

A LITERARY EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF PERSONALITY DISORDERS

How does Tiffany D. Jackson's characterization of Mary Addison and Dawn Cooper Effectively Display the Social Effects of Psychopathy and Narcissism in her novel "Allegedly"?

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INTRODUCTION

Personalities are the first representation of a person, the driving force of human relationships. Across all types of relationships that humans have, (platonic, familial or romantic) the way in which people interact with each other all boils down to their personality. A human's personality comprises their thoughts, feelings, opinions, beliefs and experiences and all these affect one's behaviour when they interact with those around them.¹ The ability to notice social cues such as sarcasm, understand the atmosphere in a conversation, and empathise with other people's feelings is what constitutes of having a 'normal' personality. However, some people are unable to relate to the people around them, causing their day-to-day social interactions are deemed abnormal by the society. While not being able to understand the sarcasm in a friend's voice may not constitute abnormality, the inability to feel strong emotions such as happiness and sadness may be a sign that something is flawed. According to psychiatrists and neuroscientists, when a human is unable to function 'normally' with the people around them, they are considered to have a personality disorder.

Personality disorders are mental disorders where an individual's thoughts, behaviours and actions become harmful to themselves and others.² Some of these disorders include borderline personality disorder, psychopathy and narcissism. The most common traits the people displayed when in social settings are entitlement and impulsivity in their actions. Individuals believe that they are the most important people in any room and will go out of their way to prove it. People with personality disorders have difficulties identifying and dealing with their problems, so they pass on the blame to the people who are around them.

¹ Diener, Lucas, & Cummings.2019

² Medline Plus.2019

Tiffany D Jackson explores two prominent personality disorders in her novel, *“Allegedly”*. The book discusses the life of sixteen-year-old Mary B. Addison, who has been living in a juvenile home for seven years because she killed a toddler. Allegedly. Throughout the story, Mary communicates her thoughts and interactions with other characters, which provides an insightful look into her character, particularly her lack of empathy towards others. Mary experiences some of the normal life stages that teenagers undergo (like losing her virginity and practicing for her SAT’s) but also deals with unusual and uncommon circumstances (living in a juvenile home and being constantly monitored with an ankle bracelet). While the book is written in the present tense, with Mary narrating situations and her feelings as they are happening, there are snippets of the past events that shaped her personality and led her to where she is now. With these snippets, the reader gains insight on the many events and people affected her life while growing up and caused a large part of Mary’s personality defects. The main propagator of Mary’s instability during childhood, and emotional fragility throughout the book, is Mary’s mother, Dawn Cooper.

Dawn Cooper is a middle – aged woman who had Mary late in her life. The reader sees Dawn from Mary’s perspective, where she is painted as a self-centred villain who never cared about her daughter. Dawn is the cause of a majority of Mary’s trauma during her childhood years and is one of the only people who can bring out emotional reactions in her. While this affects how Mary portrays her mother to the audience, Dawn is an attention seeker and is not exactly the “model mother.”

Rationale

From my own interest in mental health disorders and previous reading I had done, it is clear Tiffany Jackson communicates different generalized covert and overt traits of personality disorders through her descriptions and characterizations of Mary and Dawn. Both characters constantly portrayed obvious narcissistic tendencies. However, after research on the disorder, Mary's meek and quiet personality did not correlate with narcissistic behaviours, and instead pointed towards the direction of psychopathic traits and symptoms. About ten to thirteen percent of the world suffer from some form of personality disorder³, displaying that Mary's and Dawn's experiences are not isolated or fictitious cases but affect a significant amount of the world's population. With the prevalence of these disorders, and the regular connotation of their risk to society, I aimed to investigate it, and landed on my research question: **How does Tiffany D. Jackson's characterization of Mary Addison and Dawn Cooper effectively display the social effects of psychopathy and narcissism in 'Allegedly'?**

³ Cleveland Clinic.2018

ANALYSIS

Emotional Disconnection

Tiffany Jackson explains that psychopaths are biologically unable to express feelings or sometimes even experience them. The lack of empathy causes these individuals to have a hard time understanding the emotions that people around them display, and therefore are viewed as cold or distant⁴. Due to the limited understanding of the avenues that they can use to display and express emotions, individuals with psychopathy may retreat from socializing with others as a form of protection. When interacting with other characters, Mary disassociates from any feelings or personal connections she may have with them, in order to protect herself from any emotional harm they may cause her. The abuse and negligence she underwent as a child causes her to resort to attaching her emotions to the environment around her or burying them when they boil up inside of her. This stunts her social growth and hinders her from being able to fully connect with the people around her, causing the reader to view her as shy and timid. The author displays Mary's inability to bond with other people through the anthropomorphism of Herbert, a fly that flew into the juvenile home, whom Mary 'adopted'. Mary establishes an initial connection between her and Herbert, stating that, "*he has survival skills, like me.*" (pg.1) At the beginning of every description of Herbert, Mary says "*Just like me,*" and this repetition reveals the bond she has formed with this fly, explaining that they are both indifferent about the environment and people around them. Mary's reiteration emphasizes that she is as lonely as a fly, thus evoking a sense of sympathy for her.

