

Aesthetic Narcissism And Its Discontents. A Study of Kierkegaard's "The Diary of the Seducer" and Its Relevance To Contemporary Clinical Psychology

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Original Article

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Source: *Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention*
Pages: 60 – 71

Volume: 15
Cited references: 39

Issue: 5

Reviewers:

Roberto Cauda
Institute of Infectious Diseases, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Rome, IT
Daria Kimuli
Catholic university of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, KE

Keywords:

Kierkegaard. Narcissism. Seduction. Existentialism. Aesthetics. Sexuality. Psychopathology.

Publisher:

International Society of Applied Preventive Medicine i-gap

CSWHI 2024; 15(5): 60 – 71; DOI: 10.22359/cswhi_15_5_08 © Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention

Abstract:

The present study seeks to reveal several ways in which clinical psychologists might enrich their understanding of the narcissistic phenomenon by means of Søren Kierkegaard's "The Diary of the Seducer." The study also shows how Kierkegaard scholars will benefit from a novel outlook on the Kierkegaardian concept of "reflective seduction" which, we claim, is essentially narcissistic. Divided into three parts, the article seeks to identify the nature of Johannes the Seducer's narcissism by analyzing its eclectic manifestations, both in terms of internal psychological processes and intersubjective relations. We conclude with several lessons that Kierkegaard bequeaths to contemporary psychopathology, which deserve further and more rigorous investigations.

Introduction

Since the late 1970s scholars have raised repeated alarms regarding the narcissistic proclivities of Western culture as a whole. Some went as far as equating the Western way of life (including many of its institutions) with an unbridled, unabashed narcissism (1,2). We know for quite some time now that narcissism flourishes amongst positions of authority, celebrities, and even religious leaders (3). And yet, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and even theologians (4) are far from being in full agreement about the nature, structure, scope, and conceptualization of this particular phenomenon. The present study does not aim to bring any conceptual clarifications to this debate. Rather, while using a philosophical-literary text – namely, Søren Kierkegaard’s novelette, “The Diary of the Seducer” (from his classic, 2-volume work, *Either/Or*) (5) – it intends to reveal several ways in which the aforementioned parties might enrich their understanding of the narcissistic phenomenon, as far as both the narcissist’s self- and others-relation is concerned. Kierkegaard scholarship, on the other hand, will also benefit from our conclusions regarding the existential profile and dangers of aesthetic seduction which, we claim, is fundamentally narcissistic.

Concerning the current state of theoretical and scientific research, we rely on Elsa Ronningstam’s exhaustive overview of the narcissistic personality (6). Ronningstam differentiates between a “healthy,” an “extraordinary,” and a “pathological” form of narcissism, the latter being further divided into “arrogant,” “shy,” and “psychopathic.” Below, while uncritically adopting Ronningstam’s terminology and classification, we address three particular issues: (i) whether the (in)famous protagonist of Kierkegaard’s “The Diary of the Seducer” – Johannes – qualifies as a narcissist; (ii) if so, what kind of narcissism he embodies; and (iii) what contemporary (clinical) psychology could learn from his self-centered personality and its interaction with others. We analyze in detail what we believe to be Johannes’s narcissistic features, ranging from personal charisma, going through grandiosity, and ending with a potentially sadistic aggressiveness. We suggest that via Johannes – also referred to as “the Seducer” – Kierkegaard

expressed, albeit in a literary-philosophical fashion, many of our current scientific hypotheses on narcissism and even managed to open new vistas worthy of exploring in a more rigorous fashion.

I. The extraordinary narcissist

A. Irresistible charisma and authentic creativity

Although they insist on its broad, variegated spectrum and nefarious effects, specialists warn that narcissism is not always negative. They claim that there exists a “healthy” narcissism which may be fundamental to our survival. Regarding the “extraordinary” version of narcissism, although not fully auspicious, it is not as ominous as it may sound. In what follows, we will see why, when asking whether the protagonist of “The Diary of the Seducer” is in any way narcissistic, the answer should start from the “extraordinary” manifestations of this psychological phenomenon. Because Johannes is anything but ordinary, we will show that he is the living embodiment of something that researchers are increasingly interested in: the irresistible charisma of narcissists. Specialists also tell us that “extraordinary” narcissists can be extremely creative; this, too, flawlessly captures part of Johannes’s personality.

