

The Abusive Mother-Daughter Relationship in *The Act* the Series (2019)

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyze the abusive mother-daughter relationship in *The Act* (2019). *The Act* (2019) is a true crime drama series based on the real-life story of Gypsy Rose Blanchard and her mother, Dee Dee Blanchard. The series tells the journey of Dee Dee's physical and mental abuse, as well as her controlling behaviour toward Gypsy. In this analysis we focus on how Dee Dee treats Gypsy and why Gypsy responds to Dee Dee's treatment in certain ways. We will use Nussbaum's objectification theory to analyze Dee Dee's treatment, and McClelland's three social motive theory to explain Gypsy's responses. The findings reveal that Dee Dee has the desire for power, recognition and wealth, while Gypsy has the need for independence and affiliation pushes her towards rebellious actions. This study concludes that a mother figure does have an impact on a child's growth and development.

Keywords: mother-daughter relationship, objectification, parental abuse, three social motives

INTRODUCTION

True crime drama is a genre of nonfiction that focuses on telling stories of real-life crimes, such as child abuse, murders, kidnappings, robberies, and other criminal activities (Hellerman, 2024). The origin of true crime stories can be traced back to the distant past. However, by the 19th century, true crime journalism gained popularity among popular literary figures such as Charles Dickens and William Thackeray. During this period, advancements in criminology, such as, fingerprinting and ballistics, revolutionised police investigation (Wiltenburg, 2004), which inspired writers such as Victor Hugo to write stories using real-world investigation techniques, which laid the groundwork for the detective genre.

True crime stories have evolved from early cautionary tales and ballads to a widely popular genre. They transform into a widespread trend exploring the psychology of criminals and the criminal justice system. Its popularity is due to its ability to provide closure to crime victims and their families (Cornett, 2024). Nowadays, the true crime genre continues to engage audiences through books, movies, and TV shows, often drawing inspiration from real-life criminal cases to provide insights into the criminal world and the law. The future of true crime stories looks promising with advancements in this digital era. This interactive approach could create a new perspective for true crime enthusiasts. Some viewers would argue that it may exploit victims, and others believe the genre raises awareness about crime and justice. As technology evolves, so do storytelling methods; the true crime genre will continue to fascinate audiences and provide meaningful perspectives on the darker aspects of humanity. However,

sometimes the true crime genre can negatively affect the victims and their families. According to APnews.com, Erik Menendez, a former prisoner sentenced to life in prison, unexpectedly gained the possibility of release. However, not through the workings of the legal system, but due to public attention generated by entertainment. Following the release of the case, the Los Angeles District Attorney recommended his resentencing (Shapiro, 2024). These documentaries also led some audience members to criticize and attack the victim's family, claiming the situation was unfair. While the true crime genre can have a negative impact, these instances appear to be rare.

While these negative impacts exist, they have not stopped the genre's growing popularity, especially for women. A study by the University of Illinois found that 70% of Amazon reviews on true crime books are by women. Additionally, according to the University of Law, over 52 million viewers watch *American Murder*, which is a true crime genre. According to bbc.co.uk, women enjoy the true crime genre because it offers an adrenaline rush when watching without real danger. Additionally, women watch true crime to understand the mindset of criminals or predators, which can make them feel safer and help them avoid dangerous situations in real life. However, both genders do enjoy the true crime genre. According to a survey on Yougov.com, true crime is a popular genre in the U.S., with 50% enjoying it and 13% naming it their favourite genre. In addition, according to Dean Fido, lecturer in Psychology at the University of Derby Online Learning, true crime drama gives the audience looking for something new, and a "puzzle" to fix. The excitement of the movie could give the audience a short, sharp shock of adrenaline, but in a safe environment. There are many authors who find joy in crafting true crime stories; one notable figure in this genre is Nick Antosca. Born on January 23rd, 1983, he was known for his work in television and film, particularly within the horror genre. According to Goodreads.com, Nick Antosca consistently receives over 4-star reviews from thousands of readers. Reviewers enjoy his creativity in transforming true crime stories into fictional narratives that build tension towards the audience. Nick Antosca is known for his successful works such as *Channel Zero*, *A Friend of the Family*, and *The Act*. Seeing his work, he won the Shirley Jackson Award for Best Novella in 2009 for his novel, *Midnight Picnic* (Shirley Jackson Awards, 2009).

