

Narcissistic Attitudes of Disney Villainesses in Serena Valentino's Series

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes narcissistic attitudes in five female villain characters in the Disney Villainesses series by Serena Valentino: Evil Queen, Lady Tremaine, Mother Gothel, Cruella, and Ursula. In the Serena Valentino series, initially these five female characters are depicted as good characters, but slowly they become evil characters. With that, this study aims to explore how their narcissistic attitudes such as manipulative, a need for validation and lack of empathy to others slowly develop within them. Otto Kernberg's narcissism theory is used to see how early trauma, feelings of insecurity, and disappointment shape the narcissistic attitudes of the characters, making them manipulative, needing validation, and lacking empathy for others. The results of the analysis show that painful past experiences greatly influence the development of narcissistic attitudes that shape the way they manipulate others, demand validation, and lack empathy for others.

Keywords: manipulation, narcissistic attitude, Otto Kernberg, Serena Valentino, villainesses character

INTRODUCTION

Children's Literature refers to books or poems that are often written for children (Junaid, 2017). This genre is almost similar to adult literature, but children's literature uses simpler language so that it can be easily understood by children. There are three main criteria for children's literature, namely, the main character in the story is a child, the theme and language contain simple language, and the story must contain a moral message that can be learned (Oby, 2020). In recent years, children's literature is in great demand and is quite popular among readers, especially in the United States and England. Data from Coolest Gadgets shows that in 2023, the global children's book market is worth around USD 12.3 billion and is expected to grow to USD 13.5 billion in 2024, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.5%. This market is projected to grow to USD 16 billion by 2028. Additionally, a survey by Statista reveals that in the United Kingdom, children aged 8–11 are the most enthusiastic readers, with many of them citing reading, especially children's books, as a fun activity. This data shows the growing interest in children's literature in both countries and predicts that its popularity continues to grow until 2028.

One example of this genre is the type of stories featuring iconic villain characters such as Mother Gothel in *Tangled*, who is famous for her obsession with keeping herself young; the Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, who is obsessed with being the most beautiful woman to the point of poisoning Snow White to seize the position as the most beautiful; Jafar from *Aladdin* (1992), who manipulates the sultan to seize the throne and control Agrabah; Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, who is selfish and wants to rule the ocean by taking advantage of Ariel who loves humans; and Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*, who is known as the terrifying black queen who puts Aurora to sleep because of her magic. They are villains who are often depicted as evil figures without any clear background as to why they are made evil characters. Serena Valentino is present in her villain series by exploring how their life experiences, traumas, and personal conflicts play a role in shaping their characters.

Serena Valentino is an American comic book writer, author, and storyteller known for her works in highlighting the perspective of villains. She has published ten books that focus on exploring the in-depth characters of villains. Some of the books she published are *Fairest of All*, *The Beast Within A Tale of Beauty's Prince*, *A Tale of The Sea Witch*, *Mistress of All Evil*, *Fairest of All*, *Mother Knows Best*, *The Odd Sisters*, *Evil Thing*, *Cold Hearted*, *Captain Hook* and *Poor Unfortunate Soul*. However, her work receives criticism from Disney fans because it is considered very different from the real story. Serena Valentino adds the Odd Sisters characters throughout the story as the main characters so that it is considered not to focus on the villain character as the main character (Alex, 2018). Although the series has received criticism from Disney fans, the Serena Valentino series offers a unique perspective by uncovering untold stories of how the characters transform into bad people. This study will not analyze all characters, but this study focuses on villainesses who have narcissistic attitudes in the story.

In *Fairest of All*, Evil Queen is obsessed with getting validation from her magic mirror; her obsession makes her willing to do anything, even kill the other woman deemed to be more beautiful than her. In *Cold Hearted*, Lady Tremaine mistreats Cinderella in the hope for her daughters to surpass Cinderella. *Mother Knows Best* tells how Mother Gothel, who is eager to look young, manipulates Rapunzel to stay in the tower and away from the outside world to maintain her power. In *Evil Thing*, Cruella shows her lack of empathy towards people and Dalmatian puppies; she does not think about their feelings for her own happiness. The last is *Poor Unfortunate Soul*, which tells Ursula, who manipulates Ariel by giving false hope to avenge Triton and become the ruler of the sea. These five stories are interesting for this study because many people only know that the five characters are evil and cause suffering to the protagonists. Serena Valentino invites readers to dig deeper into their character changes. Readers learn they were initially good characters through her works in *Fairest of All*, *Cold Hearted*, *Mother Knows Best*, *Evil Thing*, and *Poor Unfortunate Soul* through all of their backgrounds.