Let us start with the Seducer’s formidable intellectual capacities. Johannes is a redoubtable polymath. He is well versed in poetry, philosophy, and Greco-Roman mythology. He knows French and is able to read Latin authors in the original language. Agronomy, engraving, and the Judeo-Christian Scripture are other fields he frequently dabbles in. Then, there’s his deep interest in the paleontology of Georges Cuvier, an interest which made an author compare Johannes’s diaristic jottings with “a scientific journal” (7).

Johannes’s capacious intellect is doubled by equally impressive observational skills. Moreover, his experience of reality is continually filtered by what he has read and so, the results of his observations are recorded in high quality prose. To be sure, his depictions of the splendor of nature seem penned by a Romantic genius. The way he enchants women and writes letters to them appears “artistically” consummate even to

the victims. As to the domestic settings he gains access to, his meticulous attention to detail rivals that of the expert interior designer able to authoritatively assess the arrangement of furniture and the quality of light. A comparable expertise shines through his comments on the appearance of people walking on the road, travelling in a carriage, or attending a wedding ceremony. In short, everything he lives, sees, does, or writes, is imbued with aesthetic refinement.

Such aesthetically sophisticated behavior requires, however, a robust volition which the Seducer possesses to an impressive degree. Priding himself of being a literary – not mediocre – lover, Johannes feels constantly compelled to turn every moment into poetry. This urge demands self-discipline, self-limitation, and even self-denial. That explains why the Seducer is a strong advocate of both patience and temperance, praising himself for lacking the “anxiety and trembling of infatuation” or the “sweet disquietude of impatient longing.” It is thus fair to say that he possesses an “objective mastery of himself,” a quality so compelling that those around him also notice it.

Altogether, these qualities force us to agree with Bradley Dewey that Johannes “leads a fascinating exterior and interior life full of high-level challenge, drama, human encounters, daily testing of his commitment, talent, discipline” (8). If this is true, who could resist his charisma and extraordinary gifts?

B. The risky side of seduction

Without a doubt, the first to be fully aware of such extraordinary gifts is Johannes himself. However, below we will see how, as his self-importance increases, the Seducer showcases an almost inhuman invulnerability, by virtue of which he engages in highly questionable, risk-taking behaviors. And if we keep in mind that narcissistic personality disorder patients, too, “may be involved in risk-taking behavior due to their belief in their own indestructibility,” we understand why Johannes’s self-image takes on evident narcissistic overtones.

With respect to Johannes’s risk-friendly nature, we should begin with his sharp wit, ruthless irony, and sardonic humor. At first sight, these attributes reflect an attractive, multifaceted

intelligence. But they can also be seen as signs of condescension, especially, if, as will be the case, Johannes does possess an inflated sense of self. Equally revealing is that the Seducer unapologetically cultivates an aesthetic existence, thereby rejecting all ethical considerations in interpersonal affairs. It is thanks to this radical aestheticism that he engages in two of the riskiest and most morally compromising behaviors: voyeurism and stalking.

Johannes’s voyeuristic tendencies stem from a deep desire to look at, analyze, and appraise his victims without being seen at all. Relevant here is the Seducer’s preference for streets when looking for victims. More pertinent still is his habit of randomly spying on women from a spot where he could never be discovered, which prompted a commentator to christen him an “invisible, voyeuristic observer and recorder.”

A comparable fascination with disguises and invisibility fuels Johannes’s recurring stalking patterns. Given his proficient observational skills, he is most adept at meticulously mapping locations, following girls without being detected, and even eavesdropping on them. To give just one example, as regards the main feminine character of *The Diary* – a girl by the name of Cordelia Wahl – Johannes confesses that he “met her three times” in a single day. Moreover, every single time he knew “about her every little outing, when and where [he] shall come across her,” not to mention the particularly chilling detail that this “has cost [him] several hours of waiting.”

II. The arrogant, domineering narcissist

When experienced by a narcissist, invulnerability, argue clinical psychologists, is inseparable from an inflated self-importance. If there is a common thread that brings together every single manifestation of narcissism, that is by far an inward sense of superiority and uniqueness, on which the narcissistic person conceitedly insists both in their self-perception and intersubjective relations. Despite their frequent disagreements, psychologists and psychopathologists have reached a relative consensus that narcissism represents a kind of self-esteem dysregulation which expresses itself through grandiosity

(9,10). Among the indisputable signs of narcissistic grandiosity, they include “[a] self-centered and self-referential behavior, a boastful or pretentious attitude, or the exaggeration of talents and achievements.” Of course, this ostentatiously arrogant attitude can be best seen in the narcissist’s interaction with others, especially via an overwhelmingly entitled behavior (11,12). In this section, we discuss four distinct traits that render Johannes a good candidate for “arrogant narcissism:” (a) an inflated sense of superiority, which triggers exhibitionism and grandiose fantasies; (b) a grandiosity that invariably and unequivocally seeks confirmation via serial erotic encounters; (c) a constant use of deceitfulness and lies to attain one’s goals; (d) a controlling and manipulative behavior towards others, which evinces a crippling incapacity for any ethical commitments.