For psychological and emotional growth, people are advised to express their emotions so that they can understand their feelings and make headway on how to improve their reactions when

⁴ Medline Plus.2019

overwhelmed.⁵ However, ignoring these emotions can eventually cause an efflux of them, usually in an unhealthy manner, resulting in violent or exaggerated outbursts. To cover up and disregard the pain she felt as a child, Mary neglects displaying emotions, describing them as being “*frozen inside with the rest of my emotions.*” (pg.8) Choosing to use the word “*frozen*” emphasizes her lack of feeling, gradually introducing her characteristics and providing an insight about her behaviours and actions.

Distrust

Distrust and emotional unavailability may have always been a part of Mary, however the instability and confusion that being raised by Dawn brought on her, intensified these distrustful feelings. Malignant narcissists provide an outward image of being successful and self-reliant when they are extremely fragile and sensitive to criticism. The insecurity causes the narcissist to go out of their way to prove their stability, usually in grandiose ways that they are unable to sustain.⁶ This false reality eventually falls apart, harming any people that may have put their trust in the narcissist, and resulting in them distancing themselves so that they do not get hurt again. This is seen in Dawn Cooper, who seems to have a tireless pursuit for external validation, causing an impairment in her judgement. Dawn enjoyed luxury but was too poor to afford it. Dawn's paradoxical economical condition presents her narcissism and is brought out by Mary describing how, when growing up, Dawn would not buy boxed or canned food and “*she'd rather us starve than eat a pack of noodles*”. However, she would rather they eat “*real food*”, which cost money that they did not have; hence they “*did a lot of starving.*” (pg.31) These quotes brings out her pride, showing that she would rather live-in pain and distress than go out and be ashamed of being unable to provide for herself and her daughter. It also makes apparent Dawns self-centred nature, that despite the hunger her daughter

⁵ Firestone.2018

⁶ Goldner-Vukov & Moore.2010

is going through; she will not admit that they are poor and will keep up the charade of stability and independence.

Dawn's egocentric nature negatively affects her social life, costing her friendships, relationships and job opportunities. Despite the circumstances she is faced with, the priority is always on herself, something that the public views as utter selfishness, with her self-centred nature blinding her from the reality of those around her. A statement provided by an anonymous inmate from one of the facilities that Mary was held at, discusses how Mary "*never had much*" and could not buy necessities but Dawn "*came in here looking like the Queen of Sheba.*" (pg.125) This simile describes how Dawn's public appearance is her first and only priority, waltzing in and out of Mary's life as though her attention is a prize that must be won by her daughter. In order to keep up the public appearance of a caring and considerate mother, Dawn still visits Mary every other Sunday at the juvenile home but keeps her at arm's length due to the shame that she brought upon her. This paints a clear picture of her narcissism and her lack of concern on how it affects those around her and coming from a source that is not Mary, exhibits that the atrocities put upon Mary by her may not have been an exaggeration on Mary's part.

Emotional expression is vital in human interactions and assists in developing trust with other individuals. However, the abuse that Mary has gone through and her inability to connect with and display her emotions causes her to distrust the people who attempt to help her. This distrust of people comes out when she goes to Manhattan to speak with the lawyers who are part of the Absolution Project and has an internal debate when Ms. Cora tells her not to worry about paying for their services. Mary feels like "*this is a trap*" even though there is no evidence to suggest she should mistrust Ms. Cora, other than her intrusive thoughts telling her that "*No one is this nice for no reason.*" (pg.120) This internal debate describes to the reader that Mary is emotionally scarred and even when there is no reason for Mary to be scared of people's intentions, she is still

wary, and would rather be closed off than for there to be a chance for her to be exploited. This distrust in the people around her further emphasises Mary's outsider status, creating a disconnect between her and the environment.

Romance

Narcissists are often very charming and promiscuous but they do not form deep relationships with the people they are entangled with, usually hurting the other individual when they eventually end the relationship.⁷ While they do believe that they are always right and have no faults, narcissists are willing to shift their values in order to obtain favour from others, especially their partners, which usually results in them being controlled and abused, but unable to leave the relationship due to their pride.⁸ Dawn's interactions with the men in her life vividly displays her deep-seated need for attention and fear of dislike. Mary introduces her Mothers' boyfriend, Ray, who seems to be manipulative and controlling over Dawn, and due to her people-pleasing attitude, "*She did everything he said.*" (pg.62) Despite his control over her, Dawn was willing to change in order to fit a profile that Ray admired, dropping any values and morals that she may have had. This is explored when Mary reminisces over her childhood with her mother, describing that the place they "*went to most was church.*" This represents Dawn is an overly religious individual, who believed in God. However, as soon as Ray communicates his disbelief in the higher power, Dawn completely scraps going to church from her daily routine. This immediate change in principle causes Dawn to be viewed as "*a follower not a leader.*" (pg.59) and perpetuates her narcissistic diagnosis and people-pleasing attitude.

