

Narcissistic Personality Disorder in Lord Alfred Douglas: A Psychological Insight into Oscar Wilde's Letter *De Profundis*²²⁶

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Honouring Wilde's memory in the 125th anniversary of his death

Abstract:

This essay, presented as a literary essay to honour Oscar Wilde's memory in the 125th anniversary of his death, aims to cast some light on the psychology of lord Alfred Douglas by dealing with testimonies about his personality and behaviour, shown by Wilde in the letter he addressed to his lover during his imprisonment in Reading Gaol, from 1895 to 1897, called *De Profundis*. Taking the DSM-5-TR manual as a theoretical reference mixed with an innovative approach to the topic, the hypothesis that Alfred Douglas could be diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder has been formulated. This viewpoint, which has not been much studied to this day and could, therefore, give rise to ambiguity and discrepancies amongst scholars and thinkers, can ultimately serve as a conjectural exercise to, conceivably, understand the emotional abuse and toxicity that may have existed between the lovers. It also presents a plausible reason for the suffering and last erratic moves that led Wilde to his downfall, trying to find some closure to his experience through a new psychological insight. *De Profundis* is a text which requires further study and it can still be read nowadays as a powerful source of information about the author's life and, arguably, as a testimony of what emotional abuse can do to a victim of a possible NPD manipulator.

Keywords: Narcissistic Personality Disorder, DSM-5-TR, Oscar Wilde, Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis*.

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1. Introduction

De Profundis is a long letter written by Oscar Wilde during his imprisonment in Reading Gaol from 1895 to 1897, as a result of the trials between the Marquis of Queensberry and the playwright. Particularly, this conflict was promoted, to a great extent, by the Marquis' son, Alfred Douglas, and the trials led to a verdict which was resolved against Wilde, accused of gross indecency (homosexual relationships) apparently fostered by Wilde through the perversion of his young friend Alfred Douglas.

In my previous work on Oscar Wilde's letter *De Profundis*, I focused my attention on the language of emotions employed by Wilde so as to express his pain while suffering his reclusion in the Reading Gaol. Being a student of Linguistics and English Literature at that time, I decided to dive into a stylistics analysis of the text so as to decode the emotions that Wilde felt based on the type of words that he frequently used and how the repetition of some concepts and ideas were a clear sign of his torment and the things that worried him the most. "Love" and "Hate" were key concepts for him, as well as "Friendship." The overall scenario presented Wilde as "haunted" by the pain and emotional drain that he was enduring in jail, especially fostered by his lover's cruel abandonment and his lack of empathy towards him and his circumstances.

As said, the study was basically focused on linguistics and the study of the language of emotions. However, the need to write a bit further into the analysis of the emotional patterns existing between Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas was still in mind, so as to understand the dynamics that were at place in their relationship and that eventually led to the writing of *De Profundis* itself. Actually, it could be said that *De Profundis* would have never been written if the excruciating pain and confusion in Wilde's relationship had not been of a specific type.

This article aims to be a follow-up of said thesis, in which a specific analysis of the psychological nature of Alfred Douglas will be decoded through the explanations that Wilde presents in the letter. The guess suggested is that Alfred Douglas could have been a potential clinical case of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and the toxic dynamics established in his friendship with Oscar Wilde and other acquaintances could prove his

unstable and abusive nature, leading to the destruction of all his interpersonal connections. The symptoms of rejection, abandonment, and pain that Wilde suffered in prison were real and the natural result of, possibly, having been emotionally and psychologically abused by Alfred Douglas all throughout their relationship.

This is a psychological case unmasked and discovered through literature: all of Wilde's emotional reactions as well as Douglas's behaviours can be proved through psychology and the literature written about NPD, demonstrating that this relationship may fall into patterns of a toxic narcissistic dynamic. Some light can be casted onto this idea with examples taken throughout the letter to analyse the psychological profile of Alfred Douglas and the consequences of his behaviour in Oscar Wilde's psyche.