A. The Seducer’s delusional, exhibitionistic arrogance

From the foundational, ancient Greek myth of Narcissus to every single psychology dictionary today, the term “narcissistic” has been explained in terms of self-centeredness. Narcissistic is that individual who is, not simply self-loving, but also self-obsessed and, of course, condescending in all encounters with others.

Tellingly enough, whenever he talks about himself, the words Johannes chooses are always positive, superlative, lacking every trace of doubt. He is utterly amazed by his own “brilliance, wit, esthetic objectivity.” Concerning his actions, he admits that “at the bottom of what I am doing there is truth.” Furthermore, this inner sense of superior uniqueness fuels delusional fantasies of grandeur. For how else can we interpret statements like, “I...can regard myself as a favorite of the gods;” or, “How vigorous, sound, and happy is my soul, as present as a god”?

Based on such self-representations as either elect or divine, Johannes insists that the ultimate aim of his seduction is not to possess a woman physically. Instead, he wants to transfigure her *interiority*, to elevate her self-consciousness to a higher plane. This means that Johannes’s grandiosity is never self-sufficient. It continually needs the rapturous affirmation and confirmation of other individuals, be they strangers, friends, or

seduced victims. This constitutes yet another narcissistic feature since “[admiring] attention from others serves to enhance the [narcissist’s] grandiose self-experience.” Johannes openly recognizes he cares for others’ view of him and, if he is not getting enough attention from them, he will forcefully seek it. His favorite means in this regard is chasing young women.

Yet, once again, here his tactics are never simple, consisting of incredibly elaborate courtship maneuvers. Sometimes these simultaneously involve several people, e.g. acquaintances and relatives. Other times, Johannes’s enchantment entails a very intricate interaction between seducer and seduced, which presupposes an esoteric foreknowledge of body language, wherein the eyes take center stage. Johannes also uses elegantly written letters to communicate feelings and hopes, and by virtue of his self-infatuation, he expects victims to fully understand his literary allusions. The same applies to the meaning of his actions which involve carefully chosen backgrounds, intricate placements of bodies or furniture within rooms, speechless visual exchanges replete with innuendoes and hidden messages.

Following Louis Mackey, it is thus safe to assume that what he does around others is intended as full of “tact, diplomacy, and skill” (13). Equally obvious is that the Seducer’s *modus operandi* makes the most of his authentic charisma. However, as we interpret them, these outstanding social skills possess an unmistakably *exhibitionistic* flavor, albeit of a first-class order. To boot, we hold that Johannes needs such exhibitionistic features to ensure the success of his *erotic* exploits.

B. A self-centered and pleasure-driven eroticism

The hard narcissistic core of the Seducer’s personality issues from the fact that none of his exploits are fundamentally about the other person. Instead, they are to fuel his grandiosity and an incredibly efficient, hedonistic machinery. Concerning hedonism, we should first give credence to the testimony of a friend named A. (the alleged pseudonymous editor of *The Diary*), who states that Johannes’s “whole life was intended for enjoyment.” A. also clarifies that

“[as] soon as actuality had lost its significance as stimulation, [Johannes] was disarmed;” which is probably why boredom is his sole enemy.

At the same time, the enjoyment Johannes is avidly pursuing does *not* have a purely ethereal quality. After all, his last name is replaced by Kierkegaard with the suggestive title, “the Seducer,” which accurately captures the essence of his life. From the very first pages of *The Diary* the reader realizes that, as practiced by Johannes, seduction revolves around the opposite sex. Johannes unambiguously informs us that “the only thing that has amazed me in the world, a young girl is the first and will be the last.” Equally telling are the attributes he is drawn to in girls: virgin, healthy, blooming, cheerful, happy, burgeoning. Note that in the case of such persons – i.e., young, inexperienced, and probably vulnerable – the success of his seduction is almost always guaranteed.

As to the exact intentions of seduction, Johannes’s own testimony leaves much room for interpretation. We already alluded to his stated goal: to enlarge the inner world of the seduced, to engender in her that capacity for reflection and that self-awareness which will allow her to lead a more existentially fulfilled life. This sounds abstract and rather unconvincing, which is probably why the reader suspects that something much darker may be at play here. Indeed, should we conclude that the unstated aim of Johannes’s seductive games, elaborate and inscrutable though they may be, is *sexual* gratification, we would not completely miss the mark.

