



**International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)**

*A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal*

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-V, Issue-III, May 2019, Page No. 106-111

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v5.i3.2019.106-111

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## **The Hunt for Beauty: A Psychoanalytical Approach to the Narcissistic Personality Disorder of the Evil Queen in ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’**

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### **Abstract**

*In Freudian terms, Narcissism is ‘the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation’ (Freud, 1957, p. 105). Plainly, it refers to the excessive love and concern for one’s own self or extreme admiration for one’s own beauty and talents. In this paper, the psychoanalytical concept of narcissism is analyzed with reference to the image of the ‘Evil Queen’ who is the chief antagonist of the Snow White tales. Her yearning for ultimate physical beauty added with her envy for Snow White makes the evil queen one of the most gruesome and vicious antagonists in literature. This paper traces out the characteristics of Narcissistic Personality Disorder present in the Evil Queen, thus analyzing the queen’s vile hunt for beauty fostered by her self-pride and narcissist revenge from a psychoanalytical perspective.*

**Keywords:** *Narcissistic Personality Disorder, psychoanalysis, Evil Queen, Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept, libido.*

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**Introduction:** The term narcissism originated from an age-old Greek myth of Narcissus. He was the son of Cephissus, the river god and the nymph Liriope. Though there are many versions for the tale of Narcissus, the most famous one is that depicted by the Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. He was recognized as one of the most handsome man on earth during his time and won the admiration of many young women. But he cruelly rejected every one of them including the mountain nymph Echo who was deeply in love with him. This self-pride of Narcissus invited the wrath of Nemesis, the goddess of revenge and retribution, upon him. She led him to a clear water pool where he could find his own reflection in it. Narcissus was so deeply engrossed with his own image so that he even

forgot about food and rest. He mourned for the unattainable beauty which he witnessed in the pool, and finally died, lamenting his unrequited love. Many allusions to this story could be found in the sonnets of Shakespeare, Bacon's essays and works of Byron and Baudelaire. In the twentieth century, Freud used the term narcissism to define "an intermediate stage... between auto-erotism and object-love" (Jones, 1955, p. 304). Plainly, it refers to the excessive love and concern for one's own self or extreme admiration for one's own beauty and talents. In 1914, he published a paper 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' extensively dealing with narcissism as a concept in psychoanalysis.

'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' has been one of the most fascinating children's tales for over a century. It was first introduced by the famous Grimm Brothers in their 1812 edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (a collection of German folklores) under the title 'Sneewittchen'. Since then numerous adaptations of this story appeared as novels, animation movies and films including the Disney versions of Snow White. When Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published the first edition of the fairy tales, their intention was clearly to moralize the children, to make them conscious of virtues and vices. The princess Snow White is an embodiment of goodness and equity whereas the Evil Queen epitomizes malice and ruthlessness in its most crude form.

**Objective:** This paper tends to analyze the character of the Evil Queen in the light of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). The concept of narcissism as a personality disorder was developed by Walder in 1925. He describes individuals with narcissistic personality as "condescending, feeling superior to others, preoccupied with themselves and with admiration, and exhibiting a marked lack of empathy, often most apparent in their sexuality, which is based on purely physical pleasure rather than combined with emotional intimacy" (Campbell, 2011, p. 4). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, NPD is one of the dangerous anti-social personality disorders that is classified under Cluster B disorders. The Evil Queen of Snow White tales exposes serious symptoms of NPD that lead to her tragic end.

**Review of Literature:** Snow White was a little princess of a faraway land. Soon after she was born, her mother died, and father took a new queen who was a witch and possessed a magic mirror. Every day the queen would stand in front of a magical mirror and ask, who is the most beautiful women in this land, and the mirror would answer, "You, my queen, are fairest of all". But one day the mirror said that Snow White is a thousand times fairer than her. This ignited the flame of vile and ruthless revenge in the queen. She hired a huntsman to kill the princess. But the huntsman pitied the princess and let her go. In the dark perilous forest, she was given asylum by seven dwarfs. Meanwhile, the queen believed that Snow White had died. She again stood in front of the magical mirror and repeated her question. The mirror replied that Snow White is still a thousand times fairer than the queen. The Queen tried to kill Snow White twice and failed. But finally, she poisoned Snow White with a magic apple and put her to eternal sleep-like death. The dwarfs made a glass coffin for her and mourned for days. One day, a Prince happened to pass by the coffin. Mesmerized by her beauty, he wanted to kiss her. But when the coffin was lifted, the piece of apple in her

throat came out and Snow White sprang to life. At the end, she became the wife of the Prince and the Evil Queen was banished from the land. Though the different adaptations of the story have different endings, the Queen is finally repaid for her evils.