It is fair to say that there are hardly any papers which delve into this topic up to this day, so this article could honour Wilde's memory with a new contribution to the study of his life, particularly this year 2025, when Ireland commemorates the 125th anniversary of his death. All in all, the main purpose is to pay tribute to Wilde's memory by showing understanding and compassion towards what he went through, understanding why his relationship with this type of Cluster B personality was doomed from beginning to end without any possible resolution and raising awareness among society that NPD exists and it needs to be tackled so as to protect victims of emotional abuse, particularly at this point of the twenty-first century, when brand new importance is being given to mental health issues and how we approach them.

Literature is a mirror of reality and *De Profundis* can serve as a powerful testimony of what narcissistic abuse is, how we must protect and respect victims, and how psychologists can use this text to help patients and exemplify this silent malady that breeds in our society, often unchecked but suffered by their victims, either friends or lovers. However, although it is true that Alfred Douglas could be said to have shown traits of a maniac or a psychopath, what will be suggested is that the vast majority of traits and behaviours could actually tick the boxes of narcissism, mainly. NPD is a serious psychological condition. Most of the time, narcissists are unaware of their toxic behaviours, unwilling to recognise their flaws or how their behaviours impact others. The true victims are the people surrounded by the narcissist, who endure the consequences of living with their dysfunction. Narcissists rarely

go to therapy, as they may consider themselves perfect or flawless. They seem to continue living unchecked and spreading their toxicity to those who dare to intimate enough with them, all while broadcasting a perfect, efficient image to the general public.

2. Definition of NPD (Narcissistic Personality Disorder)

The term “narcissism” was first described by the Roman poet Ovid in his work *Metamorphoses: Book III*.²²⁸ This myth centres on Narcissus, a character cursed to fall in love with his reflection, disregarding anything outside of him and eventually condemned to drown in his own greedy self-centeredness. However, it was not until the late 1800s that “narcissism” was used to define a psychological mind state. According to Paroma Mitra, Tyler J. Torrico and Dimy Fluyau:

The psychologist Havelock Ellis first used the term “narcissism” in 1898 to link the description of Narcissus to behaviours that he had observed in his patient. Shortly after, Sigmund Freud labelled “narcissistic libido” in his book *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Psychoanalyst Ernest Jones described narcissism as a character flaw. In 1925, Robert Waelder published the first case report of pathological narcissism and described it as “narcissistic personality.” Despite these developments, NPD was not included in the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I)*. It was not until 1968, during the era of the second edition of the DSM (DSM-II), that Heinz Kohut termed “narcissism.”²²⁹

Considering the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revised (DSM-5-TR),²³⁰ Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is defined as a complex psychological condition that presents a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (either in fantasy or behaviour), a constant need for admiration, a heightened sense of self-importance and a lack of empathy for others. Narcissists seem to be generally unable to manage criticism from peers and they can frequently become enraged. They also struggle with having honest,

²²⁸ Ovid. *Metamorphoses: Book III*. Translated by A. D. Melville. London: Penguin Classics, 2008, 93-96.

²²⁹ Mitra, Paroma, Tyler J. Torrico, and Dimy Fluyau. “Narcissistic Personality Disorder.” *National Library of Medicine*. Published 2024.

²³⁰ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revised (DSM-5-TR)*. Washington DC. American Psychiatric Association, 2022, 733.

mature communication, as they fear vulnerability and are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions.

NPD presents a pattern of behaviours that can persist for life and through a variety of situations or social contexts, and, thus, it can result in significant impairment in social and occupational functioning. This pattern of behaviours appears to begin in early adulthood and the clinical history usually reveals tumultuous relationships.²³¹ Often, these individuals become increasingly isolated as they grow older due to others having difficulty maintaining their friendships with those who suffer from severe NPD. Although many individuals with NPD deny feelings of depression or any signs of perceived weakness, they often do suffer these symptoms due to their often-underlying fragile ego, which can be threatened by the social and emotional impairment resulting from their maladaptive behaviours.²³²

NPD is considered an ego-syntonic disorder; therefore, a patient's understanding of their issue can be generally poor. Accepting self-deficit is usually not congruent with NPD. Besides, general cognition and orientation are not expected to be impaired. Individuals with this condition have the capability for linear and logical thought, often used to achieve their initial accomplishments (higher education, careers, relationships of status...). However, they often fail when it comes to emotional intelligence.²³³ Besides, Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is classified within the spectrum of personality disorders, and it is usually included within Cluster B, characterized by dramatic, emotional, and erratic behaviour. This Cluster, which will be referenced hereunder, also includes disorders such as antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and histrionic personality disorder.²³⁴

2.1. Clusters and Characteristics of NPD

In the current DSM-5-TR, personality disorders have been categorized into clusters, based on shared characteristics. This categorization includes Cluster A, Cluster B and Cluster C personality disorders:²³⁵

²³¹ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 735.