On the contrary, that Johannes’s seduction must have included a sexual dimension is confirmed, we argue, in four different ways. First, we have his own, carefully veiled, confessions which do suggest the narcissistic-hedonistic use of women for carnal gratification. In a rather melancholy vein, Johannes asks himself: “Why does a young girl have such beauty, and why does it last such a short time?” His answer speaks volumes: “it is really none of my business. Enjoy—do not chatter.” He also declares that “When a girl has given away everything, she is weak, she has lost everything.” Were we to read the Seducer’s last two diary entries with this belief in mind, we could safely assume that the loss of Cordelia’s appeal, too, occurred due to the physical consummation of their affair (14).

Next, there is the Seducer’s lewdness. Noteworthy here is that Johannes conceives himself as “sheer sensuousness.” More often than not, he acts, thinks, and fantasizes like the Freudian id, as it were. When looking at a woman’s clothes, for example, he seems fond of divining the bodily forms that hide behind them. In this respect, he appears particularly attracted to small waists, prominent bosoms, and bent-over bodies. In Cordelia’s case, he speaks freely about the physical attraction between them and even muses on the quality of her kisses.

Thirdly, the supposition that Johannes’s perception of womanhood may be primarily carnal, did not escape those around him, either. To return to A., he says that Johannes knew “how to bring a girl to the high point where he was sure that she would offer everything. When the affair had gone so far, he broke off.” Here, A.’s view is confirmed by Cordelia’s own letters which strengthen the longstanding suspicion that her relation to Johannes culminated in physical intercourse. Should we need a third opinion, Victor Eremita (the supposed editor of *Either-Or* as a whole) may offer it when he alludes to possible parallels between Johannes and Don Giovanni.

Fourthly and finally, many Kierkegaard students are convinced that the Seducer’s declared idealism was but a thinly veiled ruse to possess his victims. To give just a few examples, John Elrod states that Johannes was not shy to envision “sexual conquest” (15), while Kresten Nordentoft takes note of Johannes’s success in transforming Cordelia into “an erotically charged beauty” (16). In his turn, Louis Mackey holds that the Seducer’s behavior is driven by “carnal climax,” a peremptory example of which being the “enthusiastic defloration of Cordelia.” Referring to Johannes’s sexual penchants, Bradley Dewey adds that the Seducer “no doubt got what he wanted.” Last but not least, George Connell goes so far as comparing Johannes to a sex-dependent vampire, for whom “seduction is the only activity that can rejuvenate [his] soul” (17).

C. The “slippery” side of seduction

However, one of the key reasons why we cannot identify the exact intentions behind Johannes’s seduction is his deployment of stealthy,

untrustworthy poses. To put it bluntly, deceitfulness and mendaciousness are fundamental to Johannes's pursuits, whatever those may be. In our estimation, these are additional traits of his narcissistic personality.

Starting with the seemingly endless capacity to deceive, we should mention that Johannes masters to perfection the art of secrecy and cunningness, be it in daily conduct or verbal communication. His refined taste demands cleverly constructed dramas which, in turn, force him to interact with his victims as a masterful deceiver. This aligns with his overall principle that the aesthetic interaction with any girl inevitably ends with her being deceived, and Cordelia is no exception. That is why the engagement with her remains "merely a simulated move," and so, any trace of earnestness therein must be carefully avoided.

But deception is not the only tool in Johannes's kit. The Seducer will not hesitate to resort to outright lies to fulfill his hidden agenda. Amongst the most egregious instances of lying, we count his statements about being "honest and reliable," and having "never deceived anyone who has confided in me." In contrast, his diary represents an open, huge, and unapologetic testimony of the ruthless deception of several people who have sincerely trusted and confided in him. *Vis-à-vis* Cordelia, he claims to be madly in love, whereas his diary abounds in confessions about being tempted by other girls. The same applies to one of his closest friends, Edward, to whom we shall soon return. Lastly, we have the issue of the Seducer's wealth. On the one hand, he claims to "own nothing" and even to "desire to own nothing." On the other hand, he admits he owns a "country house," sparing no expense to refurbish it just "to set the proper mood" of a date with Cordelia. No less important is that Johannes affords a personal servant, who deeply reveres his employer and, interestingly enough, is "a perfect virtuoso" in following instructions.

