

Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Psychopathy in Liz Jensen's the Ninth Life of Louis Drax

Huda Razaq Ibraheem

University of Baghdad, College of Arts, Department of English Language

Abstract: *Psychopathy is a complex psychological disorder that arises from the interaction of genetic and environmental elements. Individuals with psychopathy are characterized by lack of empathy, manipulation of others, impulsivity, and antisocial behavior. The environment plays a crucial role in the development of this disorder. In Liz Jensen's novel The Ninth Life of Louis Drax, psychopathy and psychological problems are presented in an accurate and realistic way, providing ideal conditions for understanding these psychological problems. The author successfully shows the effect of psychological issues on family and social life, which raises awareness about it. This paper discusses the psychological issues in the novel in details.*

Key words: *Psychopathy, low self-esteem, antisocial behavior, etiology, manipulative behaviors.*

1.1. Introduction

The scientific understanding of the psychopathic brain keeps advancing, but even with experimental research, there is a need for a theory to comprehend the psychopathic mind. One such theory is psychoanalysis. Contemporary psychoanalytic theorists present a model that explains the psychopath's personality, including the nature of their mind and its evolutionary origins. This model requires considering behaviors and attitudes that may seem contrary to human nature, such as the lack of empathy and emotional attachment, the reversal of moral values, addiction to violence, cruelty, and intense excitement, manipulation and triumphant deceit of others, and an attitude of arrogance, and a sense of absolute power. This model also identifies the motivations and context behind psychopathic behavior to understand their subjective experience of the world (Yakeley 381).

To study and analyze psychopathy, like everything else, we must start from the beginning. Since childhood, the human mind is formed to adopt images and ideas that represent its existential nature. Psychopathic traits usually appear in early age. Psychopathic traits in youth are usually marked by a set of symptoms that extend to emotional like cruelty and emotions in the same time, personality such as feeling superior and being deceitful, and behaving such as impulsive and aggression. Compared to other behavior problems in children, psychopathy is more focused on emotional and personality traits, making it different from other antisocial behaviors (Bounoua, 2022, p. 36).

Both mental illness and psychotic disorders are having a big impact on individual and society that often last a lifetime. This creates significant social costs. Psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia, not only cause personal and health suffering, but also have significant financial cost. For example, studies have estimated that the economic burden of psychological problems in the United States alone is almost \$155.7 billion dollar. These costs include direct health care, lost productivity, and social assistance provided to patients (Anderson. 2022, p. 149).

Psychopathy is not one-dimensional illness, rather it is multidimensional. It appears differently from one person to another and it can cause many damages to the person or people around him or her.

Despite the shared symptoms, the psychopathic people practice their strange tendencies and behave differently towards their families and other people (Patrick, 2019, p. 9). This paper discusses specific form of psychopathy which is directed toward family and close ones only.

1.2. Literature review

The Ninth Life of Louis Drax has been studied in few articles. Helen E. Mundler (2022) examines how Alexandre Aja's film adaptation discusses "transposition" and "commentary," Mundler's analysis focuses on how Jensen's novel is mirrored or transformed through visual film,. In earlier work (2013), Mundler also explored the imaginary spaces within *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* and *Egg Dancing* by Liz Jensen, discussing how these psychological and surreal settings contribute to the narratives. Jensen herself (2016) reflected on the film adaptation, describing the experience of seeing her work on screen as something shocking as it differs from the novel. These works are the only ones that tackled the novel so far.

1.3. Psychopath Characters in *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*

The narrator talks about complex characters specifically the mother Natalie and her son Louis and how these characters go through psychological and psychopathic phases. The novel presents Natalie the mother who faces psychological issues. From the beginning, Natalie feels a mixture of love, guilt and anxiety as because of the accidents of her son Louis, who is described as a "moving accident". Over time, her relationship with her son becomes tenser, and she begins to behave in ways that indicate a deep psychological disorder. Natalie loves her son, but this love is mixed with fear and desire to get rid of the burden he represents in her life. Natalie may suffer from psychological disorders such as 'Munchausen syndrome by proxy', where she tries to harm her son repeatedly to attract attention or sympathy from others.

The novel also introduces the character of the son Louis Drax, the protagonist of *The 9th Life of Louis Drax*. Louis is nine-year-old and very smart boy but with disorders. Since his childhood, Louis has been known for his unusually frequent accidents, which becomes a defining characteristic of his personality. Louie has been through many life-threatening situations, such as electrocution, food poisoning, and a serious fall that nearly killed him, leading him to be classified as an "accidental child" (Jensen). The accidents and pains are caused by his mother, which impact him and make him a disturbed child as well.