Throughout the novel, the author deliberately makes it clear that relationships are a difficult path for psychopaths to navigate and maintain. The lack of empathy means that they may be unable

⁷ Smith & Robinson.2019

⁸ Goldner-Vukov & Moore.2010

to relate to their partner, and therefore their relationships do not last because their partner is unable to connect with them on a deeper level.⁹ Mary is able to connect with a few people around her, but this connection is limited, and she tries her best not to completely open up to these people. When Mary meets Ted while working at the hospital, she starts an emotional and sexual relationship with him. Like her, Ted is also a juvenile delinquent, and they find solace in each other, even though they do not know the charges brought up against the both of them. Since emotional connection is difficult for psychopaths, they result in having possession over their partner so that they do not leave them.¹⁰ This can be seen in Mary's relationship with Ted. Both teenagers have little privacy because they are criminals, and this disturbs Mary, as she wants "*this to just be our world, our secret,*" (pg.75) and feels as if the tracking anklets are a disturbance to that. This evokes more compassion and pity in the reader, as they sympathize with her for being unable to experience a normal relationship and the feeling of free love. It distracts the reader to cause them to forget that Mary and Ted are criminals. Her controlling nature comes from a place of insecurity and fear that if Ted finds something wrong with her or finds out why she is in juvenile detention he will immediately leave her. This fear is brought out when Mary finds out she is pregnant and is unsure of how to tell Ted about it. When Ted projects his personal frustrations on Mary, she feels "*like a moon drifting farther away from my sun, lost and growing colder,*" (pg.42) surprised by the lack of composure and attention from Ted. The metaphor of him being her sun exhibits how Mary idolizes Ted, putting him on a pedestal and expecting him to provide her with attention the way the sun lights up the moon at night. It additionally indicates Mary's low self – worth, and her belief that she is unable to sustain herself, requiring the people around her to support her.

⁹ Pozueco-Romero, Manso, Alonso, & Sanchez.2013

¹⁰ Mackenzie & Beurkens.2015

Confrontation

The author brings to the attention of the reader that due to the inability to form deep emotions, individuals who suffer from psychopathy usually mirror other emotions and display the expected emotion in specific situations.¹¹ They study the people around them and mimic their actions in order to act in a way that will appease them and protect them from anyone who may figure out their intentions and from any potential harm. This may result in inappropriate behaviour if the wrong action is copied but can also make the psychopath seem abnormal due to their delayed or underplayed emotional expression. While at the juvenile home, Mary is timid and reserved, the tone of her voice being low and scared when she is talking to or addressing other people, and she is barely audible. Her shy demeanour at the home acts as an automatic shield for her during any conflict or confrontation. When Tara, one of the other inmates in the juvenile home, takes her SAT practice book (pg.23), she mumbles, “*Give it back*” and repeats the statement again when she is taunted. The volume and aggression in her voice does not increase, even though she wishes it did, and this low tone can be interpreted that Mary is not a violent and irrational person, even when attacked. This brings to question her character, causing the reader to wonder whether she actually committed the heinous crime, she was accused of. She copes with being questioned and shouted at by being quiet and complacent. Even in a situation where she would otherwise speak up, her automatic response is to be docile to not displease the person who is questioning her. Therefore, when Ms. Stein, one of the handlers in the juvenile home, finds her SAT practice book and questions her about it, “*her mind goes blank*” (pg.26) and she starts stumbling over her words. This metaphor persuades the reader to sympathize with her more as they view her as traumatized and possibly broken. This provides additional evidence of how the abuse that she suffered as a child

¹¹ Book et al.2015

resulted in Mary's helplessness when it comes to confrontation and general conversation with people.

The Unconscious

The common denominator between Mary's psychopathy and Dawn's narcissism is an interaction with their unconscious mind. The decisions and actions that one deliberately pursues are defined as our conscious mind. However, these decision-making processes are said to be influenced by our unconscious state of mind, the thoughts that we do not actively carry out. According to Freud's (1923) Psychoanalytical Theory¹² of the unconscious mind, our thoughts, decisions, and eventually personalities, are all controlled by three distinct parts of our mind: id, ego and superego. Mary's thoughts and interactions with those around her provide a picture of her underdeveloped and odd super-ego. Freud's initial superego theory was based on primary narcissism, the idea that an infant's libido is directed at themselves and not the outside world, and that they would eventually grow out of this and develop values that align with society.¹³ Mary was unable to experience this part of social-cognitive development. Mary describes her mother's aggressive and dissociative moments (pg.50) as her having '*a day*', indicating that this was a common occurrence for Dawn. This emotional instability and pawning off constant irate behaviour as a slight change of mood without any apology or change, is internalized by Mary, and she is unable to develop a moral understanding of right from wrong. This is further perpetuated by Mary's lack of formal schooling, where she would have been taught and picked up on acceptable behaviours towards people.