²³² Barlow, David H., Mark V. Durand, and Stefan G. Hofmann. *Abnormal Psychology: An Integrative Approach*. 8.^a ed. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2018, 475.

²³³ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 762-763.

²³⁴ Barlow, David H., Mark V. Durand, and Stefan G. Hofmann. *Abnormal Psychology*, 451.

²³⁵ Mitra, Paroma, Tyler J. Torrico, and Dimy Fluyau. "Narcissistic Personality Disorder," 2024.

- Cluster A: personality disorders with odd or eccentric characteristics, including paranoid personality disorder, schizoid personality disorder and schizotypal personality disorder.
- Cluster B: personality disorders with dramatic, emotional, or erratic features, including antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, histrionic personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder.
- Cluster C: personality disorders with anxious and fearful characteristics, including avoidant personality disorder, dependent personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.

As for the characteristics of NPD, psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich described “character armour” in 1933 as defence mechanisms that develop with personality types to relieve cognitive conflict from internal impulses and interpersonal anxiety (for example, those with narcissistic tendencies may have fantasies, projection defence, and splitting mechanisms).²³⁶ Negative developmental experiences, such as being rejected as a child and ego fragility during early childhood, may contribute to the development of NPD in adulthood.²³⁷ In contrast, it could be argued that excessive praise in childhood, including the belief that a child may have extraordinary abilities, may also develop into a lifetime need for constant praise and admiration. Temperament traits include harm avoidance (they may act in general disregard for the consequences of their actions or view the potential gain from risky behaviour as far outweighing the gamble of any potential harm that may result), novelty seeking (inherent desire to initiate novel activities likely to produce a reward), reward dependence (individuals with NPD try to be social but for the sake of receiving praise or being seen in association with others of high status, which provides them with internal validation) and persistence (these individuals strive for higher accomplishments and social status worthy of praise).²³⁸

The American Psychiatric Association (2022) outlines the specific NPD criteria for the diagnosis of this disorder in the DSM-5-TR.²³⁹ Directly drawn from this reference, below are

²³⁶ Mitra, Paroma, Tyler J. Torrico, and Dimy Fluyau. “Narcissistic Personality Disorder,” 2024.

²³⁷ Mitra, Paroma, Tyler J. Torrico, and Dimy Fluyau. “Narcissistic Personality Disorder,” 2024.

²³⁸ Mitra, Paroma, Tyler J. Torrico, and Dimy Fluyau. “Narcissistic Personality Disorder,” 2024.

²³⁹ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 761

the following criteria that need to be met to diagnose narcissistic personality disorder, indicated by five or more of the following:

- A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behaviour), need for admiration and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts.
- A grandiose sense of self-importance, such as exaggerating achievements and talents, expecting to be recognized as superior even without commensurate achievements.
- Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
- They believe that they are “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
- They require excessive admiration.
- They have a sense of entitlement, having unreasonable expectations of especially favourable treatment or automatic compliance with their expectations.
- They are interpersonally exploitative, taking advantage of others to achieve their ends.
- They lack empathy or are unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
- They are often envious of others or believe that others are envious of them.
- They show arrogant, haughty behaviours or attitudes.

