

Defense Mechanisms in Victor Frankenstein's Personality: An Investigation of Pathological Narcissism

Giuseppe Giordano (giugiordano1969@alice.it)

Research Scholar, Azienda Sanitaria Locale ASL CN2 Alba-Bra, CN, Italy



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee JRSP-ELT (2456-8104). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the **Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License**. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). **Crossref/DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54850/jrspelt.7.35.007>

Abstract: *Frankenstein is a Gothic novel well-known for its horrifying monster created by the hands of an ingenious but insane character who challenged the laws of nature and, more specifically, of human procreation. Victor Frankenstein is depicted by Mary Shelley as an arrogant and outrageous scientist who defies the normal evolution of humankind and generates a new life, his own child, a creature that, in the end, proves to be a complete failure in terms of physical appearance, human relationships and quality of life. The aim of this research paper is to investigate the personality of Victor from the representations given by the author in her work, such as the descriptions of behavior and mental states and the literary devices used in the novel. Then, all these elements are evaluated in relation to the psychological defense mechanisms which are described in detail in a final appendix. The analysis of the correlation between elements of the text and defense mechanisms will provide useful insights into the structure of the personality of this controversial figure as well as confirm previous research on pathological narcissism in Shelley's masterpiece.*

Keywords: Defense Mechanisms, Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, Narcissism, Personality

Introduction

The aim of this research paper is to explore the disturbed personality of Victor Frankenstein, the main character of the well-known story of Mary Shelley published first in 1818 and then revised in 1831. As a Gothic novel, it differs from other works of this literary genre because it does not portray the classical elements of a ghost story like ruined castles or victimized female heroines (Botting, 2014). It rather depicts a grotesque atmosphere in which an evil creature, symbol of human precariousness and scientific crisis, is created by the hands of an ingenious yet narcissistic scientist. The investigation of this character's personality in relation to pathological narcissism and the defense mechanisms underlying this mental disturbance is illustrated in this article with emphasis on the ways the author of the novel represented with words, utterances, feelings, behavior and facts the complicated psychological asset of Victor. Defense mechanisms are psychological reactions of the human mind that can be elicited by distressful events or emotional strain. They are typically unconscious, involuntary, and likely reversible, and their main scope is to reduce mental tension and to find a better adaptation of the individual to the conflicting and emotional situation which is being experienced (Vaillant, 1994). Sigmund Freud was one of the first scholars to theorize the existence of these mechanisms as he first detected a mental reaction adopted by hysterical patients, called repression, to explain the dislocation of strong affects into the unconscious part of the mind. These mental reactions were further researched by Freud himself and his daughter Anna, as well as by other psychoanalysts thus describing a wide range of defense mechanisms that can be differentiated according to their function, level of adaptation and possible meaning. A detailed classification of the psychological defense mechanisms is provided in Appendix 1 for reference (Lingiardi, 1994). Narcissism is a psychopathological condition characterized by the exhibition of specific defense mechanisms which explain the expression of clinical symptoms such as grandiosity, lack of empathy, arrogance, need of appreciation and egocentrism which are frequently responsible for individual suffering and social dysfunction (Kampe, 2021). Modern diagnostic manuals for psychiatric disturbances (i.e., DSM-5) classify narcissism as narcissistic personality disorder and provide a complete list of symptoms and complications related to this mental condition. In essence, the reasons justifying the

behavior of a narcissistic person may be connected to intense feelings of inferiority, shame and hopelessness along with a lack of self-recognition which cause significant distress and are managed by the individual with the use of defensive and maladaptive reactions of the mind. The severity, the persistence and the intensity of these reactions is what differentiates pathological narcissism, which Kampe defines as grandiose, from a less severe form called vulnerable which is characterized by a better adaptation to life and less mental stress. The psychological functioning of Victor's personality is, at a first reading of the novel, more in relation to grandiose narcissism but this point will be further examined in the discussion section of this paper. The problem of narcissism in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been the object of a previous investigation (Kenster, 1995) which highlighted significant elements of the troubled personality of the main character. In particular, the wish of Victor to create a double or alter ego in which to reflect his own idealized identity, but when the other turns out to be a complete failure, the narcissistic injury or wound (Lovering, 2022) causes a mental breakdown that forces Victor to flee. Flight is the reaction of such a grandiose personality when confronted with his own creature who does not correspond to his initial expectations. The lack of personal gratification and feelings of loneliness will induce Victor to seek for another person who can be reassuring and caring, such as Walton, but, in the end, all his efforts to find an object of love and to reestablish his mental equilibrium are clearly unfruitful.