¹² Rennison.2002.pg 38-40

¹³ Rennison, 2002.pg 39

Mary's superego is an extension of her mother's reign over her life. Despite her best efforts to get away from Dawn, she believes she has a moral obligation to protect her. From the beginning of the book, it is clear Mary is not a big fan of her mother, referring to her as the "*most diabolical, most conniving woman in the world,*" (pg.3) in her first mention of Dawn in the book. Mary views herself as her mother's sole protector despite the multiple times she has been hurt by her. This is particularly visible when Mary recalls the beatings she has received from her mother, and how she imagined fleeing her home as this progressed, but would never leave, wondering, "*Who would take care of Momma?*" (pg.63) The rhetorical question is a juxtaposition when put alongside the pain and anguish previously indicated. It exhibits Mary's inner turmoil, and the constant prioritization of her mother over her own self, which could have stemmed from Dawn's ostentatious self-worth. With Dawn's belief that she is the most important individual in any setting, and Mary's emotional mimicry, this assumption of Dawn's significance was captured by Mary, resulting in Dawn's precedence in Mary's life.

Mary's outward appearance when interacting with people is subconsciously influenced by her mother. When preparing to go talk to the lawyers of the Absolution Project, she cleans and dresses herself in the same manner Dawn would do for her when she was younger, admitting, "*I couldn't help myself.*" (pg. 118) This line unveils the integration of Dawn in Mary's everyday choices. The superegos' need for perfection are closely aligned with Dawn's disdain for fallibility, becoming one and the same in Mary's unconscious mind, causing her to live under her mother's metaphorical shadow, even when she is not interacting with Dawn. Her values and beliefs are not from her own making of the environment around her, and instead are the words and actions of Dawn, stemming from the constant beratement she put upon Mary. Eventually, this translates to Mary's view of all the people around her, prioritizing them above herself, as is seen with her adoration and obsession with Ted.

Dawn's interactions with Mary and lack of emotional stability display a constant fight between her id and her super ego. The id is a human's primitive mind, seeking instant and complete gratification of our natural selfish desires.¹⁴ This is said to be controlled by our ego, the part of our unconscious that interacts with the environment, rationalizing the ids thoughts¹⁵. The ego is influenced by the superego, therefore, when human urges are 'out of control' it has conflict with personal ethics, causing a dilemma in the individual experiencing this. Dawn's narcissistic tendencies are an indication of an underdeveloped superego. However, her disassociation when experiencing great emotions is seen as an unhinged id, Mary explaining that when Dawn beat her, *"She was a whole different person altogether. Her eyes would go blank, face almost unrecognizably mashed up in rage."* (pg.64) Dawn's anger would take over her, and the visual imagery of her changing face explains the extent to which this occurred. This mental battle was usually won by her urges, causing immense emotional and physical turmoil not only to herself, but to all the people she interacted with, especially Mary.

¹⁴ Rennison, 2002.pg 38

¹⁵ Lumen Learning.2021

CONCLUSION

In *'Allegedly'*, Tiffany D. Jackson explores the ways in which personality disorders, specifically narcissism and psychopathy, affect human interaction through her characters, Mary B. Addison and Dawn Cooper. This is done to make the reader aware of the traits of these disorders, however small and insignificant, and how ignoring them can eventually lead to self-destruction and the breakdown of relationships with others.

Tiffany Jackson employs an array of literary devices when explaining her points. Rhetorical questions are used to explain the vulnerability of the characters, specifically Mary, and the turmoil that they experience. Metaphors and similes are utilized to explain and contextualize Mary's and Dawn's interactions with the people around them, providing the reader with insight on the feelings of the individuals who suffer from personality disorders.

The story ends with the final revelation that Mary did in fact kill baby Addison, despite the numerous amounts of times she denied it, convincing not only the reader, but the other characters around her. Mary is the narrator, therefore the perspective of the story has a high chance of being biased. It is possible that she downplayed the events that took place in order to get the reader to sympathize with her and consequently, the content must be reviewed with a grain of salt.

As was said by Raheel Farooq, "*the biggest challenge to the human mind is the human mind,*"¹⁶ and so this exploration can assist in further understanding and contextualizing the human mind, assisting in coming one step closer to defeating the challenge.

¹⁶ Wise Famous Quotes. 2021

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