1.4. Psychopathy and the Disposal law in *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*

Louis' accidents seem to occur with such frequency and severity that it is difficult to believe that they are coincidences. This suggests a darker background to his story. Louis displays a remarkable psychological condition as his intelligence is merged with a sense of detachment from the world around him and a fascination with death and dark things. His inner thoughts reveal a child asking existential questions and his sense of mortality is always doubted. His relationship with his mother Natalie is always at tension. Louis lives in isolation and instability. Throughout the novel, his tone alternates between dark humor and sad contemplation.

The important thing with 'Munchausen syndrome by proxy' is that the mother fakes or causes a serious harm to the child under her care. The main purpose of this behavior is to gain attention or sympathy, or to gain appreciation from others for the care she gives to her son (Meadow 535). Yet, in the novel it shows her condition to be more complicated than psychological understanding. Doctor Marcel Perez describes the relationship between the two where he said:

She loved her son, but she hated him too. There was an eternal conflict. It was more complex than Munchausen's syndrome by proxy. The murderous instinct really was there. She said she never let him die. But she took him to the edge time after time. A part of him wanted it too. It was a game they played together. (Jensen).

The novel displays the relationship between the two as mixture of deep love and psychological intensity. Natalie expresses her love for her son and defends him strongly, but this love comes with anxiety and fear for him due to the repeated nearly death moments that he is exposed to.

Natalie lives in a constant fear. Sometimes it seems that Louie's suffering may be the result of a conflict between him and his mother. Louis suffers from conflicting feelings about being his mother. Throughout the novel, Natalie shows an unusual interest in her son, despite being the reason of his harm. She tries to keep him safe but in fact she always tries to get rid of him. She attempts to dispose him because she does not want to be his mother forever. On the other hand, Louie seems to have an awareness of his mother's feelings and expresses his attachment to her in a way that is not without weirdness.

Louis is a reflection of his mother's personality; her influence has shaped his mind and brought the concept of "the Disposal Law" into his thinking. Louis killed his hamster, Mohammed, as a result of ideas about ownership and control. In his young mind, Louis has a concept called the "Right of Disposal," a secret rule he imagines that allows him as the pet's owner, to dispose of it after its expected lifespan of two years. Louis feels he has absolute power over the hamster because it is "his" and that justifies killing the hamster using different means like suffocation, poison, or crushing it with a heavy object like a large book. (Jensen)

This concept of disposal law reflects Louis' psychopathic understanding of power and responsibility, and shows his capability to use fantasy to justify his violent behavior. The idea itself is not legal or moral, but it is part of Louis' troubled mind, as he struggles between the desire to control something in his life and an emotional disconnect from the reality he lives in.

Freud describes a group of people he calls "guilt criminals," who committed wrong acts because of the inner guilt. He believes that this feeling was linked to the Oedipus complex, where they have desires to kill their father and to bond with their mother. Although he believes that most criminals deep down wanted to be punished because of these feelings, he notes that there is another type of person, known as psychopaths, who commit crimes without a sense of guilt. They had not developed any moral restraints and felt justified in their actions. Freud also suggests that psychopaths are characterized by extreme selfishness and a strong destructive drive, and that the lack of love and appreciation for things around them is what unites these traits (Freud 178).

Louis never clearly feels guilty about his doings. Rather, his actions are motivated by a sense of emotional detachment, and sometimes by a sense of curiosity or a misunderstanding of life and death. Louis justifies his killing of the hamster Muhammad with what he believed to be a "right to dispose" and shows no remorse or guilt about his actions. He seems to see it as a form of personal right and absolute power that he has as the owner of his pet.

A mind with psychological issues is a step away from crossing into psychopathic behavior. According to Freud, there are two types of people, one feels guilty and the other does not. In Natalie's case, it is pure psychological issue because her past ended tragically with her husband Jean-Luc who is the real father of Louis. She did everything to keep him with her even her pregnancy was a trick to make him stay:

Natalie's way of thinking comes from another era. From the time when women really were helpless, when they really did have to manipulate men. She wanted a man who didn't want her, so she tried to trap him by getting pregnant. It's the oldest trick in the book." (Jensen).

