Jung specifically described an archetype as a figure that repeats itself in the course of history whenever creative fantasy is fully manifested" (59) Dobie in concordance with Carl Jung's idea, further defines archetypes as: "Inherited ideas or ways of thinking generated by experiences of human race that exist in the unconscious of individual." (71) She opines that archetypes are universal and recurring images, patterns, or motifs representing typical human experiences that often appear in drama and other art forms. (71) Dramatists therefore appear not just to be burdened with the duties of observing their society but also to be laden with the common duties of unconsciously bearing the socio-cultural anxieties that culminate from the fragmentation of the society in which a particular dramatist exists. Playwrights seem thus to unconsciously participate in some universal beliefs, fears and anxieties which ritualistically recur at all ages in varied places of the world.

The playwright's attempts to create plays thus appear to culminate from socio-cultural conflicts which are not entirely personal but rather include fears and conflicts which he/she appears to have imbibed from the society. The allusion that can be drawn from this

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is that play texts do not exist in a vacuum. The contents of Play texts instead culminate from the collective unconscious which the dramatist recollected innately as a member of the human species and from his society.

Collective unconscious is the term used by psychologist Carl Jung to describe the shared unconscious of the human species. Explaining the 'collective unconscious' Dobie opines that in concordance with Sigmund Freud's ideas on the human unconscious, Carl Jung an adherent of Sigmud Freud's 'psychoanalysis',:

...believed that our unconscious mind powerfully directs much of our behavior. However, where Freud conceived of each individual unconscious as separate and distinct from that of others, Jung asserted that some of our unconscious is shared with all other members of the human species. (58)

The unconscious that is shared by all human species is what Carl Jung termed the 'collective unconscious'. He described it as a storehouse of knowledge, experiences, and images of human race. Play texts thus appear to be an expression of the author's repressed anxieties which hitherto have been buried in the playwright's personal unconscious or collective unconscious. In other words, the dramatist repressed conflicts do not only culminate from the author's personal experiences, but are also collections from societal anxieties and fears. Thus dramatists appear to repress the seemingly ugly experiences of their society in favour of the 'reality principle' which are the principles that are morally accepted by society. The repression of the 'pleasure principle' by the 'reality principle' according to Sigmund Freud makes us ill when the repression

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becomes excessive. This form of sickness caused by repression is called neurosis which Eagleton asserts that, "...all human beings must repress to some degree..." (132) According to Eagleton, "It is possible to speak of the human race...as the 'neurotic animal'. It is important to see that such neurosis is involved with what is creative about us as a race, as well as what causes our unhappiness" (132) The dramatist thus appears to be caught up in the socio-cultural complications and fragmentation of his time and place. In other words, it appears that playwrights constitute into their unconscious, the socio-cultural issues bordering the orderliness of human existence. These socio-cultural issues wrapped in images and symbols called archetypes are what culminate into collective unconscious. So the dramatist in seeking relief from his/her conflicted unconscious, takes to the expression of his/her collective unconscious in the terms of play-writing. The culmination of this expression is a dramatic text which appears to be therapeutic not just for the playwright but also for his/her readers. In line with this, Dobie avers that "Freud's sense of the artist, finally, was that he is an unstable personality who writes out of his own neurosis, with the result that his work provides therapeutic insights into the nature of life not only for himself but also for those who read" (51)

It therefore becomes pertinent to probe the society and culture that informed playwrights whose plays present the readers with similar characters and themes. This research is necessary to the point that the play texts under investigation apparently appear not to be adaptations, yet, these dramatic texts from varied playwrights who existed in varied times and space tend to elicit seemingly similar response from readers. It is hoped that the archetypal reading of

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Cauldron of Death will help us determine what informs play texts that are archetypal in nature.