Methodology

The investigation of this paper consists in a qualitative close analysis of selected passages of the novel with a particular focus on the descriptions of events and mental states, significant utterances, language choice and figures of speech which best depict the defense mechanisms adopted by a narcissistic personality. The list of defense mechanisms provided in Appendix 1 is of support here to better comprehend the textual analysis of the chosen excerpts while the histogram of Appendix 2 from Kampe's study gives a good illustration of the relationship between narcissism and the specific psychological reactions that are employed. Psychoanalysis as a discipline plays an important role in this study since it is concerned with the understanding of the unconscious parts of the human mind, of hidden meanings and psychological conflicts as well as relational and emotional aspects. The novel examined in this study can be considered as a patient who is undertaking a psychoanalytical session: the expert critic or reader evaluates and perceives unconscious aspects, emotions, and mental dynamics during his interaction with the written word. This approach to a literary text is called *textoanalysis*, conceived by a French academic who argues that analyzing a psyche is not different from analyzing a text (Bellemin-Noel, 2012). Therefore, the two disciplines, literature and psychoanalysis, can support each other in a final interpretation that should be sensible, thoughtful and discernible. Lastly, the author of this paper is a psychiatrist who is trained in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and has a long experience in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders.

Discussion

The first defense mechanisms that can be detected in the novel is displacement, basically a way to cope with conflicts by moving on the undesired affect to another idea or situation which is more tolerable for the individual. Victor, the first narrative voice, describes it in the following excerpt:

'My temper was sometimes violent, and my passions vehement; but by some law in my temperature they were turned, not towards childish pursuits, but to an eager desire to learn' (F, 30)

Here Shelley has chosen some words which refer to the mechanism of displacement: 'passions' and 'vehement', both giving an idea of the inner turmoil of the character, then 'turned' that implies a movement towards something else, and finally 'eager' which reflects the enthusiasm related to the wish to learn (which is conscious) and also to the resolution of the conflict (of which Victor is unaware). Moreover, the term 'temperature' may be a metaphor for the emotional state of the character as well as a reference to

the psychological concepts of temperament, innate inclination, or emotional response. To reinforce the picture of Victor's personal conflict and of its intensity, it is worth to highlight the following utterances:

'I find it arise, like a mountain river, from ignoble and almost forgotten sources; but, swelling as it proceeded, it became the torrent ...' (F,31).

The metaphor of the mountain river along with torrent likely gives the idea of something that is running or flowing away with a vigorous movement, in this case it may refer to the psychic energy that is associated with an inner struggle.

Idealization is a second mechanism that is represented in Shelley's book. This mental process is characterized by an excessive value or importance given to a particular object, and this is the case of Natural philosophy which is considered by Victor as the perfect and highest knowledge as described in the next passage.

'Wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!' (F, 33)

It is possible to argue, from the analysis of these words, that wealth, synonym of well-being, is not Victor's interest rather he aspires to greater but unreachable ideals ('my only visions'), that of defeating illnesses and death. It is the magnitude of this aspiration that is in accordance with the ideas of grandiosity that typically affect a narcissistic personality. Moreover, the individual wishes something that is superior to his present situation which is unsatisfying but often with no awareness of it. Indeed, Victor was a wealthy person in his time, likely too proud ('ardent imagination') and young ('my childish reasoning') to understand that he was escaping from mental wellbeing. The problem with grandiosity is illustrated in another chapter of the novel, where it is the same character who reports his mental condition:

'... but my imagination was too much exalted ...' (F, 42)

'No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success.' (F, 43).

The simile used here, hurricane, gives an idea of the degree of energy and power that Victor is experiencing at this time of the story.

Idealization is the opposite of another mechanism, devaluation. It consists in the attribution of exaggerated negative qualities to oneself or to others as a way to manage the anxiety caused by ambiguity. As a matter of fact, the shift between these two processes is very commonly observed in narcissistic personalities (Leonard, 2022) in the sense that the individual may first admire or praise a person or a situation and then, in a second time, show dislike or aversion as shown in the following passage:

'... and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged by an eagerness...' (F, 43).

The problem here is that Victor may exalt or degrade his work according to the gratification he may or may not receive.