D. A controlling, manipulative and exploitative seduction

The deceitful and cunning behavior takes center stage in any scientific discussion of narcissism (18). Moreover, from the lack of any guilt or regret for such behavior, scholars infer

an impaired capacity for empathy, more exactly, the absence of a respectful, responsible, and sustained commitment to other people (19). Part of this absent empathy is yet another, crucial manifestation of narcissistic cold-heartedness: the obsessive desire for control and manipulation (20,21,22).

The existence of controlling tendencies in Johannes did not escape the attention of interpreters who presume a direct connection between the Seducer's cavalier experimental psychology and his manipulative egotism. However, the argument we wish to put forward here is that Johannes's manipulations: (i) represent the most convincing proof of "arrogant narcissism" in Johannes's personality; (ii) have a bewildering variety of expressions (not all captured by contemporary psychological science); and (iii) foreshadow the pathological or "psychopathic" side of Johannes's overall narcissism.

What is missing from most scientific accounts of narcissism (and plays a central role in Kierkegaard's portrait of Johannes) is that to gain control over others, the Seducer must exercise strict control over himself by suppressing any spontaneity or natural reaction. Otherwise stated, he must approach what is traditionally considered impulsive or natural as a calculated, carefully crafted endeavor. As we see it, self-control represents both an offshoot of the Seducer's strong will and an indispensable condition for manipulating his victims.

Fundamentally striking about Johannes's manipulative behavior is his irrepressible need to control the *external* environment – which is another feature ignored in narcissism scholarship. Here, we should return to the fact that Johannes filters absolutely everything through the lens of aesthetic enjoyment. For him, the real world is just a reservoir to exploit at will, the source of aesthetic stimuli for enjoyment. Consequently, Johannes reduces the external world to an endless occasion for egotistic (or narcissistic) manipulation. As he cannot leave anything to chance, the outer environment is a good place to start (a possible sign of narcissistic hyperreactivity). Relevant in this regard are the Seducer's voyeurism and stalking habit, both related to the meticulous mapping – and whenever possible, deliberate manipulation – of the victim's sur-

roundings, be they a street, a house, an apartment, or a parlor.

At the same time, Johannes achieves the greatest successes when he tries to control his fellow humans. Psychopathologists would be very familiar with his initial tactic. They call it, idealization which is arguably an unerring means to make victims surrender completely to the narcissist's will. Surprisingly or not, psychological studies have shown that narcissism – especially in its “extraordinary” expression – and idealism are not necessarily opposed to one another. Here, again, Johannes does not disappoint. Words like “idea” or “image” surface in a positive manner throughout the entire Diary; so much so that Johannes appears unable to survive without “the joy that is in the idea.”

Nonetheless, what is unique about Johannes – a feature clinical psychologists should pay more attention to – is that, albeit mediated by his idealism, the process of idealization starts with *himself*. That is to say, before placing the objects of his seduction on an unworldly pedestal, the Seducer wishes to turn his own self first into an ideal, literary figure. Eric Downing has documented the multiple and incredibly complicated ways in which Johannes adapts his personal experiences to literary models and language. As he explains, Johannes “deliberately strives to live his life as literature, to realize a peculiarly literary existence in the course of his erotic pursuits.” In the final analysis, the Seducer's hope is “to fashion a literary artwork out of himself, to regulate his erotic activity by the rules and *ratio* [method] of *ars*” (23).

Johannes's tendency to present himself as a literary artwork which replaces his immediate self, is intimately tied to the desire to transform his victims into literary masterpieces, as well. This process is obvious in the case of Cordelia, who suffers a “mythification” of sorts at the hands of her seducer. According to Downing, she becomes “the prime example of [Johannes's] idealizing artefaction, as he skillfully labors to fashion or counterfeit her into the image of the »picture« he secretly cherishes.” Hence Downing's dual conclusion that “the desire in Johannes' seductive scheme [is] not for a woman, even for a composite woman, but for a picture, an artwork;” and that the Seducer's

overarching goal is “to implant within [Cordelia] a specific literary ideal of love and of him as lover.”

Inevitably, the process of idealization ends up in disappointment, whose direct consequence is known to students of narcissism as devaluation. For Johannes, the particularity and concrete imperfections of actual women are no match to the perfection of the ideal. No woman, Cordelia included, is sufficient on her own to embody an ideal content. However, the dangerous game – which Johannes plays remorselessly – is to shape an aesthetic artwork out of a living human being. The disturbing consequence of the fact that the Seducer prefers ideal images to concrete, living individuals is that he has to treat others as if they were dead. In this regard, the Seducer may be a diabolical version of Pygmalion: someone who disregards the ineradicable uniqueness of the particular person in order to preserve her mythical, narcissistically generated image.