NPD significantly affects familial and romantic relationships. As for the latter type of dynamic, they tend to present a common behavioural pattern designed to attract their targets: Narcissists tend to love-bomb their victims at the beginning, then devalue them when they begin to see “imperfections” in them or a lack of usefulness in their dynamic,²⁴⁰ leading to the eventual discard and “ghosting,” usually after a sudden break up. This cycle of abuse repeats endlessly, as narcissists are unable to form deep, meaningful bonds or

²⁴⁰ Day, Nicholas J. S., Michelle L. Townsend, and Brett F. S. Grenyer. "Pathological Narcissism: An Analysis of Interpersonal Dysfunction within Intimate Relationships." *Personality and Mental Health* 16, no. 3 (2022), 212.

connections with others and they see relationships as transactional, based on what they can take from their victims.²⁴¹

2.2. Causes of NPD

While the exact causes of NPD remain a topic of on-going research, professional agreement exists around a combination of factors contributing to its development. These factors include biological, psychological, and environmental influences, each playing a unique role in the manifestation of NPD,²⁴² as expressed below:

- Biological factors: there is a possible genetic predisposition to NPD, indicating that individuals may inherit certain personality traits or sensitivities that increase their risk of developing the disorder.
- Psychological factors: a core feature of NPD, such as an inflated sense of self-importance or lack of empathy, could stem from early childhood experiences.
- Environmental factors: the environment in which a person grows up can significantly influence the development of NPD. For example, cultural and social expectations emphasizing success, beauty and personal achievement above communal values can contribute to narcissistic traits.
- Family dynamics: dysfunctional family structures, such as those involving emotional abuse, neglect, or inconsistent parenting styles, can be fertile ground for the development of NPD.
- Psycho-social theories: some theories blend psychological and social factors, suggesting that NPD develops as a result of the individual's temperament interacting with their environment. For example, a child with a naturally sensitive temperament might respond to their environment in ways that gradually shape narcissistic personality traits, especially if those environmental factors include validation for superficial achievements, beauty, or charm rather than empathy and collaboration.

²⁴¹ Day, Nicholas J. S., Michelle L. Townsend, and Brett F. S. Grenyer. "Pathological Narcissism," 204–216.

²⁴² Barlow, David H., Mark V. Durand, and Stefan G. Hofmann. *Abnormal Psychology*, 483.

2.3. Challenges in Diagnosing and Treatment

There are significant challenges in diagnosing NPD, as these individuals may not often present for psychiatric evaluation.²⁴³ There is a generally limited understanding of the disorder, because high-quality and multi-population studies are lacking. Most of the current knowledge is based on small sample-size investigations. A study of this type conducted in Germany showed grey matter decreased volumes in the prefrontal and insular regions. Notably, these brain regions are associated with empathy, compassion, cognition, and emotional regulation processing.²⁴⁴

Psychotherapy is the only available method to treat this disorder, despite there also being limited evidence for its efficacy.²⁴⁵ In a safe, controlled environment, the individual might engage in discussions that provide valuable insights into their behaviour and how it affects those around them, although these individuals may also be highly sensitive to any suggestions or advice. NPD, as with other personality disorders, does not seem to have specific medications for treatment. Besides, as said before, individuals with NPD may not recognize their illness, as it is generally ego-syntonic, so they usually will not be willing to go to therapy. The suggestion will commonly be a request of a first-degree relative or friend. This may occur after maladaptive behaviours have created stress on another person, rather than internal distress from the individual with it. Ultimately, it could be argued that NPD seems to be unlikely to resolve on its own or with treatment.

3. Analysis of the Character of Alfred Douglas

Bearing the theoretical framework in mind, and in order to conduct the analysis, the different testimonies that Wilde presents in *De Profundis* will be classified into two different categories (nature and behaviour), gathering in them a series of traits that prove the narcissistic personality of Alfred Douglas. Throughout the letter, Wilde attempts to present his lover with a summary of his conduct during their three years of friendship, analysing both his temperament and behaviour, and the terrible impact that his unbalanced

²⁴³ Barlow, David H., Mark V. Durand, and Stefan G. Hofmann. *Abnormal Psychology*, 451-475.

²⁴⁴ Mitra, Paroma, Tyler J. Torrico, and Dimy Fluyau. "Narcissistic Personality Disorder," 2024.

²⁴⁵ Barlow, David H., Mark V. Durand, and Stefan G. Hofmann. *Abnormal Psychology*, 483.

personality may have had on him. The number of examples that can be found in *De Profundis* about this topic are profuse, and a complete reading of the letter would make all this sample a complete puzzle. However, a minimal but thorough selection will be used to illustrate the main ideas stressed in this paper.