We will use Otto Kernberg's theory of pathological narcissism to analyze villainesses characters in Serena Valentino's *Disney Villain* series. According to Kernberg (1995), narcissistic attitudes can appear in the form of manipulative behavior, a need for validation, and a lack of empathy. These attitudes are often self-defense mechanisms formed in response to emotional wounds experienced in the past. Kernberg explains that individuals with narcissistic tendencies tend to build an idealized self-image to protect themselves from emotional pain, such as trauma, deep disappointment, and feelings of insecurity. He states that "individuals develop a grandiose self as a shield to protect themselves from vulnerability, rejection, or feelings of worthlessness" (p. 229). This theory helps explain how villainous characters, who are initially depicted as good characters, develop into evil with narcissistic attitudes. In this study, the focus is on the three main narcissistic attitudes—manipulative behavior, a need for validation, and a lack of empathy—and their underlying causes, namely early trauma, feelings of insecurity, and disappointment. This study investigates the narcissistic attitudes displayed by Queen Grimhilde, Lady Tremaine, Mother Gothel, Cruella de Vil, and Ursula in Serena Valentino's *Disney Villain* series.

THE NARCISSISTIC ATTITUDES OF THE FIVE VILLAINESSES

Based on Otto Kernberg's theory of narcissism, this research identifies narcissistic attitudes namely, tendency to manipulative, craving for validation, and lack of empathy possessed by the villainesses in Serena Valentino's series, including Evil Queen, Mother Gothel, Lady Tremaine, Cruella and Ursula.

Tendency to Manipulate

Manipulation is an action that someone uses to achieve their goals in a dishonest way (Shyroka, Anastasiia 2020). According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, manipulation is a behavior used to control, exploit, and influence others for him/her benefit. This can be seen in three characters in the Serena Valentino series namely, Mother Gothel, Lady Tremaine, and Ursula. Gothel deceives Rapunzel by saying that the outside world is dangerous. She instills fear in Rapunzel to prevent her from leaving the tower, hoping that Rapunzel will be obedient and stay in the tower because of her own desire so that she will not try to escape. She wants to use Rapunzel's fear to imprison herself in the tower. This is evident in her statement: "The world is dark, selfish, and cruel. If it finds even the slightest ray of sunshine, it destroys it" (p. 411). This statement serves as a tactic to make Rapunzel believe that the outside tower is dangerous and strengthen her dependence on Gothel. Gothel sees her chance to further manipulate Rapunzel. Gothel's manipulation is successful when Rapunzel finally believes her by saying, "You were right, Mother. You were right about everything" (p. 410). From this moment, Gothel's manipulation not only wins Rapunzel's trust but also further establishes her control over her. By using Eugene as an example that thieves cannot be trusted, Gothel successfully instills the beliefs that the outside world is full of lies and danger. This reaffirms that Mother Knows Best—that a mother, in this case Gothel, always knows what is best for her child. Gothel's ability to manipulate Rapunzel's feelings ultimately works. By hiding the fact that she is Rapunzel's kidnapper, instilling fear of the outside world, and twisting the truth about Eugene, Gothel ensures that Rapunzel remains emotionally dependent on her. She carefully creates an illusion of love and protection, making Rapunzel believe that as a child, she should listen to her mother because she always knows best. However, Gothel's words and actions show that her concern is not for Rapunzel's good but for her purposes.

The second character who uses manipulation to get their goal is Lady Tremaine from *Cold Hearted*. Lady Tremaine uses manipulation to achieve her goal of revenge for everything Sir Richard, Cinderella's father and her second husband, does to her and her two daughters. Lady Tremaine does not immediately forbid Cinderella from going to the ball. Instead, she uses false hope - a form of subtle manipulation that makes it seem as if Cinderella still has a chance when, in fact, she does not. This is seen in her statement, "Well, I see no reason why you can't go...if you get all your work done" (p. 97). This sentence sounds permissive and neutral, but it is a trap. The phrase "I see no reason why you can't go" creates the illusion of freedom, giving the impression that Lady Tremaine is giving permission. However, the condition she puts forward, "if you get all your work done," is a form of control. She knows that the homework is too much to complete quickly. In this context, Lady Tremaine's manipulation is strategic—she allows Cinderella to feel like she has a choice when, in reality, Lady Tremaine remains in complete control of the final decision.