Integral to everyone's unrepeatable individuality are their vulnerabilities, flaws, fears, concerns, insecurities, etc. These are Johannes's preferred target because, as any experienced narcissist knows, only defenseless people are guaranteed prey. Therefore, from the very beginning Johannes will employ a very effective, clinical expertise to uncover the other's personal history and weaknesses. This will allow him, not just to charm the victim, but also to subtly infiltrate their entire being. Despite his claims to the contrary, the Seducer never really loves his conquests, nor does he care to help them overcome psychological difficulties. Instead, the latter are used as a means to satisfy his needs, namely, to extract from the victim the satisfaction of carnal desire or to pedestalize her for aesthetic contemplation. Occasionally, given his matchless cunning, Johannes even resorts to self-debasement in order to gain a woman's trust. Yet, once past the entry to their soul, he is in full possession of the victim. Here, his psychological manipulation proves so adroit that the victim does not even suspect she's completely lost her freedom and identity. This existential vampirism leads us straight into the dungeons of Johannes's world, which is where we will turn our attention next.

III. The aggressive-psychopathic narcissist

A. The other's alienation and commodification

So far, we have only hinted at Johannes's immorality. It is now time to confront it head-on by addressing two of the most destructive effects Johannes has on others: the loss of their distinct selves and their instrumentalization. Scholars have amply documented the psychological damage narcissists inflict on whomever they run into: relatives, children, parents, partners, friends, coworkers, and oftentimes, mere strangers. Victims complain, amongst others, that no matter how short or long, the interaction with a narcissist culminates in a complete loss of identity by having been transmogrified into "narcissistic supply." The existential harm victims describe resembles psychic death, while their emotions range from disbelief and random bouts of rage to feelings of unforgivable shame, isolation, and (suicidal) depression (24,25,26,27,28,29).

At this point, it may not surprise anybody that almost every one of these symptoms can be detected in Johannes's victims. Other symptoms are unknown even to clinical psychologists, which is why they should find them within the pages of *The Diary*. To begin with, Johannes infantilizes Cordelia. Claiming to be charmed by her youth, innocence, and naivete, he treats her like a child to be initiated into erotic matters for the sake of a putative expansion of her self-awareness. Equally grave is her privation of personal freedom. Cordelia is sometimes depicted as completely fenced in by Johannes's seductive words, acts, or strategies, while her seducer is utterly intoxicated with such domination. *The Diary* abounds in entries which detail his arresting gaze or irresistible presence. By consequence, in his presence everyone without exception – Cordelia's aunt included – behaves as if "bewitched."

As a matter of fact, anyone coming into contact with Johannes feels as if possessed by an alien entity. Cordelia admits she "always...was enraptured by him," but his hold on her became so profound that, when he wanted to break up the engagement, he made *her* take the initiative, after persuading her that marriage is not as ex-

hilarating as unconventional sex. Even when painfully aware of her self-alienation, Cordelia remains hopelessly attached to him. "Flee where you will," she exclaims vehemently, "I am still yours; ... in the hour of death, I am yours." In the end, Cordelia's entire being merges with an all-encompassing love for the very person who has seduced, betrayed, and abandoned her. Her loss of self is so profound that in a letter to A., she writes: "every thought I think is only through him."

Things can take an even more sinister form inasmuch as the inner turmoil induced by the Seducer leads to self-denigration. Cordelia is again a case in point. She openly confesses to Johannes: "you have become everything to me, so that I would rejoice solely in being your slave." A similar self-debasement prompts her to ask for forgiveness "for continuing to love [him];" or to promise to keep her affection intact until he'll be "tired of loving others." Cordelia's mental degradation reaches such heights that A. cannot help but notice it and starts pitying her.

Here it should be emphatically stated that Johannes pursues a democratic stance when it comes to choosing his victims and enablers. Kierkegaard scholars tend to downplay, if not completely ignore, the fact that the Seducer alienates and manipulates, not only women (i.e., the primary object of his interest), but also men, if these happen to serve his overall purpose or help him bring about the realization of his strategies. Thus, Johannes's seduction corrupts *everybody's* mind. He breaks the spirit of women and men alike. This self-estrangement happens through the commodification or instrumentalization of human alterity. We have said that, due to his unconditional commitment to a hedonistic, erotic aestheticism, Johannes is not interested in the uniqueness and existential dignity of the other. He constantly treats others as mere means to either follow an ideal goal (i.e., turning his life into an authentic artwork) or to satisfy his secret carnal desires.

