

# Psychopathy and Mental Health: An Analysis of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

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## Abstract

Mental health is defined as people's psychological, emotional, and social well-being, which impacts their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. There is a direct correlation between mental well-being and mental disease. Antisocial personality disorder is a common mental health disorder known to have a subtype called psychopathy. An individual with antisocial personality disorder has a history of taking advantage of, manipulating, or abusing the rights of others without feeling guilty. Gillian Flynn, an American writer, explored the importance of mental health through her psycho-thriller novels. The present study tries to shed light upon the psychopathic disorder of the female protagonist, Amy Dunne, in Flynn's third novel *Gone Girl* (2012). Amy is portrayed as a gorgeous, cunning, seductive, selfish psychopath, and her behaviour indicates that she has a narcissistic personality disorder. Amy's successful manipulations and alluring nature define her personality and behavioural traits. The paper highlights the kind of psychopathy depicted in the novel and the external/internal factors that affect Amy's behaviour using Freudian psychoanalytical theory. Freudian concepts also help the research to focus on the psychological conflicts of Amy's personality. The study uses close textual analysis as a research technique under the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Antisocial personality disorder; Freudian concepts; Psychoanalysis; Psychological conflicts; Psychopathy.

## Introduction

"Mental health is not a destination, but a process. It's about how you drive, not where you're going." Noam Shpancer, an Israeli psychologist, defined mental health as a process with many stages which have to be dealt with by being in control of one's emotions. Mental health is known as peo-

ple's psychological, emotional, and social well-being, which impacts their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It helps in one's stress management, decision-making, and interpersonal interactions. The absence of mental disorders can also be termed "mental wellness." Well-being requires coping with unpredictability and unforeseen life upheavals. People have recently begun to consider any mental health issues seriously and responsibly. The knowledge of mental disease advances by analysing the inner functions of the brain. Through DNA analysis, medical researchers can pinpoint specific genes associated with particular mental diseases. The future of psychiatry is difficult to predict; thus, practitioners will need to stay updated with new findings and technological developments. Changes will be primarily influenced by research about the brain. Sophisticated medical procedures like deep brain stimulation will likely be used in psychiatry in the future. Recent developments in psychology also identified types of personalities struggling to adjust to societal codes, like antisocial, borderline, and bipolar personalities.

Antisocial personality disorder is a mental health disorder that deals with unscrupulous, criminal, and offending behaviours without guilt. Similar to other personality disorders, Antisocial personality disorder can range in intensity from mild symptoms like involuntary mood swings to more severe ones like repeated criminal offences. Antisocial personality disorder is regarded as having an extreme form in psychopaths. Anomalous emotional reactions and antisocial behaviour are considered as the signs of psychopathic behaviour. Numerous studies have shown that a diminished capacity for empathy frequently accompanies psychopathy. Individuals who score high on the Psychopathy Checklist are referred to as "psychopaths." The Psychopathy Checklist was developed in the 1970s by psychologist Robert D. Hare, whose book *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us* is still the most authoritative work on the subject. Psychopaths, in the words of Hare, are "social predators who charm, manipulate, and mercilessly plough their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts, shattered expectations, and empty wallets." Psychopathy gained more prominence when people started writing about fictional psychopaths. Some of the most popular fictional depictions of psychopaths or sociopaths are in literature and movies. The villainous portrayal of psychopaths are depicted exaggeratedly in fiction, and their actions enhance tension and danger in the audience.

Gillian Flynn, an American writer, explored the importance of mental health through her psycho-thriller novels. Flynn created a female psychopath, Amy Dunne, in her third novel, *Gone Girl*, published in 2012. This

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research studies Amy as a psychopath by comparing her with the general traits of psychopathic personalities and using Freudian concepts.

### **Amy as a Psychopath: A Critical Analysis of *Gone Girl***

People who exhibit callousness, emotionlessness, and moral depravity are referred to as psychopaths. Despite “not being a recognised mental health diagnosis”, it is frequently applied in clinical settings. The symptoms of antisocial personality disorder, a more general mental health condition used to describe people who “repeatedly act out and break the law”, share many characteristics with those of psychopathy. It is possible to display psychopathic tendencies without actually being one. Even those who exhibit psychopathic tendencies may not always behave in a psychopathic manner. Amy Morin, an English psychotherapist, opined that only those who display antisocial behaviour in addition to having psychopathic features are regarded as psychopaths.