The last character who uses manipulation is Ursula from *Poor Unfortunate Soul*. Ursula uses Ariel's disappointment in her father to gain Ariel's trust. She acts as if she is her savior and the only person who truly understands Ariel. In order to carry out her actions as a savior, Ursula offers a way to be with the human she loves, by becoming a human. She makes Ariel believe there is no way Ariel can pursue her love other than asking for her help. This is seen in her statement, "The only way to get what you want is to become a human yourself." (p. 60). By saying this, Ursula creates the illusion that Ariel's choices are limited and this is the only way she can take; by providing a solution that seems reasonable but is a trap, Ursula leads Ariel to make a decision that will ultimately harm herself.

In conclusion, Gothel, Ursula, and Lady Tremaine are three characters who use manipulation as their main weapon, each employing different tactics to serve their own purpose. Gothel relies on psychological manipulation to maintain her power, constantly convincing

Rapunzel that the outside world is dangerous and that only she can protect her. Lady Tremaine uses verbal manipulation to crush Cinderella's spirit, making sure she never takes the chance to change her fate and be with the prince. Meanwhile, Ursula masters deception by disguising her schemes as generous offers, trapping Ariel in a nearly impossible deal that ultimately serves her own revenge. Though their methods vary, all three are intelligent, calculating, and driven by deep-seated resentment, carefully crafting elaborate plans to achieve their goals.

Craving for Validation

In *Fairest of All*, Evil Queen is a character who has fragile self-esteem due to her past trauma of her father's bad treatment, which makes her seek external sources of validation for her self-confidence. The attitude of always wanting to be validated is one of the narcissistic attitudes when someone always wants to get praise and validation from the people around them to maintain their self-image (Kernberg, 1975). When she first tries to ask about her beauty which is depicted in her words, "Tell me, mirror, who it is that is fairest in the land?" (p. 147), what she asks shows how she begins to shift her source of validation from the king and Snow White to the magic mirror. When the magic mirror answers, "You are, my Queen," (p. 148), Grimhilde who is previously sad because she loses her source of validation slowly gains a new source of happiness as described in this quotation,

And as evening fell and the Queen retired to her room, she found herself armed with a new confidence. She approached the mirror in her chamber and said to her reflection, 'I am the fairest of all (p. 151).

This quote shows that after receiving validation from the mirror, Grimhilde begins to feel more confident and even forgets her sadness over the King's death. This proves that when there is no one around her to give her validation, and the mirror can fulfill that role, she becomes more dependent on it.

In conclusion, Grimhilde's desire for validation develops over time after she becomes used to receiving validation and attention from the King and Snow White. When the source of validation disappears, Grimhilde begins to seek validation from other things that can give her a sense of appreciation by saying she is beautiful—the magic mirror. This shows that Grimhilde does not have a strong sense of self-confidence, so she relies heavily on external validation to feel valuable. She builds her self-esteem not from within herself, but through the validation of others toward her.

Lack of Empathy

Lack of empathy refers to a person's cold, callous, uncaring attitude, and non-verbal aggression. According to the *American Psychiatric Association*, it is the tendency of a person to be unable to understand feelings and needs for others. As Kernberg has said, people who have narcissistic attitudes generally have no empathy for the feelings of those around them. They usually prioritize their desires and needs and are not hesitant to do anything for personal happiness without regard for their feelings or impact on others. Cruella shows no concern for the Dalmatian puppies, whom she initially views as mere means to achieve her ambitions. She does not hesitate to end their lives in order to make a coat to give to her mother, hoping to gain her affection and recognition. When the person she hires fails to kill the puppies, Cruella creates an urgent situation by saying that the police are looking for her, so someone she hires will immediately carry out the order without hesitation. This is reflected in this quotation:

It was the only way I could get them to do the deed quickly. Simple men that they were, they had no idea how to go about slaughtering a bunch of puppies. I didn't care how they did it. I just wanted it done. I needed those puppies. I still do (p. 248).

From this quote, Cruella does not care how the puppies feel pain, even what happens to them afterwards, all she cares about is how she gets the dog's fur which will fulfill her goal to make the fur coat her mother likes most, that's all she thinks about. Cruella shows her narcissistic

attitude, namely lack of empathy, she never thinks about other people's feelings to realize her ambitions, she is even willing to hurt Dalmatian dogs just so that she is able to gain her mother's recognition. As she says, "Then she will love me again. I am sure of it" (p. 251).