In short, Johannes approaches the other as a mere object, as someone completely devoid of autonomy, agency, and moral worthiness. Needless to add, the primordial and perennial target of Johannes's seduction is and remains the *feminine* other. In this regard, almost every page of

The Diary is an irrefutable proof of the commodification and objectification of women. Understandably enough, this reality prompted feminist scholars to use terms like “thievery,” “shallow [and parasitic] desire,” and the “continuum of vice” (30) to characterize Johannes’s personality, philosophy, and actions.

But no less evident, though equally degrading, is Johannes’s commodification of the *male* other. Edward Baxter’s example is paramount in this regard. Edward is a naïve young man who falls in love with Cordelia. However, his sincere affection becomes a mere cog in Johannes’s intricate machinery built to seduce, control, possess, and finally discard Cordelia. Consider Johannes’s plan to have Edward propose to Cordelia, to then approach Cordelia’s aunt and ask for her niece’s hand, after which he tells Edward it was the aunt’s idea that he marry the girl. Consider also Johannes’s equation of Edward with a child; or his derisive remarks about Edward’s awkwardness and embarrassment in Cordelia’s presence, despite claiming to be his “mentor;” or his caricature of Edward who is compared with a famous comic character at the time, named Fritz. Taken together, these attitudes and behaviors denote a *universal* instrumentalization of the other, confirming once again that any contact with a narcissist of Johannes’s caliber is, for both women and men, the royal way to perdition.

But who else than a narcissist with potentially psychopathic tendencies would have such an effect on others? Specialists argue that in its most extreme forms, narcissism can become aggressive either in a passive way or through an explosive behavior (30,31). At this juncture, the question becomes: what kind of aggression does our protagonist display?

B. Seducer’s carefully designed aggression

Were we to ask Johannes himself, what he would have to say would not be very reassuring. “I might think of myself as Mephistopheles,” he confesses without any hesitation or care. Somewhere else, while imagining himself speaking to a potential victim, he exclaims: “Watch out; the monster is approaching.” If the same question were posed to his friend, A., he would readily agree that Johannes is a “corrupt man.” As to his most famous victim, Cordelia, she would use

such words as “my enemy, my murderer, [...] the tomb of my joy, the abyss of my unhappiness,” with reference to her seducer. The verdict of scrupulous Kierkegaard commentators would also be unambiguously negative. By far, the vast majority use such labels as “evil,” “a complete scoundrel,” “a social deviant,” a “lifeless parasite,” a “criminal,” to capture his nature.

At the same time, our judgment of Johannes’s aggression should be more nuanced. After all, he does possess commendable qualities, some of which have already been mentioned, while others did not escape scholars’ attention. Moreover, despite his truly detestable personality, worldview, and habits, the Seducer’s influence on others might not be completely negative or destructive (32). Notwithstanding, granted that unethical aestheticism, lack of empathy, and cruel instrumentalization of others remain the defining features of his personality, what can we say for sure about his hostility and how does that reflect on his narcissism?

Let us note first that Johannes does not *ever* manifest himself violently in the physical sense. We never see him being resentful, furious, or hateful, either. Given his powerful self-control and aristocratic airs, all of these reactions would be unthinkable. Rather, it is our argument that the Seducer’s cruelty is of a primarily *psychological* nature, which, of course, does not make it less threatening. The psychopathic dimension of his narcissism consists, not so much in possessing bodies – although we saw that the Seducer does not shy away from doing that, too – but rather, in controlling, manipulating, and reshaping his victims’ interiority in the image of his aesthetic ideals. However, in so doing, the Seducer ends up defiling or even crushing the other’s *spirit*. Even more, knowing that suffering (or the “dark side” of life) often tears an individual apart, and still continuing to do what he does, makes us wonder whether his cruelty does not have a sadistic tinge to it.