Theoretical Framework

Carl Jung's concept of collective unconscious has enormous impact on the way we understand what we read. The idea of collective or common unconscious gives us a way to deepen our understanding of theme that have been recurring in drama the world over. Jung's ideology of collective unconscious provides critics with the view that like Freud's concept, the dramatist is a conflicted individual who aims not just to work out his/her problems but also those of his/her society. Jung conceives the dramatist's unconscious which is the store-house of his creativity, as an unconscious shared by all humanity. Jung believes that collective unconscious is an ancestral memory inherited, just as the personal unconscious is individually acquired. Distressed by complications of their societies, the dramatists engage in therapeutic measure of expressing their universal or collective unconscious through the recreation of their society. They thus recreate their collective unconscious with ancestral or inherited images and patterns encapsulated in dramatic narratives. The culmination of this is the recurrence of archetypal characters, symbols and struggles in dramas from diverse authors from diverse time and space. Cherry Kendra, posits that Carl Jung, "...believed that archetypes were models of people, behaviors, or personalities." According to her, Jung suggested that archetypes were inborn tendencies that play a role in influencing human behavior.

Universal Images and Characters in *Cauldron of Death*

In *Cauldron of Death*, Tracie Chima Utoh turned to the universal female figure archetype to explore the nature of the good mother who represses her id for the reality principles as she nurtures her family members. The id is defined by Dobie as: “An unconscious part of the psyche that is the source of psychic energy and desires. (71) She opines that it operates for the sole purpose of finding pleasure through gratification of its institutional needs. The good-mother archetype features in various mythologies over time and place. This self-denying mother figure is similarly revealed in the Classical Greek play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles and the 19th Century Norwegian play *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen. Like Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* who gave life to King Oedipus and remains with him to nurture him during his trying moments, Nneoma in *Cauldron of Death* gave life to and nurtures Junior during his neurosis. In response to Junior’s expression of guilt and self-torments, Nneoma says:

Nneoma: *(resignedly.)* I have nothing against you Junior. You are my son. I have loved and cared for you since the day I brought you into this world. I will always love and care for you. (124)

Similarly, Brockett describes Jocasta, King Oedipus’ mother and wife as the good mother who “...strives to make life run smoothly for Oedipus, she tries to comfort him. To mediate between him and Creon, to stop Oedipus in his quest; she commits suicide when the truth becomes clear...(89) The archetype of self-sacrificing mother

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is also shown by Ibsen in *Ghosts* as Mrs. Alving nurtures, empathizes and completely accepts her son in spite of his shadow. Although there are less examples of motherhood in the classical dramas as there are of the heroes, mothers and motherhood when presented in the ancient and contemporary dramas are mostly portrayed as self-denying beings who could do anything for their children. This archetype of the good mother who represses her better instinct for morally accepted principles is also aptly/ clearly represented by Mrs. Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* is shown to have remained with a sexually deprived husband in accordance with accepted social standards only to have her only son go neurotic presumably from syphilis he inherited from his father.

Motherhood archetype appears to be universally embodied with immense selflessness and self-denial. The motherhood archetype is attributed with the willingness to do anything to maintain her duties to her family. Though it is usually rare for the good-mother to take centre stage in drama, she is endowed with selflessness and generosity. At times they are prone to exploitation because of their strive to protect and help their family members. Motherhood myths throughout the world are extremely varied, but all share psychological similarities.

This character is typical of Nneoma in *Cauldron of Death*. Just as her name suggests, she is the good mother who suppresses her better instincts in order to pay attention to her traditionally defined duties of sacrificing her ego. Nneoma meets the requirements of an archetypal mother by being in one respect different from every other character in the play: she has not even for once gotten tired of

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sacrificing her ego. The patience she exhibits in nurturing her sick son contradicts that of her daughter Ozoemena who rather feels deep hatred for her brother, Junior who infected her with the deadly HIV virus. This is portrayed in her dialogue with Nneoma:

Ozoemena: (*almost sobbing.*) Why? Why? What have I done to deserve this?

Nneoma: None of us has done anything to deserve this.

Ozoemena: Mum stop it. You infuriate me when you talk like that. Junior has done something to deserve what is happening to him...(129)

Theme of family life seems to be the most obvious in *Cauldron of Death*. The archetype of depraved husband and mother figure are present in the drama. *Cauldron of Death* which is a recreation of the contemporary Nigerian family implies that in the contemporary family, women tend to bear the brunt of the promiscuity of their husbands because tradition demands their loyalty to married life no matter what it takes. This same loyalty required of the Nigerian female folk is coincidentally a universal phenomenon. As it is also shown in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, there exists innocent members of the society and family who are infected with deadly venereal diseases that could have been averted if they have had balanced psyche. Having balanced psyche points to the stage where an individual becomes psychologically mature through the discovery, acceptance and integration of his/her shadow, anima/animus and persona. Women and girls are similarly shown by *Cauldron of Death* and *Ghosts* to be traditionally the most vulnerable family members. Although the author of *Cauldron of death* does not make this

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explicit, dialogue are scattered throughout the play text that allude to the vulnerability of the female characters and the perverseness of the male characters. Ikem's response to Junior's whining and groaning in his sick bed is a pointer to Junior's depravity.