All of the five villainesses mentioned, each has a different narcissistic attitude. Gothel, Ursula, and Lady Tremaine all show manipulative actions to achieve their goals. Gothel tries to maintain her power by keeping Rapunzel and her golden hair from leaving her. Ursula manipulates Ariel and Prince Eric as part of her plan to get revenge on Triton and show that she is superior by ruling all the seas and lands. Lady Tremaine tries to manipulate Cinderella into not attending the castle, so that her daughters have the opportunity to change their fates by marrying the prince. On the other hand, the Evil Queen continues to seek recognition to ensure that she remains the most beautiful woman in the kingdom and Cruella shows a lack of empathy by ignoring the feelings of others—even Dalmatians—in order to pursue her ambition to make her mother proud.

FACTORS THAT MAKE THE FIVE VILLAINESSES DEVELOP THEIR NARCISSISTIC ATTITUDE

Early Trauma

Early trauma arises due to painful emotional experience early in their life. When children are raised by parents who are cold, unfeeling, uncaring, and even emotionally abusive, this fosters self-hatred and a lack of self-worth. As stated by Kernberg (1975), past trauma caused by early relationships that are cold and emotionally unresponsive can become the basis for the development of narcissistic traits. Children who grow up in a family environment like this tend to develop into individuals who lack empathy, are often indifferent to others, and feel angry. This condition is evident in Grimhilde, or Evil Queen, Cruella and Gothel.

The first character that faced early trauma in her past is Grimhilde from *Fairest of All*. Grimhilde's trauma begins with her mother's death during childbirth. Her father deeply loves and adores her mother, who is often described as "very beautiful." However, because her mother dies giving birth to her, her father continues to see Grimhilde as the reason for his wife's death. This is reflected in her words when Grimhilde tells the king about her past, "My mother's death was a result of my birth, and I am sure my father blamed me for it" (p.109). These words, which she hears repeatedly from her father, shape the way she sees herself—as a mistake. When a child is constantly blamed for something beyond her control, she internalizes that blame, leading her to believe that she is worthless and undeserving of affection.

The second character that faced early trauma in her past is Cruella from *Evil Thing*. When her father dies and her mother travels around the world, Cruella feels she has a close relationship with her servants and her best friend, Anita. However, her mother does not like their closeness and forbids the relationship, as depicted in her mother's words, "I don't want you seeing that girl anymore, do you understand?" (p. 121). Her mother's words show she has full control over who has the right to be close to her. Cruella has no right to choose who will be her friend or even her best friend. Anita is one of the people who gives her sincere emotional support, which she never even gets from her mother. However, her mother forbids it, and she has to lose one of her emotional supporters. Not only that, her mother also says, "They're not people, Cruella. Not like you and me! And I won't have you socializing with them" (p. 123). Her mother's words clearly shape Cruella's perspective that people beneath their social status are not worthy of being treated with respect or regarded as equals. Their feelings are considered unimportant. Her mother's words become the foundation for Cruella's loss of empathy toward others, especially the lower class people.

The last character who experiences trauma that forms her narcissistic attitude is Gothel as she blames herself for her mother's death. In *Mother Knows Best*, Gothel experiences several losses that are her mother's and two sisters' death. Gothel chooses to save her two sisters whom her mother wants to hurt by burning the rapunzel flower. As the flower is the source of her mother's power, her action also causes her mother's death when "Manea screamed as she started to wither and age and crumble to dust. She screamed in pain as the rapunzel burned" (p. 86). Realizing that she is the one who causes her mother to perish, Gothel experiences a deep trauma as she blames herself by repeating that "I killed her. I killed her! Gothel's head was spinning. She couldn't believe she had done this. She wanted to take it back. She wanted to try to reason with her. Give her a chance. But it was too late. Everything was destroyed. Everything was in ruins" (p. 86). This incident leaves a deep trauma in Gothel which makes her keep blaming herself.

In conclusion, Grimhilde, Cruella and Gothel's narcissistic attitudes grow because of early trauma formed due to emotional wounds from their past, even though the forms are different. As Kernberg says, "early trauma, whether in the form of abusive neglect, overstimulation, or selective deprivation, can lead to the internalization of malignant object relations and, later, the development of pathological narcissism" (p. 234). The trauma they experience in the past makes them build a stronger self-image to cover up their fears by developing attitudes that require validation, manipulative, and lack empathy for others.