A further analysis of the text reveals the existence of another maladaptive operation, projection, by which an intolerable idea or affect is expelled from the individual and located to another person or object. Projection is clearly displayed in the following excerpt, in which Victor changes his interest to mathematics and attributes this conversion to the merit of a supernatural being.

'When I look back, it seems to me as if this almost miraculous change of inclination and will was the immediate suggestion of the guardian angel of my life ... Her victory was announced by an unusual tranquillity and gladness of soul' (F, 34)

What appears here is a young man who is seeking refuge into phantasy rather than keeping contact with reality, and this process is more convenient to Victor as he can restore his mental peace. The extent of this projection is so intense that the individual is convinced that it is not he who determined the transition rather the result of the intervention of an external and prestigious entity. In addition, this mechanism is used by Victor in a similar way in another context as shown in the following passage as he tries to justify Professor Krempe's attitude towards him:

'Chance, or rather the evil influence, the Angel of Destruction who asserted omnipotent sway over me led me first to M. Krempe' (F, 36)

Interesting is the shift from a good angel who is acting positively in his life to an unpleasant entity who has a negative impact. This transition from a favorable to an unpleasant influence in Victor's opinion refers to another defense mechanism often employed in narcissism which is splitting. It consists of the coexistence of two attitudes towards external reality which are generally opposing and not integrated. In simple words, good and evil cannot coexist in the same person and for Victor his fate is either 'miraculous' or destroying but not something between these two extremes. The opposition between these two attitudes recalls the problem of the dualism good/bad as well as moral/immoral that will recur frequently in the novel likely to reflect the frailty of Victor's personality, in particular his doubts about the righteousness or wrongness of his final deed. At first, Victor is extremely excited by the idea of generating a new life from inanimate objects:

'A new species would bless me as its creator and source. No father could claim of his child ...' (F, 43)

but this initial condition is opposite to a later remark made by this man on his own invention:

'... but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.' (F, 45)

And the consequence of the horror will be the manifestation of an anxiety state as shown in the following utterances:

'unable to compose my mind to sleep' (F, 45)

'a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered' (F, 46)

Remarkable is also the conflict with omnipotence and grandiosity that is illustrated here by the author likely to underline the existence of two core aspects of narcissism. On one side, the belief the person is superior to others and on the other side, the responsibility of one's actions which are unconsciously attributed to other people or situations. The former aspect is reinforced by other utterances in the novel ('more, far more, will I achieve ... I will pioneer a new way' F, 38) while the latter confirms the pathological use of projection as discussed above.

A question rises at this point of the analysis: why does Victor need to feel superior? What lies behind his ideals of grandeur? An answer to this issue is provided in the following scene from the novel (F, 36) when he leaves his family to go to Ingolstadt.

'I threw myself into the chaise [...] and indulged in the most melancholy reflections [...] I was now alone. [...] but I believed myself totally unfitted for the company of strangers.'

A depressive state is clearly depicted in this excerpt and visibly specified with the use of the term 'melancholy' but the mental condition is aggravated by the description of feelings of solitude along with Victor's inability to form new relationships as a consolation to the lack of his loving family. Furthermore, the image of the man that abandons himself onto a chaise refers to a sense of helplessness, resignation or

anergy which are typical features of depression. Interestingly, his departure from home follows the loss of his beloved mother who died of an infectious disease. Death is clearly unacceptable for this young man who struggles against bereavement and, most important, is forced to deal with the separation from the object of love, thus generating an intense melancholic state which is a common complication in narcissism (Mayo Clinic).

Confronted with his failure and with the reality of his deeds, Victor experiences a severe mental breakdown which can be reported to the employment of another defensive strategy called dissociation. In practice, the individual copes with acute emotional stress by acting a disintegration of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. This is confirmed by the following expressions in which the character describes his emotional instability and precarious mental state.

'This was the commencement of a nervous fever' (F, 49); then 'I jumped over the chairs, clapped my hands, and laughed aloud' (F, 48); and 'I imagined that the monster seized me; I struggled furiously, and fell down in a fit' (F, 48). Dissociation is observed often in narcissism (Howell, 2008), it is commonly linked to a trauma and can be related to relational problems, which in Victor's case are represented by his inability to attach or empathize with his own creature and eventually the horror and disgust towards the final production.