We are interested in analyzing this TV series because of its popularity, and it is based on a real-life story. As previously mentioned, Nick Antosca is a highly regarded author, best known for his work on *The Act*, a drama series that premiered in 2019 as a Hulu Original. The series gained popularity due to its star cast, including Patricia Arquette, Joey King, and Anna Sophia Robb, which earned a spot among the top 400 TV shows according to IMDb. The series has over 40,000 user ratings on IMDb and earned 7.8 out of 10 stars (Shirley Jackson Awards, 2009). In addition, the series could be streamed on multiple platforms such as Amazon Prime Video, Google Play, and iTunes. Another reason why we are interested in this series is that it is based on a real-life story. The series is inspired by true events and adds a layer of emotional depth, making the narrative more engaging. Therefore, real-life stories make it much more interesting to the audience.

The true-crime drama series, *The Act*, is a story about the life of Gypsy Rose Blanchard and her mother, Dee Dee Blanchard. Dee Dee is a mother that exaggerates Gypsy's medical conditions to gain money, attention, and control. While Dee Dee presents herself as a pretended

selfless caregiver, she manipulates those around her, including Gypsy, to maintain control over her. Gypsy believes she is gravely ill and grows up isolated and dependent on her mother, unaware of the lies surrounding her life. As Gypsy matures, she begins to question things and slowly uncovers the truth about her health and her mother's manipulations. Desperate to escape, Gypsy finds herself trapped by Dee Dee's control. As she comes of age, Gypsy starts to feel attracted to men and eventually begins a secret relationship with a boy, Nick Godejohn, whom she meets online. Since then, she begins her journey towards freedom. Gypsy conspires with Nick, her boyfriend, to murder Dee Dee, which they succeed. In summary, the drama series is about a problematic mother-daughter relationship.

The Act is a story that portrays a real-life issue about an abusive mother-daughter relationship, which is an interesting topic worth analyzing. It is worth analysing because child abuse, particularly by mothers, is a serious yet often overlooked problem. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2019, 62% of victims of child maltreatment were perpetrated by their mother, making mothers the most common perpetrators of child abuse. Which means, there are thousands of children being abused by their mothers. According to National Children Alliance.org, child abuse could hurt their minds, bodies, and future. This implies that the trauma of a child's abuse could cause mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. As estimated, 1 in 4 girls in the U.S experience child abuse, according to CDC.org. Additionally, analyzing *The Act* is important because it highlights the harmful effects of abusive mother-daughter relationships, a real issue many people face. Understanding more about abusive mother-daughter relationships is crucial, as it helps us become more knowledgeable about their effects and the treatments that are available to support healing and recovery for the child. Since this series discusses the abusive mother-daughter relationship, represented by Dee Dee as the mother and Gypsy as the daughter, we investigate how Dee Dee treats Gypsy, and why Gypsy responds to Dee Dee's treatment in certain ways. Gypsy and Dee Dee Blanchard have a complex relationship influenced by psychological factors. In this article, we will apply two main theories, objectification theory and three social motives, both of which are based on psychological perspectives. The objectification theory will explore the way Dee Dee treats Gypsy, while the three social motives will help explain the reason why Gypsy responds to Dee Dee's treatment in certain ways.

We will be using objectification theory to analyze how Dee Dee treats Gypsy. There are a lot of scholars who have different perspectives on objectification theory. Originally, objectification theory is a feminist theory. However, we will be using Martha Nussbaum's perspective. Objectification could be defined as the seeing and/or treating of a person, usually a woman, as an object (Nussbaum, 1995, p.251). This means that Martha believes that objectification theory is when someone is being used as an object. Objectification theory usually involves two people, one who has objectives and one who is being objectified (Bartky, 1990). Martha Nussbaum has found seven features that are involved in the idea of treating a person as an object, which are instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (Nussbaum, 1995, p.261). However, in this article, we will focus on using three of them: instrumentality, ownership and violability.