In general terms, Wilde deplores the result of his friendship and its toxicity: “Of the appalling results of my friendship with you I don’t speak at present. I am thinking merely of its quality while it lasted. It was intellectually degrading to me [...] When you were away I was all right.”²⁴⁶ He also struggles to identify how he ended up in such a toxic dynamic: “But most of all I blame myself for the entire ethical degradation I allowed you to bring on me. The basis of character is willpower, and my willpower became absolutely subjected to yours.”²⁴⁷ Besides, he also acknowledges his resolution to break free from their toxic bond, as in “an irrevocable parting, a complete separation was the one wise philosophic thing to do”²⁴⁸, since he needed time to reflect and analyse what he was going through: “I required rest and freedom from the terrible strain of your companionship.”²⁴⁹ But Douglas always managed his way back to him.

3.1. Examples of Douglas’ Nature

To begin with, examples of Douglas’ nature will be gathered, starting with his perceived lack of empathy towards Wilde. It is important to highlight that Wilde never uses the term “empathy” in his letter, but rather, the concept of “lack of imagination” to describe Douglas’s inability to see him or others. He describes a time when first Douglas, then Wilde, came down with a nasty flu. They were away from home at the time, so they had to depend on each other. Wilde took care of Alfred very well, but when he got better and then Wilde got it, Alfred disappeared to have fun, leaving Wilde without anyone to care for him. In one of the many scornful letters addressed to Wilde, Douglas despised him during his illness: “You concluded your letter by saying: ‘When you are not on your pedestal you are not

²⁴⁶ Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis. The Ballad of Reading Gaol and Other Writings*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2002, 6.

²⁴⁷ Wilde, 9.

²⁴⁸ Wilde, 13.

²⁴⁹ Wilde, 14.

interesting. The next time you are ill I will go away at once.’ Ah! What coarseness of fibre does that reveal! What an entire lack of imagination! [...] I confess that when I had finished your letter I felt almost polluted.”²⁵⁰

Wilde also stresses the importance, and marks the difference, between a healthy individual able to express compassion through love: “Love is fed by the imagination, by which we become wiser than we know, better than we feel, nobler than we are: by which we can see Life as a whole: by which [...] we can understand others in their real as in their ideal relations”²⁵¹ and one dominated by what seemed to be hate and egotism like Douglas: “Hate so blinded you that you could see no further than the narrow, walled-in, and already lust-withered garden of your common desires. Your terrible lack of imagination, the one really fatal defect of your character, was entirely the result of the Hate that lived in you.”²⁵²

There are numerous examples of Wilde pointing out the lack of empathy in Alfred’s nature: “The faculty ‘by which, and by which alone, we can understand others in their real as in their ideal relations’ was dead in you.”²⁵³ Besides, Alfred was also unwilling to accept his share of responsibility for Wilde’s imprisonment and Wilde suffered deeply his careless indifference towards his situation: “But that it was through you, for you and by you that I was there, never for one instant dawned upon you. Even the spectacle of me behind the bars of a wooden cage could not quicken that dead unimaginative nature [...]. That you were the true author of the hideous tragedy did not occur to you.”²⁵⁴

Wilde then seems to apply radical acceptance to the pathological phenomenon he had identified in Alfred’s personality: “I saw that you realised nothing of what you had done. I did not desire to be the one to tell you what your own heart should have told you [...] Everything must come to one out of one’s own nature. There is no use in telling a person a thing that they don’t feel and can’t understand.”²⁵⁵ This may show that, even though he probably did not have the clinical knowledge about it, Wilde might have known very well that Alfred Douglas could be suffering from some sort of mental health issue or personality

²⁵⁰ Wilde, 22.

²⁵¹ Wilde, 30.

²⁵² Wilde, 31.

²⁵³ Wilde, 34.

²⁵⁴ Wilde, 35.