Two distinct metaphors emerge when envisaging the “violent” side of seduction. The first one is that of war. When he is by himself, Johannes does not conceive the seductive undertaking like a dance, wherein both partners enjoy an equal share of grace, control, and submission. Rather, he imagines his affair with Cordelia as a kind of

war, wherein, predictably enough, he has the upper hand and is the guaranteed victor. The second metaphor – which is much more apposite – is that of hunting. Johannes loves to hunt, which is why treating women as a kind of aesthetic prey comes naturally to him. It also seems that his preferred method is that of ambush through disorientation. He seeds chaos wherever his prowls take him, inducing, as already noted, exasperation, alienation, and self-denigration in his victims. To use Dewey's wonderful wording, "Johannes can be seen as ...as a professional hunter. The aesthete must constantly keep himself at the ready-weapons primed, skills hone[d], reflexes sharp. He must gather needed intelligence about his next quarry, design campaigns, execute plans with precision and stealth, make the kill, then cover his tracks expertly as he withdraws." Were we ever to suspect that these might be exaggerations, consider Johannes's realization that the sexual enjoyment obtained by tricking a woman into thinking she has fallen in love with her seducer, can be thought as a psychological rape; and yet that is exactly what he is doing all along.

Conclusions

Suggesting that there is something narcissistic about Johannes is not completely new. Eric Downing, for instance, noted that overall, the Seducer's "relationship with Cordelia is only a complexly narcissistic conversation with himself." However, despite a high interest in the self-other dynamic (33,34,35), no commentator has shown whether Johannes suffers from what contemporary psychopathology calls narcissism, and if so, what kind. We argued that Kierkegaard's "reflective seducer" displays several, unambiguous symptoms of narcissism, some of which are essentially pathological. We showed why, following Elsa Ronningstam's terminology, Johannes is an "extraordinary and arrogant" narcissist with some psychopathic traits. More to the point, the "extraordinary" side of Johannes's personality consists of genuine charisma based on his exceptional, intellectual-artistic capacities, as well as aesthetic idealism. Inasmuch as he swears by an inflated sense of superiority and entitlement; condescension and exhibitionism in interpersonal relations; grandiose fantasies; and a controlling behavior vis-

vis others; it is safe to assume that the core of the Seducer's narcissism is "arrogant." Finally, since guilt and remorse remain completely foreign to his nature and given his exploitative-aggressive stance towards other people's sense of self (possibly hiding some sadistic tendencies), Johannes's narcissism undoubtedly extends into "psychopathic" territory.

Now, concerning the possible lessons that "The Diary of the Seducer" has to offer vis-à-vis the narcissistic phenomenon, we claim that these are:

(1) Narcissism should be understood on a rather large and multilayered continuum.

(2) Johannes's personality shows that it is possible that the same individual has symptoms typical of divergent forms of narcissism, and not all of them are absolutely detrimental to oneself.

(3) However, in relation to human alterity, the narcissistic behavior is almost always harmful, if not downright abominable.

(4) The narcissist targets the other's psychology. He violates the victim's inner life (especially, one's identity and self-esteem) instead of their body or physical integrity. That is why the narcissistic trauma is of an existential, if not spiritual, nature.

(5) Once it takes on pathological valences, narcissism may prove incurable. (The Diary shows no sign of Johannes starting to take responsibility for his actions, express shame for their destructive repercussions, or seek any cure for his obsessive hedonism.)

(6) Narcissism could be a defensive mechanism meant to carefully hide certain vulnerabilities which one is incapable to come to terms with. In this respect, we could only speculate that Johannes's unavowable vulnerabilities might come from: emotional dysregulation (36,37); a fragmented or no self; isolation (seen as an immediate consequence of his antisocial behavior); not being in full control (neither of the environment, nor his victims, nor even himself); enjoying a prudently veiled masochism; having to face the mere passage of time and succumbing to the bodily indignities of old age; or even struggling, as some scholars surmise, with impotence or compulsive onanism (38,39).

(7) There exists a purely pathological type of narcissism, which contemporary psychiatry calls,

the narcissistic personality syndrome. Considering the key thesis of this study, the question becomes whether Johannes is afflicted by this particular syndrome. Many scholars would answer in the affirmative, especially those who claim that the Seducer suffers from “a pathological masculine heterosexuality,” or “an *exacerbatio cerebri*,” or a “conscious madness,” or even “schizophrenia.” At the same time, one still has to explain how it is possible that such an individual is incredibly intelligent, charming, urbane, composed, not to mention his literary accomplishments. Perhaps, both the Seducer and the narcissistic phenomenon are ultimately an enigma which continues to haunt scientists and hermeneuts alike.

Acknowledgement

This article was supported by The Research and Development Agency (APVV-22-0204 Religiosity and Values of Permanent Sustainability) as well as the EU NextGenerationEU through the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Slovakia under the project: Søren Kierkegaard within the East-European Context, No. 09IXX-03-V04-00594 and by Research and Development Agency (APVV-22-0204 Religiosity and Values of Permanent Sustainability).

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