The protagonist/antagonist of *Gone Girl* is Amy Elliott Dunne. Amy is a wealthy, attractive woman who grew up in New York. Amy has already established herself as a renowned quiz writer when readers first get to know her through her diaries. The *Amazing Amy* children’s book series is written by her parents, who have achieved phenomenal success. All of Amy’s achievements and failures in real life served as inspiration for these books. Amy and her husband, Nick, try to lead a fairy-tale life together in which they defy gender expectations and endure problems like job loss, illness in the family, and financial difficulties. Amy’s diary entries described Nick as an abuser who tortured her physically and mentally. Amy disappears at the beginning of the book, and her journal entries confuse the police with Nick’s involvement in the case. It turns out that Amy set up the evidence to accuse Nick of murdering her and plotted her abduction to get even with him for the many ways their marriage had failed. Amy ultimately resorts to lying, cheating, stealing, and even murder to reunite with Nick. She decides that she wants to pretend to be the perfect American couple while carrying out the lie she and Nick have been living. Amy is described as “selfish, conniving, contemptuous, spoiled, deceitful, and wickedly funny” by many critics.

Amy Dunne is portrayed as a cold, calculating psychopath. She is one of the most disturbing female villains of the recent psycho-thriller fiction. Amy went to extreme lengths to make herself victimised by men. She shows the symptoms of Munchausen Syndrome by hurting herself to gain sympathy and attraction from people. Amy was able to injure her

enough to convince others that she had been a victim. She lies about her health or causes pain to herself to produce signs of a medical illness. She has a habit of accusing people of abuse that never happened. For instance, she pretends as a victim of sexual assault in the estate of her previous suitor, Desi, using a wine bottle to injure herself. To make her story more convincing, she even murders Desi when he attempts to flee. Usually, a miserable childhood is the root cause of this condition. Amy had to pretend like 'Amazing Amy', a girl who triumphs over all challenges, a character constructed by her parents. "My parents have always worried that I'd take Amy too personally—they always tell me not to read too much into her. And yet I can't fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right. This used to drive me mad". She forced herself to live up to her parent's expectations. The interference of a fictional character diminished her admiration towards reality. She manipulates her surroundings to become 'Amazing Amy' because she aspires to be a perfect icon, even as an adult. A study concluded that "as a result of a childhood trauma related to parenting, a person may have unresolved issues with their parents that cause them to fake illness", which is true in Amy's case.

Amy's relationship with Nick has a major influence on her character. Amy and Nick's married life turned out to be a failure. Nick acted like a typical 'man' in their relationship without taking any measures to keep the marriage working. Nick ignores and cheats on Amy and compels her to adjust to his hometown and way of life. He also moves Amy away from the people and surroundings she is familiar with. Amy was forced to take extreme measures to obtain his attention and get revenge. She is a lonely, antisocial, and cunning manipulator whose continual objective is to be in the spotlight. Amy is identified as a psychopath, but she has some traits of a sociopath, too. Combining Amy's personality with intelligence makes her quite dangerous. Also, her attitude towards Nick shows her narcissistic side.

Amy also exhibits characteristics of an antisocial personality disorder. Her actions pose a danger to societal standards and are highly detrimental and harmful. Her plan of vengeance hurts not only Nick but her parents and the community she lives in. "She is one of those people who is never wrong, and she loves to teach lessons and dole out punishment." Nick accurately portrays Amy in this statement to the police since she enjoys making others suffer for even the slightest infraction against her. Amy carries out the most horrific acts of violence with no sense of morality. She manages not to feel wrong about all the chaos and suffering she inflicts on others. The primary motivation behind a person with ASPD is

cruelty or the desire to hurt other people. Jeannie Kim, an American journalist, opines that “Amy clearly falls under the diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, which is one that we would most associate with what we think of as a psychopath”. According to Dr Andrew Pierce, “violation of the law, deceitfulness, aggressiveness and lack of remorse” are the main traits of anti-social personalities. Amy also uses the women card to escape the terrible things she has done.

Additionally, Amy exhibits symptoms of borderline personality disorder. People with BPD are impetuous and have confusing self-images. “It had gotten to the point where it seemed like nothing matters because I’m not a real person, and neither is anyone else.” Amy’s words suggest that the “inner lives of borderline personalities would be hollow and empty”, which makes an unstable impact on their behaviour. Some of the traits shared by people with borderline personalities include explosive anger, acts of self-harm or suicide ideation, and a tendency to have many casual relationships. Lopez-Villatoro’s research states that “BPD features are highly represented in subjects with psychopathy as well as psychopathic traits are highly prevalent in patients with BPD”. The cunning nature of Amy is one quality that makes her such a terrifying figure. “I’ve always thought I could commit the perfect murder. People who get caught get caught because they don’t have patience; they refuse to plan”. She murdered other people to take revenge on her husband. She has no regret for her acts and will go to any lengths to carry out the “perfect murder,” which completely exposes her psychopathic inclinations.