²⁵⁵ Wilde, 35.

dysfunction whose terminology had not been explored yet: “There was always to my eyes, as I watched you, something not a little contemptible in your complete and wilful blindness [...] “Do you realise now what Hate blinding a person is? [...] Do you recognise now that when I described it as an Atrophy destructive of everything but itself, I was scientifically describing a real psychological fact?”²⁵⁶

Douglas’s strong vanity or egotism will also be decoded, particularly by his choice of living a flamboyant life, most of the time at the expense of Wilde’s money. Following this line of thought, Wilde insists on Alfred’s parasitic nature: “Your incapacity of being alone, your nature so exigent in its persistent claim on the attention and time of others [...] all these things, combined with the fact that your desires and interests were in Life not in Art, were as destructive to your own progress in culture as they were to my work as an artist.”²⁵⁷ All in all, Alfred seems to have exhibited a sort of blind and exaggerated vanity in his grandiose lifestyle: “Your interests were merely in your meals and moods. Your desires were simply for amusements, for ordinary or less ordinary pleasures. They were what your temperament needed, or thought it needed for the moment.”²⁵⁸

Not only did Wilde notice Alfred’s personality, but his mother was also fully aware of Douglas’ emotional issues: “At that time I knew very little of your real nature [...] Your mother began to speak to me about your character. She told me of your two chief faults, your vanity and your being, as she termed it, ‘all wrong about money’.”²⁵⁹ Considering the knowledge provided by Douglas’s mother, she also told Wilde in one of her many letters about her son’s “blind and exaggerated vanity [...] his temper [...] the conduct in money matters [...] and that he was, of her children, the one who had inherited the fatal Douglas temperament,”²⁶⁰ which could conceivably show a genetic predisposition in the family.

Overall, Wilde realises the power and control that Alfred exerted upon him: “Your persistent grasp on my life grew stronger and stronger [...] You demanded without grace and received without thanks [...] You grew to think that you had a sort of right to live at my

²⁵⁶ Wilde, 36.

²⁵⁷ Wilde, 6.

²⁵⁸ Wilde 7.

²⁵⁹ Wilde, 7.

²⁶⁰ Wilde, 15.

expense and in a profuse luxury to which you had never been accustomed”²⁶¹ and he also complains about the impossibility of having mature and meaningful communication with Alfred about his behaviour: “In your case, one had either to give up to you or to give you up. There was no other alternative. Through deep if misplaced affection for you, through great pity for your defects of temper and temperament [...] I gave up to you always.”²⁶² His consumption of Wilde’s time and energy is considered several times by Wilde himself, who thought he was entangled in a vicious cycle: “The froth and folly of our life grew often wearisome to me [...] I was often bored to death by it, and accepted it as I accepted your passion for going to music-halls, or your mania for absurd extravagances in eating and drinking [...] a part of the high price one paid for knowing you.”²⁶³

In summary, Wilde admits that he rarely perceived Alfred’s genuine love for the time they spent together, but rather, he knew there was a utilitarian purpose behind Alfred motives, and this was fuelling his vanity and pride by achieving his goals in life: “Of course you had your illusions, lived in them indeed, and through their shifting mists and coloured veils saw all things changed [...] with me was luxury, high living, unlimited pleasure, money without stint.”²⁶⁴ There is also evidence of his rage, unleashed in public scenes, a clear sign of his plausible histrionic behaviour and the fact that his mother was scared of talking to him, therefore using Wilde to try to control her son’s conduct, with Alfred’s incapacity for emotional self-regulation mentioned several times: “That dreadful mania you inherit from your father, the mania for writing revolting and loathsome letters: your entire lack of any control over your emotions as displayed in your long resentful moods of sullen silence, no less than in the sudden fits of almost epileptic rage,”²⁶⁵ and he also narrates several episodes that they both had lived, mainly scenes of public and private scandals in which Alfred had shown his changing moods and aggressiveness: “I was always terribly sorry for the hideous temper to which you were really a prey.”²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ Wilde, 8.

²⁶² Wilde, 10.

²⁶³ Wilde, 13.

²⁶⁴ Wilde, 28.

²⁶⁵ Wilde, 9.

²⁶⁶ Wilde, 13.