Ikem: Bear the pains with fortitude. You are a man. This is the price you have to pay. If you had given heed to my warnings, this would not have happened...(144)

The last sentence in the above excerpt alludes that Junior's illness and pains are the result of his depravity. It implies that junior had previously sunk into a life of utter depravity. Ozoemena on the other hand is described as the innocent one who suffers for the sins of her father, Ikem and her brother, Junior.

Throughout the play *Cauldron of Death*, ailing Junior remembers all that he has done in terms of his intimate associations with loose women. The play symbolizes his intimate moments with the temptresses as cauldrons holding sumptuous contents. AIDS is personified as a dancer. AIDS the dancer in *Cauldron of Death* personifies the principle of evil that intrudes into Junior's life to lure and destroy him. AIDS carries a cauldron of death and purports to kill Junior who is the first to taste the content of his cauldron. AIDS black costume is associated with Junior's inevitable death. Junior's "shadow" is the promiscuous life which led to his contracting the deadly HIV virus. His "anima" is sense of guilt and inevitable death which controls all that he says. He appears to usually sink into a sense of guilt whenever he remembers the inevitable end that is to come upon him due to his own carelessness. After saying that he is sorry for having put his family into pains and

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his mother in particular, he begins to reflect on the hopelessness of his life and the death that is to come. He laments thus:

Junior: I am dying Mum. Don't you understand? I no longer have a future. All your dreams ...All your dreams for your son. All those plans. (123)

Junior's acceptance of his of 'shadow' and his regrets of his past came only when he could not succeed in projecting his shadow on anyone. Rather than accepting his shadow, he keeps speculating initially in an attempt to apportion blame on the various girls he has had sex with. He expresses his regret as he continues to render his apologies to Nneoma who in her 'good-mother' nature has refused to complain about the sacrifices she has been making for Junior and her entire family:

Junior: (*pensively*): Yes. You have always stood by me. And that is what makes the whole situation unbearable. You have never uttered a word of complaint. You are still as loving and as caring as you have always been. But it is wrong. You are made of flesh and blood. You should express displeasure. You should treat me with scorn. Tell me how you feel and what you think of me. (125)

At this instance, the full import of the reality of the inevitability of his death dawns on him as he starts to whine:

Junior: I will be gone in less than a month. (125)

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But like her archetype Mrs. Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Nneoma is apt to deny the reality of her son's end. Instead of accepting this reality, she rebukes Junior:

Nneoma: Desist from such sordid thoughts (125)

Similarly we see Mrs. Alving with the same trait of constant denial of reality. So when Oswald her ailing son tells her about the doctor's diagnosis of his ailment and the consequences of the disease, she adamantly denies the realities of his past and the consequences of his reckless past:

Oswald: ...my whole life ruined – irreparably ruined – and all through my own thoughtlessness. All the things I meant to do in the world... I daren't think about them again – I can't think about them. Oh, if only I could start afresh and have life over again...It's so shameful to have thrown away my health and happiness – everything in the world...my life itself! (75)

But typically, like Nneoma of Utoh's *Cauldron of Death*, Mrs. Alving of Ibsen's *Ghosts* is inclined to deny such truth. She therefore quickly refutes Oswald's remark about his despondency:

Mrs. Alving: No, no, my dearest boy, that isn't possible.
 [*Bending over him*] It's not as terrible as you think. (75)

It appears that mother archetypes engage in such denials as a measure to reduce anxiety especially when such truth threatens the peace and harmony of their family. But as the

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play progresses, Junior's past pops up more and more to torment him, forcing him to contemplate his sad end:

Junior: ...Here I am, watching myself die a slow, painful sordid death. Look at me Mum. Does this look like your healthy, bouncing, robust, one hundred and eighty pound son? The one you were always proud to introduce to your friends? See what I have become. An apparition. A ghost of my former self. By the time I finally die, I would have reduced to a skeleton...(125)

At this transition, he sinks into a neurotic condition. So he begins to ponder vocally on the possibility of detecting who among his numerous girlfriends infected him with the AIDS virus. He unconsciously releases himself from his neurotic condition as he narrates his sexual exploits with varied 'temptress' archetypes. At this outburst, Nneoma becomes inconsistent with her usual denial as she reaches the state of awareness. At this stage of personal conscious, she becomes aware of her seemingly naïve son's depravity which in Jungian term is his 'shadow', Nneoma retorts:

Nneoma: (*sudden outburst.*) You should not have indulged in such an illicit union. Where did you abandon all the moral training we gave you?...(136)

In reply, Junior affirms that he is neurotic:

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Junior: I am sorry. I don't know. I am going crazy. At what point did I contact the HIV virus? and who did I transmit the virus to?...(136)

At this stage, Junior attains his individuation as he successfully discovers, accepts and integrates his own shadow, animus and persona. He reaches the stage of psychological maturation in concordance with Jungian idea of individuation.

The dramatist also used the archetype of the temptress on the other hand as she destroys the men who are attracted to her sensuality and beauty. The myth of the temptress is also one of the most prevalent myths in the world. The temptress archetype is characterized by his/her desire to offer something enticing to the one who craves for it with the intention of pulling him/her down. The temptress might use sex, power, influence or money, as a bait to lure her victim into her clutches. This universal character can be found in the Serpent in the Biblical account of creation, Mephistopheles in *Faust*, Delilah in Lee Philips's *Samson and Delilah*, Bride in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* among others. The temptress archetype destroys the men who are attracted to her sensuality and beauty. Like Delilah, who robs Samson of his strength, she causes their downfall.

The temptress archetype is exemplified by the figure that personified AIDS in Junior's dream and Junior's recounts of his sexual perversity with his numerous lovers. In *Cauldron of Death*, the character AIDS seduces those attracted to him with his 'cauldron' which impliedly something with sumptuous content. Having successfully seduced many into tasting the content he bears, AIDS bellows:

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AIDS: Yes! You all belong to me now! Come unto me all
 you who have taken sips from my cauldron of death.
 Come! Come! Come!...(117)

AIDS in Junior's dream symbolizes in reality the varied temptresses he narrated about. While the dance party is connected to the forces that affect him in term of his unrestrained yields to pleasure. The temptress archetype is also encountered in Bride in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play's narrative alludes that Elisin becomes distracted from his heroic goal immediately he sees the Bride:

Elesin: ...I saw the ivory pebbles of Oya's river bed. Iyaloja,
 who is she? I saw her enter your stall; all your
 daughters I know well. No, not even Ogun-of-the-
 farm toiling dawn till dusk on his tuber patch. Not
 even Ogun with the finest hoe he ever forged at the
 anvil could have shaped that rise of buttocks, not
 though he had the richest earth between his fingers.
 Her wrapper was no disguise for thighs whose
 ripples shamed the river's coils around the hills of
 Ilesì. Her eyes were new-laid eggs glowing in the
 dark. Her skin...(19)

Dazzled by Bride's beauty which Elesin describes as above that of the gods, he deviates from his heroic goal of accompanying the king to the mythological world of the ancestors. Similarly, in Ibsen's *Ghosts* Regina doubly portrays the temptress and the child archetype. As the temptress,

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she is already scheming to attract Oswald and almost lets it slip to Engstrand during his conversation with her on partnering with him in his proposed seamen lodging house:

Regina: No. If things go the way I want...and they might – they very well might...(25)

But it is shown almost immediately that her desires are not motivated by love. Regina is shown a few moments later asking Pastor Manders to consider collaborating with her.:

Regina: Because I'd like to go back to town; it's terribly lonely out here, and you know yourself, Pastor, what's it's like to be all alone in the world. I can honestly say that I'm able and willing. Don't you know of a place like that for me, Pastor? (30)