Social motives are the psychological processes that drive people's thinking, feeling, and behavior in interactions with other people (Folmer, 2016). It means that social motives focus on

the psychological factors that influence how people think, feel, and act when interacting with others. This theory will be used for analyzing the reason why Gypsy responds to Dee Dee's treatment, because social motive theory explains Dee Dee's reasons for treating Gypsy abusively. Some scholars are famous for their theory of social motives. One of them, Hans-Joachim Kornadt, is known for his research on social motives, particularly focusing on Aggression Motive and Achievement Motive. Aggressive behaviour is motivated to hurt or destroy something or somebody (Kornadt, 2015). For example, a person who tends to outperform another person in a competitive sport without intending to hurt the other person. However, focusing on the motivational process, the goal and behaviour are different; the goal is to win, but his behaviour hurts the person. Meanwhile, the achievement motive is defined as the motive to be successful, to perform well, to be capable, to improve the standard of excellence (McClelland, 1961). Meaning achievement-motivated people are interested in doing something for its own sake or doing something better. McClelland proposes three social motives that drive people to behave. Those are the need for affiliation, the need for achievement, and the need for power. The three social motives from McClelland's explain a person's motive, which would be used to analyse Gypsy's responses towards Dee Dee's treatment. The three social motive theories explain the reasons behind Gypsy's response to Dee Dee's treatment. The theory allows a deeper understanding of the psychological motivations driving both characters' actions in the abusive mother-daughter relationship.

Overall, we use two theories in this analysis. Firstly, we will use the three out of the seven features of objectification, as it highlights how Dee Dee treats Gypsy. Secondly, we will use the three social motive theories for explaining the reasons behind Gypsy's responses to Dee Dee's treatment.

ABUSIVE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

In this part, we will analyze the abusive mother-daughter relationship in *The Act* the series, as it focuses on the two main characters, Dee Dee and Gypsy Blanchard. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first section will show how Dee Dee views Gypsy as an object. The second section focuses on Gypsy's response to Dee Dee's treatment, such as her progression from being obedient to rebelling. Overall, this chapter will use objectification and three social motive theories to analyze the mother-daughter relationship in the series *The Act*.

Dee Dee's Treatment Towards Gypsy

The parent-child relationship is important for growing up. In a family life, the mother, as the main caregiver, has a more important role than the father in bringing up children (Akgün, 2010), which means a mother is a role model for the children. A healthy mother-daughter relationship is full of support, positivity, handling conflict properly, and accepting each other for who they are. A healthy mother and daughter relationship is one in which they are able to lean on each other when times get tough (Casey, 2024). Meanwhile in *The Act* series, Gypsy and Dee Dee have an abusive mother-daughter relationship. An abusive relationship means treating someone with violence, disrespect, cruelty, harm, or force (Dovi, 2021). Throughout the series, Dee Dee's relationship with Gypsy contains abusive behavior. Dee Dee treats Gypsy as an object for her own benefits. According to Martha Nussbaum (1995), treating someone as an object is labelled as objectification. She writes, "objectifying is treating a person like a tool for

his or her purposes” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. X). In Dee Dee’s case, she views Gypsy as an object by treating her as a tool to gain power, recognition and wealth.

Firstly, Gypsy was treated as a tool to gain power. Throughout the series, Dee Dee wants power over her daughter. She has the desire to control others because she needs to have power. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, power is a possession of control, authority, or influence over others. Which means having control over others. Dee Dee objectifies Gypsy as a tool to gain power. The way she has power is reflected in the way she treats Gypsy, for example in episode 2, Dee Dee drugged Gypsy to gain control before a child services check on Gypsy. When Allison arrived, Gypsy was drugged by her mother, to make her appear sick, disoriented, and unable to answer truthfully. As a result, Allison received false information, allowing Dee Dee to maintain control over her daughter. By drugging Gypsy, Dee Dee shows her dominance and gains power over her. This relates to one of the features of Nussbaum's objectification theory, namely, instrumentality. Instrumentality happens when the objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purpose (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 247). In this case, Dee Dee, as an objectifier, uses Gypsy as a tool to gain power over her life.