Feeling of Insecurity

Kernberg (1975) stated that one of the main characteristics of narcissistic personality is the presence of a deep sense of insecurity and inferiority. People who have this attitude often feel that they are not valuable enough and worry about losing the admiration of others. In *Fairest of All*, one of the reasons Grimhilde really wants to be validated by others is because of her high feeling of insecurity. Because her father never gives her validation, Grimhilde has a great sense of insecurity over her beauty. Even though the King has given her his validation over her beauty, Grimhilde treats it as an insincerity, as how

She just looked at the portrait in wonderment, wishing his words were sincere, but unable to take them as anything but flattery from someone who must have needed something from her. Her father's estate perhaps? The remaining mirrors? Whatever it was that the King wanted, it could not have been her (p.17)

This quote shows how Grimhilde views the king's sincere words to her as a lie. This is caused by the many doubts and feelings of insecurity within her because she is used to believing her father's words. This sentence "whatever it was that the King wanted, it could not have been her" shows that her insecurity makes her feel unworthy.

Disappointment

Disappointment is a common human emotion related to an individual's expectations of the outcome of an action or event (Zeelenberg et al., 1998). When someone experiences feelings of disappointment toward others, they may appear to be depressed, but underneath it is anger, resentment, and revenge (Kernberg, 1985). This happened to the two villainesses, Ursula and Lady Tremaine, where when they felt disappointed with others because their expectations did not match the reality given by the person concerned, the disappointment eventually grew into a desire for revenge.

Ursula has a different physical form from the mermaids, Triton forces her to change herself to be accepted by the sea people. This is illustrated in Ursula's confession to Odd Sisters about her past when Triton takes her to the sea, "He didn't think his precious merfolk could stomach the likes of my true design, so he ordered me to hide myself within a mermaid's body!" (p. 34). This quote indicates that her physical form must be disguised as it is considered to be a

disgrace. Ursula is forced to adjust herself to the standards set by others to be accepted, not out of protection but because of rejection. Her disappointment deepens when the narration states, "Triton had stolen her beauty. He made her hide in a version of her human form, not allowing her to be herself. She had been trapped and made to feel loathsome" (p. 23). This implies that Triton robs Ursula of her ability to love herself, leaving her feeling trapped and disgusted with who she is.

The second character who experiences disappointment is Lady Tremaine. Before meeting Cinderella's father, Sir Richard, Lady Tremaine is a widow who lives luxuriously with her two daughters from her husband's inheritance, Lord Francis Tremaine. She then decides to remarry for the sake of her 2 daughters as depicted in this quote, "Anastasia and Drizella had cried so many tears for their father, there had been no room for her own. Lady Tremaine had to be strong for her girls and do whatever she could to make them happy again" (p. 57). This quote reflects her hope to have a father for her two daughters and a husband who supports her. Lady Tremaine decides to marry Sir Richard because she thinks they have mutual needs. She needs a father for her two daughters and a husband, and Sir Richard needs a mother for Cinderella and a wife. In this statement, "He talked of wanting a mother for his daughter, someone to raise her, and to be a wife to him. He spoke of combining our wealth to create a secure future for our children, and for ourselves" (p. 77). Sir Richard seems to promise that she can recreate a happy family and there is also an assurance that she can live with ease as her wealth and that of Sir Richard's ensure a life free from financial concern. These words make Lady Tremaine believe that their marriage will bring happiness to her and her two daughters.

In conclusion, their past experiences such as early trauma, feelings of insecurity, and disappointments—form them into evil characters with narcissistic attitudes. Grimhilde grows up to be someone who desperately needs validation, while Gothel, Lady Tremaine, and Ursula show manipulative tendencies to achieve their goals. Cruella, on the other hand, loses her empathy in order to achieve her ambition to gain her mother's recognition. All of these villainesses show that their narcissistic attitudes do not come from birth, but rather form from the bad experiences they have had in the past.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study shows the development of narcissistic attitudes in five villainesses in Serena Valentino's series, revealing that their transformation into villains is not the result of an innate evil nature but rather a response to early trauma, feelings of insecurity, and disappointment. These experiences trigger the growth of narcissistic tendencies that become more pronounced over time as these characters seek to protect themselves and seek power or recognition. As John Locke argued, humans are born as blank slates, and the influences of their environment, family, and life events shape their personalities (Hafiz, 2024). Valentino's depiction of these characters suggests that their narcissism is not an innate attitude but rather a defense mechanism that develops in response to their bad experiences in the past.

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