The psychotic characteristics of Amy can be analysed further using Freudian concepts. Sigmund Freud classified the human mind into three divisions: the id, ego and super-ego. All three categories are interconnected but have different dynamics and functions. Dr Saul Mcleod, an English critic, defined the three levels of mind as follows; “the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the super-ego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego”. Amy Dunnes’ actions are motivated by irrational subconscious desires. The Id, a personality trait that humans are born with and which is regarded as the demonic aspect of those who are likely to cause harm to both themselves and others, is dominant in Amy. Amy is concerned about her husband’s extramarital relationship. Amy plans to exact revenge by orchestrating all of her misdeeds to make Nick the prime suspect in her murder. Her thoughts stem from the unconscious, which makes all the moral codes disappear. An Indonesian critic, Mukhammad

Teguh's research, proposes that "Amy's psychopathic problems occur because her ego is overly driven by the id. An adult human whose id is more dominant will become a psychopath". For example, Amy's childhood is overpowered by a fictional character. She always thinks, "Amazing Amy is always, always one step ahead of me". Amy tends to be a perfectionist. As a result, when Amy has difficulties in life, the ego and superego struggle to restrain their behaviour. Amy feels she has always succeeded since society has liked her since she was young.

The ego in Amy can be seen when she is confused to decide which version of herself to believe more in. Amy's self-destructive behaviour can be traced back to the ego phase in her life, in which she experiences a mix of recognition and misunderstanding. However, she attributes her complications to her parents. Amy's internalised hatred for her so-called "child psychologist" parents is a direct result of this. Thus, she intended for her parents to feel pain and grief when she disappeared on purpose; she harboured no feelings of remorse or compassion for them. Also, she puts her outside appearance above her inner self. Amy is constantly well-groomed, well-dressed, and well-accessorized and maintains an ideal figure. She thinks she is more accomplished intellectually and socially than those regular couples. Amy desires to create a pleasant home and earn her husband's physical and emotional affection. She feels cheated and mistreated as a wife when her wish is not granted. Amy exacted revenge on her husband to satisfy her desires and make her pain go away. She might have felt like a failure for wanting to end her marriage. For this reason, her ego meticulously plans out a plot to get Nick arrested for her murder. Her words, "Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity and my hope and my money. Let the punishment fit the crime", suggest that her intense need for vengeance results from the impact of excessive dark thoughts that are uncontrollable by the ego. If a person's soul cannot consider the harm they are causing, it is because of having a fragile ego.

Throughout *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne grapples with the conflicting concepts of imagination and reality. Her true character emerges when she stops trying to be the ideal woman. When Amy was on the run, she was no longer the "Amazing Amy" who cared about maintaining the image she had cultivated for herself. That was her only opportunity to get in touch with her real self.

When a person's one personality is strong, the power of others is diminished. The energy available is only sufficient to support one individual. This indicates that for the id to acquire energy, the ego or the super-

ego must lose energy to balance things out. According to Hall, a person with a powerful id will have a feeble ego and superego. Amy's id demonstrates an excessive amount of power, which causes her other two identities to act in an illogical manner.

Psychopaths typically exhibit antisocial behaviour and cause harm to people who are close to them. Psychopaths are known to tend to be artificially charming by spreading a friendly vibe. Amy's complex and confusing personality often attracts victims to death. In the first phase of their relationship, Nick thinks that "Amy is kind but never a martyr", but his thoughts change to "she's complicated" when their relationship progresses. According to Freud, psychopaths have "complex personality traits", and the public won't be able to interpret what he or she is up to. Amy is excellent and has a flawless appearance because she wants to convince people that she is special. She believes being a 'nice' person might mask the crimes committed.

Narcissism is another trait exhibited by Amy Dunne. Also, critics consider narcissism as a social sign of psychopathy. Unhealthy narcissism is the outcome of "verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse". Gillian Flynn shows the narcissistic characteristics of a pathological psychopath in *Gone Girl*. Amy Dunne, the main character, exhibits symptoms of unhealthy narcissism in her conduct. She faces several forms of abuse and degradations starting in her early years. Amy exerts control over others to shield herself from mistreatment. Although Amy appears to be a great person, she is a skilled manipulator. She engages in criminal activity to fulfil her aspirations. The influence of Amy's parents on her narcissistic behaviour is significant.

## Conclusion

Gillian Flynn portrayed her protagonist, Amy Dunne, as a woman who gets what she wants. The study has examined Amy's actions, and they frequently show psychopathic characteristics. The study also uses Freud's theory of personality dynamics to study Amy's personality. Amy's ego and superego are incredibly frail and cannot govern Id. The main idea of Id is pleasure, and Amy found joy in getting back at her cheating husband. Amy let go of her parents' sad feelings about her being lost. She also killed her ex-boyfriend, who had helped in her crucial time, just to get back with her husband she hates. The traits listed above demonstrate that the id that shapes Amy's personality is more predominant and gives Amy more psychological vigour, which makes her a psychopath. If the ego and

superego are not emphasised, adult humans with a more substantial id will experience psychopathic issues that are challenging to treat. Discord between id, ego, and superego causes instability in her personality. Also, Amy's imbalanced character reveals psychological problems due to her uneven dynamics.

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