In the different adaptations of the story, the queen is portrayed in different colors. In the films like *Snow White, The Fairest of them All* (2001), and *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), the Queen is represented in a more humanitarian light. In these adaptations, the Queen's enmity for her stepdaughter is due to the excessive love that her husband gives to Snow White. The narcissism of the Queen in the Grimm's version of Snow White transforms into a competition between the stepmother and stepdaughter to gain attention from the male counterparts. According to Cristina Santos, the Queen is "a victim of her socio-cultural environment and patriarchal standards of beauty" (Santos, 128). In the 2011 television series, 'Once Upon a Time', a soliloquy of the Queen emphasizes her helplessness as: "I'm the Queen but practically a prisoner. With a husband whose heart is still with his dead wife and insipid daughter. I need freedom. I need options" (Once Upon a Time, 2013). Thus, her option was only to kill Snow White, to acquire love and freedom. However, in many other adaptations like the Disney animation movie 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', the Queen is darker and more despicable. The tragic end of the Queen is the inevitable result of her demonic deeds.

**Analysis and Major Findings:** The Evil Queen of the Snow White story is one of the most vicious and ruthless antagonists in literature. In the story, the queen is portrayed as ravishingly beautiful, but proud and conceited, and so engrossed with her beauty that she would kill anyone who is more beautiful than her. Here, the Freudian concept of Narcissism could be consolidated into the image of the Queen.

"One day when the Queen went to her secret room and stared into the mirror and the mirror stared blindly back as the Queen asked:  
Mirror, mirror, on the wall,  
Who is the most beautiful women in all the land?  
The mirror rippled and whispered, only this time it said:  
Lady Queen, you are the most beautiful woman here,  
But Snow White is a thousand times more beautiful than you.  
When the Queen heard the mirror, her heart almost burst with envy and hated. 'I cannot bear it,' she cried. 'I cannot bear it,' and she was without pity or mercy."  
(Grimm, 1982, p. 221)

'Envy' is a distinct feature that helps to identify a narcissist, which is widely used in experimental stimuli in clinical psychology. Narcissists possess a highly inflated sense of pride and self-admiration. So, their social behavior is often characterized by extreme confidence and competitive spirit, which leads them to being aggressive and hostile to some extent. The fear of failure, or a potential threat to their success can incite revenge in such a person. In 2013, a group of psychologists developed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC, see Figure 1). This is based on the idea that "the narcissist's

overarching goal to maintain a grandiose self can be achieved by two separate social strategies: the tendency to approach social admiration by means of self-promotion (assertive self-enhancement) and the tendency to prevent social failure by means of self-defense (antagonistic self-protection)” (Back et al., 2013, p. 1015). According to NARC, assertive self-enhancement triggers ‘narcissistic admiration’ that is characterized by striving for uniqueness, grandiose fantasies, and charmingness. Before the mirror told the Queen that Snow White was more beautiful, the Queen exhibited all these symptoms of narcissistic admiration. The behavioral dynamics attributed to antagonistic self-protection is called narcissistic rivalry, resulting in aggressiveness, striving for supremacy and devaluation of others. Thus, the Evil Queen’s urge to kill Snow White was her way of self-protection by eliminating the threat to her being universal beauty.

Freud categorizes narcissism as primary and secondary. Primary narcissism is the extreme self-love or ego libido (libido for one's own self). When this love for one's own self is directed towards an external person or object, it is called object libido. Secondary narcissism occurs when the object libido returns to one's own ego, thus withdrawing his libido from any object or being other than the person. “The libido that is returned to the ego creates a disinterest and indifference in the external world. The introverted libido, (the ego-libido), needs to store all the energy of the once object libido in the ego. The return of the libido causes megalomania which enlarges the ego’s size and thus allows the libido to house itself inward” (Freud, 1957, p. 106). It is this secondary libido that the queen retains. Her love is so self- centered that it is not directed to her husband or stepdaughter. In the tale, she is portrayed as an emotionless woman without motherly tenderness or affection. She not only summons to kill Snow White, but also craves to eat her heart. This beastly nature of the queen is incited by her narcissistic revenge.