Secondly, Gypsy was treated as an object to gain recognition. Throughout the series, Dee Dee thrives on recognition. She constantly seeks recognition because she needs to be the center of attention. The way she searches for recognition is reflected in the way she treats Gypsy. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, recognition is the ability to positively identify someone or something. In the series, Gypsy was used as a doll to be played with. In public, she was treated like a princess; however, at home, she was treated carelessly. Gypsy was used as an object to gain recognition, for example in episode 3, by dressing Gypsy pretty like a princess in public to gain attention. In that scene, Gypsy was dressed up beautifully for a convention, however at home she is not allowed to wear make-up. This shows that Dee Dee treats her daughter poorly and only presents her well for people's recognition. This reflects to violability, as described by Martha Nussbaum, using someone as if they have no personal boundaries, making it seem acceptable to be harmed or used (Nussbaum, 1995:247). Throughout the series, Gypsy lacks boundary-integrity, as evidenced by her always obeying whatever her mother tells her to do. Which allowed Dee Dee to use Gypsy as an object to gain attention by others.

Thirdly, Gypsy was treated as a property to gain wealth or asset. In the series, Dee Dee uses Gypsy as a tool not only to fulfill her need to be recognized and have power but also to gain wealth or asset. According to the Cambridge dictionary, an asset is something that has value, such as a possession or property, that is owned by a person. This means Gypsy is being used as an asset for Dee Dee’s financial benefits. For example, in episode 1, Dee Dee uses Gypsy by hosting a small gathering in the new neighborhood to get donations for a supposed “eye operation”. This scene also demonstrates the concept of ownership, which is a characteristic trait of objectification theory. Ownership is when the objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another and can be bought or sold (Nussbaum, 1995, p.247). This situation reflects how Gypsy was treated like a property to be sold. By using Gypsy’s fake illness to gain sympathy and collect donations for a made-up eye surgery, Dee Dee was essentially “selling” Gypsy’s condition for financial profit.

In conclusion, Dee Dee views Gypsy as an object, treating her to gain power, recognition and wealth. Firstly, Dee Dee treats Gypsy as a tool to gain power because Dee Dee has the need for power over Gypsy's life. Secondly, Dee Dee treats Gypsy as an object to gain recognition by other people, because she needs to be the center of attention. Finally, Dee Dee treats Gypsy as a property to gain financial benefits. Overall, Dee Dee views Gypsy as an object throughout her life while being abused physically and mentally just to please her mother's needs.

Gypsy's Responses to Dee Dee's Treatment

A healthy family is filled with respect, boundaries, fairness, and a feeling of safety with each other (Indurain, 2023). Meanwhile, Gypsy didn't grow up with any of those things. As mentioned above, she was physically and mentally abused and manipulated by her mother throughout her life. This constant abuse during her childhood affected Gypsy's development as an individual, causing her to miss out on many essential life lessons. As a result, it influenced her character and behaviour development. A proper mother figure is essential for healthy character development. A study states that a child's emotional and behavioral development is influenced by their parents (Edossa, 2017). Gypsy's behavior throughout the series appears odd or inappropriate for her age due to the abuse she endured from her mother, which eventually led to Dee Dee's death. We will be analysing Gypsy's responses towards Dee Dee's treatments and the reason behind it. Gypsy's response can be divided into three categories, obedience, curiosity, and rebellion.