3.2. Examples of Douglas' Behaviour

Douglas's behaviour will be further tackled in this section. Firstly, his complete recklessness in the use of money seemed to have led to Wilde's financial ruin, both in relation to their pleasures and the costs of the trial. Besides, there was Douglas's obsession with revenge against his father, who apparently shared many maniac traits with his son. Wilde constantly repeats the concept of Hate as predominant between them: "In you Hate was always stronger than Love."²⁶⁷ In general terms, the psychological similarities between father and son point directly at the fact that more family members of the Douglas clan could conceivably have had a Cluster B personality disorder, and Wilde also acknowledges this sort of madness that he had witnessed within the family, for example, with the harassment of the Marquis he himself had suffered.

On top of that, Douglas seemed to have found some joy in making his family conflicts a public issue, showing that, perhaps, he would be looking for some sort of social approval or admiration coming from society if he had been able to send his father into jail. In this way, he weaponized Wilde to fulfil his purpose, as seen in "I told you I would not be the catspaw between you both in your ancient hatred of each other [...] You could not be made to see this. Hate blinded you"²⁶⁸ or in "Indeed the idea of you being the object of a terrible quarrel between your father and a man of my position seemed to delight you. It, I suppose very naturally, pleased your vanity, and flattered your self-importance."²⁶⁹

Wilde also refers to his distressing feelings towards the conflict between Douglas and his father, in which he ended up involved: "Between you both I lost my head [...] I had made a gigantic psychological error."²⁷⁰ Once Wilde pursued the demand to the Marquis of Queensberry, that he termed as a "hideous trap," Douglas refused to help him or discuss the situation any further: "You refused to discuss even for five minutes the position to which you and your father had brought me. My business was merely to pay your hotel expenses and your losses."²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ Wilde, 30.

²⁶⁸ Wilde, 31.

²⁶⁹ Wilde, 32.

²⁷⁰ Wilde, 11.

²⁷¹ Wilde, 11

Furthermore, and of utmost importance, is the narcissist's tendency to manipulation in order to get their needs met or to deflect responsibility. Some common manipulation tactics are "gaslighting"²⁷² (denying someone's perspective on something) and "projection" (projecting onto or accusing someone of your own flaws)²⁷³ which were frequently used by Douglas, as seen in the episode when Wilde fell ill after taking care of Douglas' own illness, and the latter refused to help the former in his need: "You leave me entirely alone, without care, without attendance, without anything"²⁷⁴, and also later on, when Wilde calls out his reckless behaviour and Douglas reacts negatively: "You fell on me with every hideous word an intemperate mood, an undisciplined and untutored nature could suggest. By the terrible alchemy of egotism you converted your remorse into rage. You accused me of selfishness in expecting you to be with me when I was ill; [...] of trying to deprive you of your pleasures."²⁷⁵

Wilde was also subjected to several attempts of "hovering,"²⁷⁶ a common manipulation tactic used by Cluster B's individuals who attempt to get back the person who has escaped or is trying to escape from them, usually involving new love-bombing, false promises of change and repentance, and in extreme cases, resorting to violence or threats of suicide. As said before, Wilde acknowledges the parasitic nature of Douglas and how he found emotional and physical difficulties to break free from the relationship. Douglas manifested an absolute dependence on Wilde, particularly in terms of money, and when Wilde was most convinced of getting rid of their bond, Douglas even threatened with committing suicide: "You stated [...] that no matter what you had done to me you could not believe that I would absolutely decline to see you [...] You made what I must admit was a most pathetic appeal and ended with what seemed to me a threat of suicide, and one not thinly veiled."²⁷⁷ Eventually, Wilde always kept taking him back and forgiving him: "I ended my relationship with you every three months regularly [...] and each time that I did so you

²⁷² Drescher, Anna. "Narcissistic Marriage Problems & How to Deal With Them." *Simply Psychology*. Published 2025.

²⁷³ Zaslav, Mark. "The Manipulative Narcissist." *Psychology Today*. Published August 25, 2023.

²⁷⁴ Wilde, 19

²⁷⁵ Wilde, 20

²⁷⁶ Drescher, Anna. "Narcissistic Hoovering: Signs & How to Respond." *Simply Psychology*. Published 2025.