The analysis has highlighted so far at least six defense mechanisms typically used by a narcissist person, which are displacement, idealization, devaluation, projection, splitting and dissociation. These mechanisms along with other psychological symptoms discussed above, grandiosity, sense of entitlement, arrogance, lack of empathy, egotism, depression, rage, emotional instability (DSM-5) all confirm that Victor is affected by narcissistic personality disorder. Kampe's work on grandiose and vulnerable narcissism supports the results of this investigation. In fact, a close look of the histogram in Appendix 2 demonstrates that the above mentioned mechanisms are very frequently detected in grandiose narcissism, a condition which is characterized by severe social dysfunction, psychological distress and low life satisfaction. The severity of the mental disorder is further confirmed by the use of immature defenses, such as dissociation, splitting and idealization as shown in Appendix 3, which according to Vaillant are commonly observed in personality disorders. Victor will never recover from his mental condition since he will never be able to find tranquility, not even from his marriage to his loved one. Instead, he will be continuously tormented by his own creature until the end of his life as shown in a final chapter of the novel:

'My present situation was one in which all voluntary thought was swallowed up and lost. I was hurried away by fury; revenge alone endowed me with strength and composure;' (F, 133)

Conclusion

The problem with narcissism is to find an adequate treatment to the dysfunctional and abnormal behavior manifested by the individual. It is hard to find a cure especially because the individual is often unable to be introspective or self-critical and, for the nature of the disorder, to attach to a therapist and establish a positive and constructive relationship. As a matter of fact, Victor shows many signs of mental suffering because he has a high opinion of himself, is self-centred, does not consider the consequences of his actions, rejects the support of academic experts, is unaware of the immorality of his achievements and challenges the laws of science and nature. All these aspects are the symptoms of a severe mental disorder and are explained by the employment of the different defense mechanisms discussed in this paper. The persistence of a mental illness will bring misery to Victor's entire life and to that of his beloved ones as well, and the story will end with no good resolution but the death of the character. Paradoxically, the monster will outlive his creator and probably dwell on earth for eternity ('He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance.' F, 170) which means a potential risk for humankind. As suggested by Kampe, the behavior of a narcissist is indeed dangerous, risk taking and may have fatal

consequences for the individual who is unable to seek proper treatment for all his acquaintances who are often the target of rage outbursts and impulsivity. Finally, the defense mechanisms discussed in this paper provide a clear idea of the pathological personality of Victor Frankenstein and of the cleverness of Mary Shelley who was able to represent with remarkable linguistic choices the complexity of her character's personality and, even more, to explore with accuracy the multiple facets of pathological narcissism.