The Queen epitomizes all the traits of a narcissist as pointed out by Freud. He argues that megalomania is an important outcome of narcissism. It refers to the obsessive desire for greater things in life, like power. Here, the megalomania of the queen is a result of her craving for ultimate physical beauty. She not only desires to be beautiful woman on earth, but also wants to destroy anything which is more beautiful. Freud introduced another significant term in association with narcissism, called narcissistic injury, which is anything that can threaten the pride of a narcissist. In the case of the Queen, it is Snow White’s beauty which poses a threat to her pride. However, her instinct to kill Snow White arises out of her narcissistic rage. It is a direct reaction to narcissistic injury. The vengeance of such a person against the object which poses a threat to them can lead them to a peculiar kind of revenge. This narcissistic revenge of the Queen is the reason for her constant urge to kill Snow White. Her sense of revenge is so profound that she attempts four times to destroy Snow White.

The magic mirror which the Queen possesses is a symbol of her own unconscious. In the case of Narcissus, the mirror-like reflection of the water in the pond reflects his unconscious. The Jungian psychologist Von Franz argues in her ‘Projections and Recollection’ that, “the symbolization of the unconscious by water with its mirror like

surface is of course based on a projection. Just as we cannot see into the depths of the waters, the deeper areas of the unconscious are also invisible to us...But on the surface, on the threshold area between conscious and the unconscious, dream images appear spontaneously, not only seeming to give us information about the depths but also mirroring our conscious personality” (Jacoby, 2017, p. 17). Thus, the magic mirror in the tale reflects the inner personality of the queen, revealing her admiration for own beauty. After frequently witnessing the beauty of Snow White, a conflict develops in her mind between her own beauty and Snow White’s beauty. This conflict further develops as a revenge to kill Snow White. So, the mirror is just an object to assert the Queen’s beauty at first, then to admit Snow White’s beauty, and finally to incite the narcissist revenge inside her.

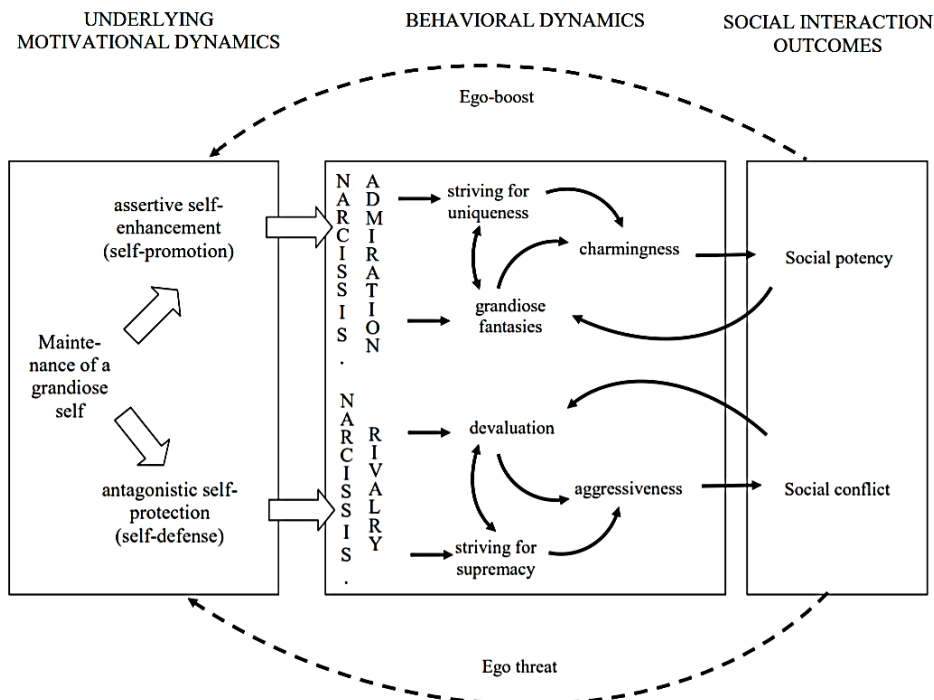


Figure 1. The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (Back et al. 2013, 1015)

**Conclusion:** Thus, the Evil Queen could be doubtlessly proved to be a victim of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Her evilness emanates from the psychological dilemma and despair of being seconded in her most ambitious space. The character of the Evil Queen symbolically represents the vanity of physical beauty. There are three different representations of beauty in the story; Snow White- the true embodiment of ideal beauty, the dwarfs- ugly in appearance yet beautiful at heart, and the witch- in whom evil is disguised as beauty. This dichotomy between the images of ideal beauty and the forged beauty contrasts the stereotypical concept that ‘what is beautiful is pure and what is ugly is evil’ as many poets and philosophers like Spenser have projected.

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