²⁷⁷ Wilde, 17.

managed [...] to induce me to allow you back.”²⁷⁸ This way, abusers often just escalate their guilt and intimidation tactics to keep their target invested in the relationship.²⁷⁹

Wilde also suffered in prison the consequences of rumination, and the trauma bond created between him and Douglas is reflected in his obsessive thinking about the whole story: “The memory of our friendship is the shadow that walks with me here: that seems never to leave me: that wakes me up at night to tell me the same story over and over till its wearisome iteration makes all sleep abandon me till dawn [...] I am forced to recall [...] every strained note of your voice, every twitch and gesture of your nervous hands, every bitter word, every poisonous phrase comes back to me.”²⁸⁰

Finally, Douglas’ “ghosting” behaviour towards Wilde during his imprisonment definitely needs to be pointed out. He never received a letter from him during that period, showing his inability for self-reflection and his incapability to take his share of responsibility for what had happened, or least to say, show a minimal sign of love and affection for his friend and lover during those harsh days in jail, as Wilde expresses with remorse at the very beginning of the letter. The feelings of abandonment that Wilde suffered were probably terrible, and it is important to bear in mind that using the silent treatment towards somebody could be a form of emotional abuse, as the receiver of it perceives it as a strong invalidation of his feelings, as a form of neglect and punishment.

All in all, this lack of understanding and this lack of closure in their relationship is what eventually triggers Wilde’s desire to reconnect with his lover, as typical of this kind of romantic dynamics: “If I write to you now as I do it is because your own silence and conduct during my long imprisonment have made it necessary.”²⁸¹ He needed answers to all this erratic and toxic behaviour, and this is the reason why he wrote *De Profundis*. Wilde also seems to have needed to come to terms with the whole experience so as to try to find peace for his soul. He finishes his letter with a tone of hope after all the bitterness, wishing that both of them could plan a future meeting to discuss things and desperately waiting for a possible answer to his letter.

²⁷⁸ Wilde, 12.

²⁷⁹ Day, Nicholas J. S., Michelle L. Townsend, and Brett F. S. Grenyer. “Pathological Narcissism,” 211.

²⁸⁰ Wilde, 30.

²⁸¹ Wilde, 35.

Time proved, nonetheless, that their reunion did not bring resolution to their conflict and both parted ways after some time in Naples.²⁸² What Wilde could have never known is that the closure he was looking for was nearly and very likely impossible with a personality type as that of Alfred Douglas. He died alone in Paris in 1900, and it may be hinted that, in those days, he probably already knew all of this, although he could never give a name or a diagnosis to it.

4. Conclusion

This essay has tried to outline the main characteristics of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), offering a psychological analysis of the character of Alfred Douglas through the testimonies provided by Oscar Wilde in his letter *De Profundis*, addressed to his lover during his imprisonment between 1895 and 1897. The causes and characteristics of this disorder have been decoded through medical literature, and examples of similar behaviour and personality traits have been found in the letter, as Wilde was particularly precise in his attempt of reflecting and showing his lover what their relationship had been, in order to make sense of what he had experienced.

On the one hand, it is key to emphasize the need to keep on researching about the text *De Profundis*. Without a doubt, it provides an especially useful and very human insight into the psychology of the characters via the experiences narrated. On the other hand, NPD is a condition that our Western society seems to be fostering, so it is important to understand its relevance, and the text can serve both as a cathartic therapy for victims and as a tool to raise awareness about this disorder among the general public. Anyone can become a victim of narcissistic abuse at some point in life, and both literature and journaling, as Wilde did, can be effective forms of healing.

All in all, it could be argued that it is only a matter of justice to bring light into the psychological personality of Alfred Douglas so as to understand Wilde's text and his life, and it is essential to continue making hypotheses, like the one presented, about the impact of emotional and psychological abuse on Oscar Wilde's decisions, since it could have, potentially, led to his downfall. But, despite all his suffering and pain, Oscar Wilde left a

²⁸² Sturgis, Matthew. *Oscar. A Life*. Head of Zeus, 2018, 649-664.

valuable piece of literature with his long letter *De Profundis*, and the misery he endured in his last years of life did not overshadow his reputation and position as one of the greatest Irish authors of all times.

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Notes on contributor

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