Her emotions caused chaos that reflected on Louis. Natalie may not be fully psychographic person and that because the guilt she felt yet she shows traits as a sign of psychopathy. The psychopath tries to maintain a sense of high level about himself by Defamation, look down and hurting others. The psychopath becomes unaffected by his strong fantasies, due to his low level of neural activity. When feelings like, empty, shame and envy start to grow, the psychopathic person feels like he should hurt others to feel better because when he does that, he feels less Envy. He makes others look less than him and also, he feels less shame because he doesn't have to face those embarrassing feelings (Yakeley 392).

Natalie claims that Louis' father raped her, and he was horrible with her. She creates the image of a monster which Louis adopt making him not only hate men but also hate the idea of man itself. This shows how terrible and devastating Natalie thoughts on her son. She makes him think about taking

some pills of a pregnancy to become a woman because of the hormones in it or thinking about surgery to change his gender. This is because he never wants to be the rapist that his father was according to Natalie.

In Natalie case, her psychological issues and complicated relationship with men deeply affect her relationship with her son Louis. Natalie's past with her husband or her past in general, her emotional trauma and manipulative tendencies show a mother who is so affected by her personal experiences that she is unable to be a healthy mother. The psychological and emotional states of parents greatly affect the psychological health of children. Emotional detachment and manipulative behaviors practiced by parents can lead to psychological problems in children. Such as low self-esteem, attachment disorders, and even antisocial behavior (Herron and Javier 108).

The father figure is very important in the child life; his stepfather was less emotionally attached to Louie because he is not his biological father. This shaped the lack of identity in existent for Louis. Children always reflect the environment that they live in, like family and condition. Any problem with the environment surrounded the child may leave deep psychological effects that appear in the child's behavior later on. Such environments create a state of confusion and disconnection, causing children to Adopt the emotional chaos around them:

Family characteristics are also believed to play a pivotal role in the etiology of youth psychopathy. Dimensions of negative parenting practices, in particular, have emerged as robust predictors of a range of psychopathic traits, including CU features and antisocial behavior in youth (Bounoua et al. 40).

Louis finds himself between two parents neither of them are reliable to raise him. Unstable mother with a lot of problems and father rejections. This created a much disrupted mind of a child. Just like Natalie used manipulation and control as a way to deal with her problems, Louis found himself trapped in a world where the people who were supposed to care for him became the source of his emotional distress. These patterns, documented in the literature on psychopathy and family relationships, it shows how much parents actions; either they were conscious or unconscious, does shape the mental and emotional development of their children.

Conclusion

Psychoanalytic theory on psychopathy can interpret the psychopathic mind in Liz Jensen's *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*. The novel shows psychological disorder of Natalie who is driven by emotional, manipulative, and harmful behaviors toward Louis. These actions reflect how parent's psychological issues can impact children. The novel shows the effects of trauma and manipulation on both personal and family life. After all, children are the products of their families and the way they are raised which is why Louis becomes a copy of his mother's abnormal behavior and how Drax shows the first signs of psychological illness (psychopathy) like lack of empathy, not feeling guilty, and superficial or cold feelings. And the constant abuse of Drax has a detrimental impact on his behavior and mental health in every aspect of his life so children that experience abuse throughout their early years struggle with self-esteem, and environmental compatibility.

References

1. Bounoua, Nadia, Rickie Miglin, and Naomi Sadeh. "Developmental Considerations in Psychopathy." *The Complexity of Psychopathy*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022. 33-62.
2. Freud, Sigmund. "Humour." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 9, 1928, pp. 1–6.
3. Javier, Rafael Art, and William G. Herron, eds. *Understanding domestic violence: Theories, challenges, and remedies*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. Print
4. Meadow, Roy. "What is, and what is not, 'Munchausen syndrome by proxy'?" *Archives of disease in childhood* 72.6 (1995): 534.
5. Mundler, Helen E. "The Ninth Life of Louis Drax: from text to film." *Film journal* 8 (2022).

6. Mundler, Helen E. Imaginary Places in *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* and *Egg Dancing* by Liz Jensen. *Résonance*, 2013, 14, pp.65-79.
7. Patrick, Christopher J. "Psychopathy as Masked Pathology." *Handbook of Psychopathy*, edited by Christopher J. Patrick, 2nd ed., The Guilford Press, 2018, pp. 3–21.
8. Yakeley, Jessica. "Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Psychopathy." *The Complexity of Psychopathy* edited by Jennifer E. Vitale, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2022, pp. 381–412. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83156-1_15.