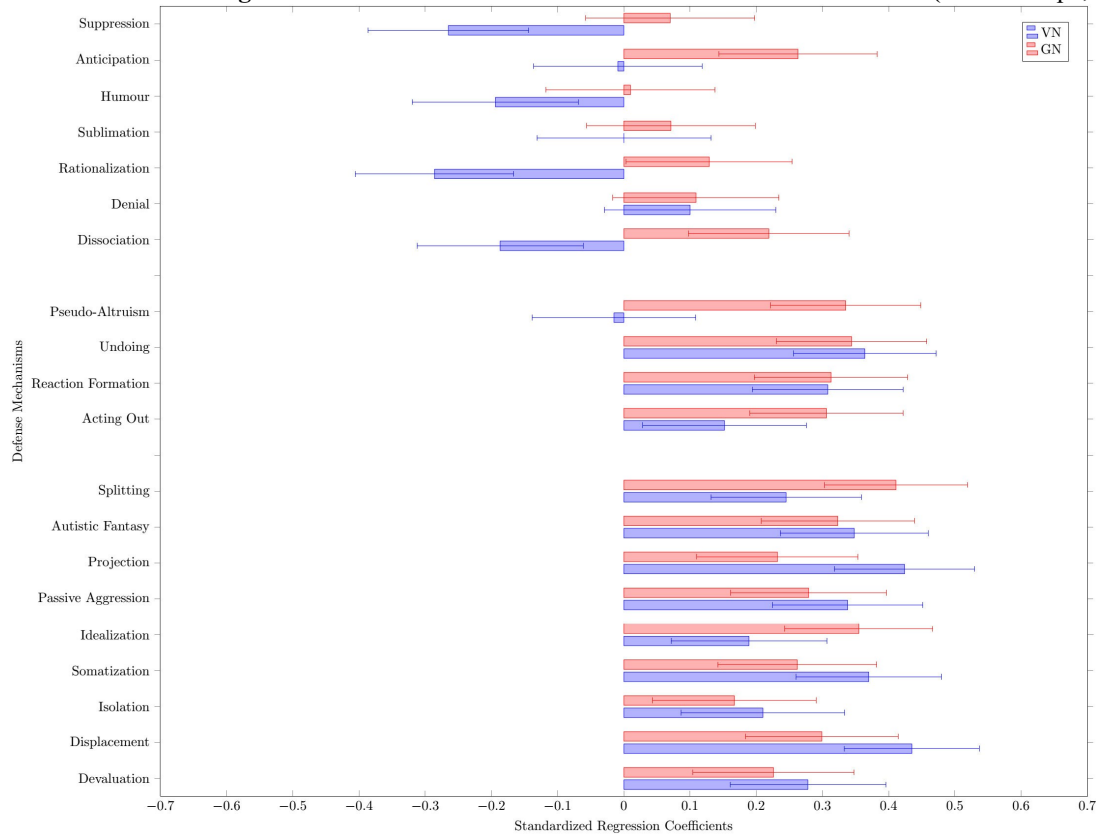
References

- Bellemin-Noel J (2012) *Psychanalyse et littérature*, pp. 209-234. Press Universitaires de France (PUF), Paris
- Botting F (2014) *Gothic*, pp. 92-96. Routledge
- DSM-5 Category: Personality Disorders. Narcissistic Personality Disorder DSM-5 301.81 (F60.81). Available at [https://www.theravive.com/therapedia/narcissistic-personality-disorder-dsm--5-301.81-\(f60.81\)](https://www.theravive.com/therapedia/narcissistic-personality-disorder-dsm--5-301.81-(f60.81))
- Howell E, (2003) Narcissism, a Relational Aspect of Dissociation. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 4: 3, 51-71. doi: 10.1300/J229v04n03_04
- Kampe L, Bohn J, Remmers C and Horz-Sagstetter S (2021) It's Not That Great Anymore: The Central Role of Defense Mechanisms in Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism. *Front. Psychiatry* 12: 661948. doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2021.661948
- Kenster J (1995) Narcissism as Symptom and Structure: The Case of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Available at <http://knarf.english.openn.edu/Articles/kenster.htm>
- Leonard, E (2022) Understand a narcissist from object relations perspective. How a narcissist manipulates and controls by playing favorites. *Psychology Today*. Available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/peaceful-parenting/202203/understand-narcissist-object-relations-perspective?amp>
- Lingiardi V, Madeddu F (1994) *I meccanismi di difesa Teoria clinica e ricerca empirica*, pp. 125-198 Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Lovering N (2022) Narcissistic Injuries: What They Are and More. PsychCentral. Available at <https://psychcentral.com/lib/narcissistic-injuries-what-they-are-and-how-to-protect-yourself-from-them>
- Narcissistic personality disorder Symptoms and Causes. Mayo Clinic. Available at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/narcissistic-personality-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20366662>
- Shelley M (1999) *Frankenstein*. Wordsworth Editions.
- Vaillant G (1994) Ego Mechanisms of Defense and Personality Psychopathology. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 103, No. 1.44-50. Available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8040479/>

Appendix 1: Definition of the main defense mechanisms in pathological narcissism (From Lingardi, 1994)

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Displacement | The person redirects a negative emotion from its original source to a less threatening recipient. |
| Idealization | The person attributes exaggerated positive qualities to himself or to other people |
| Devaluation | The person attributes exaggerated negative qualities to himself or to other people |
| Projection | The person attributes his ideas, affects or experiences to another person who is commonly considered as a threat |
| Splitting | The person copes with overwhelming emotions by seeing someone as either good or bad. Splitting means to divide something. |
| Dissociation | The person copes with intense stress by separating ideas and feelings from the rest of the psyche. |

Appendix 2: Influence of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism on defense mechanisms (From Kampe, 2021)



Appendix 3: Classification of defense mechanisms according to level of psychopathology (From Vaillant, 1994)

| Category | Defense |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Psychotic defenses | Denial (of external reality) Distortion (of external relality) |
| Immature defenses | Passive aggression Acting out Dissociation Projection Autistic fantasy Devaluation Idealization Splitting |
| Neurotic (intermediate) defenses | Intellectualization Isolation Repression Reaction formation Displacement Somatization Undoing Rationalization |
| Mature defenses | Suppression Altruism Humor Sublimation |