Regina works from all angles: she is learning French for Oswald. She is young, vivacious and attractive. Pastor Manders describes her thus:

Pastor Manders: Excellent, thank you. [*Looking at her*]
Do you know, Miss Engstrand, I really do believe you've grown since I saw you last! (28)

Regina: Do you think so, Pastor? Madam says I've filled out, too. (29)

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Pastor Manders: Filled out? Well, yes, I think you have, a little...but very becomingly.
(29)

Regina attracted Oswald with her seductive attributes and to Mrs. Alving's utter dismay, she quickly accepts Oswald illegitimate proposals. Regina does not mind using sex to get what she wants, in this instance, security. But when Mrs. Alving reveals Regina's true place in the family, namely that Regina is Oswald half-sister, she lays bare her real motives towards him:

Mrs. Alving: Regina, I haven't been quite frank with you.
(93)

Regina: No, you certainly haven't. If I'd known that Oswald was ill, then...And seeing that there can never be anything serious between us now...Oh no, I'm certainly not staying out here in the country to wear myself out nursing the sick!
(94)

Since she cannot marry Oswald, Regina implies that since she cannot marry Oswald, she is going to go after other possibilities rather than nursing him.

Cauldron of Death does not only contain the Jungian trinity of archetypes of the self, but it also contains other physical symbols that support its structure. There are repetitions of symbols and images such as death, black, depraved male characters, good and innocent female figures, allusions to sexually active female figures

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and AIDS. These images and characters were not intentionally created by the playwright, neither were they culturally acquired by her, rather they may have come to her instinctually as impulses and knowledge buried in her biological, psychological, and social natures. Thus the archetypes encountered in *Cauldron of Death* are instinctive untamed behavior patterns that are common to all mankind. In reading *Cauldron of death*, the reader tends to be connected with archetypes which are recreations of universal patterns. These universal patterns, coincidentally already exist in the readers' unconscious. Hence, the reader's response appears to be in consonance with those of readers of a number of other dramatic texts from different times and space.

Conclusion

Dramas do not only provide link to the author's individual reality, but they also provide access into the cloistered environment of the authors. Universally, the creative dramatist seems to perceive him/her self as a catalyst, thus his/her aims at exerting some corrective influence on the readers and society through dramatic plays. The urge to regenerate society erupts from the repressed shared conflicts which the dramatist creatively expresses in the form of dramatic text. Thus this research reaches the conclusion that it is ancestral myths, societal fears, anxieties and desires which have proved to be shared among human species in spite of time and space that informed Tracie Chima Utoh's creation of *Cauldron of Death*.

Plays are therefore perceived by the researcher as cathartic revelations and expressions of the inner conflicts of dramatists in particular and those of the society buried in the dramatist's

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collective unconscious. The playwright's impulse to write then comes from his/her belief that the expression of these societal fragmentations may prompt the therapeutic purging of negative intentions which appear to negate orderliness. In the same way, the reader's experience with the dramatic texts might generate emotions of pity and fear so that the reader and society at large may be freed from the compulsion to repeat the experience of the characters in the text. Play texts are therefore the playwright's expression of the experiences of his/her society which are coincidentally shared by the entire human species. It appears thus that the seeming similarities among dramatic characters, symbols, and images stem from the universality of human struggles and desires. The constitution of the universal human symbols and patterns which is the collective unconscious helps the playwright to tap into a level of desires and anxieties of humankind. Little wonder why Utoh's *Cauldron of Death* and Ibsen's *Ghosts* elicits a seeming similar response from the readers.

Succinctly put, the archetypes found in Utoh's *Cauldron of Death* and Ibsen's *Ghosts* exist in the collective unconscious of the playwrights. These archetypes have been said to be innate, universal and hereditary. These archetypal characters are models of real people who exist in all places at all times with all people from all over the world. They serve as the basic foundation and impulse for the creative dramatist. However, varied dramatists expression of the archetypes is determined by their individual cultural influences and unique personal experiences. The shared unconscious is the idea given specific resonance by Utoh and Ibsen who in the disclosure of Junior's and Oswald's Nneoma's and Mrs. Alving's, Ikem's and late

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Captain Alving's personalities respectively, reveal the universality
of the nexus among family relations.

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