Gypsy's first response towards her mother's treatment is obedience. She is introduced at the beginning of the series as a 19-year-old girl who has many medical problems, additionally she was treated like a child. Throughout those 19 years, she believed every word her mother said. According to Gypsy beliefs, her mother never lied and was her best friend. Therefore, Gypsy willingly went along with Dee Dee's stories about her illness, she was obedient. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, obedience is an act or instance of obeying. Gypsy's first response towards Dee Dee's treatment is obedience because she was manipulated and treated like a child. For example, she believes everything her mother says, especially about her health. In episode 2, Gypsy was checked by Dr. Lakshmi Chandra for medical checkup, and mentioned that Gypsy doesn't need her feeding tube to be permanent. However Dee tells Gypsy that the doctor is wrong about her not needing the tube, and in the end Gypsy believes her mother. She reacts this way to her mother's treatment, obediently, because she has the need to build a close relationship with her. This motive relates to one of the three social motives, which is the need for affiliation. The need for affiliation, also known as nAFF, is the need to build close relationships, be accepted, and belong to a social group (McClelland, 1961). Which means, Gypsy feels the need to belong with someone, either a friend or a mother. Hence, Gypsy's first response to her mother's treatment is obedience.

Gypsy's second response towards her mother's treatment is suspicion. As children grow up, they naturally become suspicious or curious about many things. In early childhood education is the stage of recognition of one's own identity, where children acquire a series of lessons with stages of curiosity or suspicion that will contribute to overall development (Suardi, 2021). In

other words, suspicion or curiosity is an essential part of a child's growth. According to the Cambridge dictionary, suspicion is feeling doubt or having no trust in someone or something. As previously mentioned, Gypsy was manipulated and lied to by her mother and as she grows older, she becomes suspicious about the truth. The suspicion started early in the series, episode 1, when Gypsy overheard the doctor mentioning that she was not actually allergic to sugar. At night, driven by suspicion, she secretly tries some whipped cream and realizes that she is perfectly fine consuming sugar. This moment is significant because it marks the first time Gypsy recognizes that Dee Dee has been lying about her health, leading her to become more suspicious about other things her mother may have hidden from her. As a child, Gypsy needs to form her own identity, and being curious about new experiences and knowledge is a natural part of that process. This relates to McClelland's Three Social Motive Theory, the need for achievement, which refers to a desire to excel or meet personal standards. Which is shown by Gypsy wanting to know the truth about herself.

Gypsy's third response towards her mother's treatment is rebellion. When it comes to rebellion, every child will come to this phase. According to TOI Life Desk (2024), every child will rebel at some point because it is a process of growing up. Children rebel because they are finding their identity, seeking attention, desiring to have control, testing boundaries, seeking acceptance, exploring new things and many more. However, in Gypsy's case, she grows up without any control over her own life, basic knowledge or basic rights, which causes her to rebel in harmful and misguided ways. According to OxfordLanguages.com, Rebellion is an act of violent or open resistance to an established government or ruler. This means rebellion happens when someone strongly fights back against control. For example, in Gypsy's case, Dee Dee never introduced Gypsy to boys which made her overly curious and easily attracted to them even when she had just met them for the first time. In Gypsy's perspective, it was her first intimate interaction with a male, which causes her to develop strong emotions and believe she is falling in love with the stranger. In the end of the scene, Gypsy decided to rebel by running away from home and be with Scott. This act of running away and engaging in an intimate relationship reflects Gypsy's growing rebellion against her mother's control. Her actions happened because of her desire for independence, something her mother had long denied. This connects to McClelland's Three Social Motive Theories, the need for power (nPow). The need for power is the desire to control others (McClelland, 1961). For Gypsy, running away wasn't just her curiosity about romance, it was about reclaiming power over her own body and choices. Gypsy have the desire to control their own choices.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the mother-daughter relationship in *The Act* (2019), focusing on how Dee Dee views Gypsy and why Gypsy responds to Dee Dee's treatment in certain ways. Using Nussbaum's objectification theory and McClelland's three social motive theories, the analysis reveals that Dee Dee objectifies Gypsy by treating her as a tool for power, recognition, and wealth. In response, Gypsy's behaviours such as obedience, curiosity and rebellion are driven by McClelland's three social motives. Overall the series highlights how a mother figure significantly impacts a child's growth and development. While children depend on their mothers for love and care, Gypsy lacked these essential needs. As a result, her responses were shaped by years of manipulation and abuse, leading to misguided actions. In the end, Gypsy's story is not just a tragedy, it is also a reminder of what happens when a mother's love becomes controlling.

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