

Mediocrity Madness: the Destructive Effects of Antonio Salieri's Narcissistic Personality Disorder in *Amadeus*

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ABSTRACT

Industriousness is generally perceived as a noble trait. Such mindset is firmly ingrained within the society through religious teachings and moral virtues. Since the foundation of identity is shaped through difference, many people endure tedious labour to either arrive at a socially-approved level or surpass that level. For individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the struggle to dismiss mediocrity may result in a form of madness conveyed through destructive actions towards both the subject and the object. The purpose of this paper is to identify the phases through which Antonio Salieri's Narcissistic Personality Disorder in *Amadeus* triggers a series of destructive effects aimed at himself and others. This research concludes that the transition from the *sense of mediocrity* to *mediocrity madness* for people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder can be divided into three phases: *the acknowledgment of mediocrity*, *the narcissistic wound*, and *the mediocrity madness*.

Keywords: Industriousness, mediocrity, mediocrity madness, narcissistic personality disorder, amadeus.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, industriousness has been universally recognized as a noble trait. In social context, hard work is almost synonymous with diligence and responsibility. This mindset is rooted in, among other causes, religious teachings and virtues. The Romans, for instance, believed that a Roman citizen must possess the virtue of *industria*, which could be translated as industriousness or hard work. In his memoir, Benjamin Franklin also mentions 'industry' as one of the 13 virtues of moral perfection; a trait which demands effective use of time and energy. Equivalent assertion was made by Christianity, as seen in the verse "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10, NIV). Likewise, The Quran suggests that "... man shall have nothing but what he strives for" (Surah An-Najm 53:39).

As identity can be generally understood as "what it means to be one is" (Burke, 1991, p. 837), social acceptance and approval become such significant objectives for many people. Musicians who do not possess the gifts of Mozart or Bach toil in years of music lessons. Scholars whose intellectual prowess falls short of Einstein's or Aristotle's attempt to claim credibility through multiple academic degrees and publications. Scientists who refuse to believe that there is truth beyond the realm of mind work tirelessly to unravel the mysteries of the universe. Similarly,

people of various occupational backgrounds who work relentlessly, day and night, for the sake of wealth, status, or power is a common sight in metropolitan cities. Although it is hard to argue that industriousness is a positive trait, it may be worth looking into that it is also a sign, or a result, of *mediocrity*.

The effect of the 'sense of mediocrity' on normal people or those with normal adult narcissism is relatively milder than those with Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Their sense of grandiose and aberrations in self-love suggests that the meaning of the word 'I' carries a significantly heavier weight than "the verbal assurance... that I am the center of awareness in a universe of experience" (Erikson, 1968, p. 218). For these individuals, to be 'in-between' or 'average', is a condition they would avoid at all cost. In extreme cases of pathological narcissism, such cost is often shared between the individual and the person, or the object, standing in the way. It means that the sense of mediocrity can lead to destructive effects for both the subject and the object, as excellently portrayed by the film *Amadeus*.

Directed by Miloš Forman, the 1984 American period drama is a fictionalized biography of Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart, one of the world's most renowned classical composers. The word 'Theophilus' in Greek is equivalent to the word

‘Amadeus’ in Latin, which means ‘loved by God’. The film is a screen adaptation of Peter Shaffer’s stage play, also titled *Amadeus*. Starring F. Murray Abraham as the Italian court composer, Antonio Salieri, and Tom Hulce as Mozart, the film is set in the ‘city of musicians’, Vienna, Austria in the late 18th century. The critically acclaimed film racked up 40 wins out of 53 nominations, including 8 Academy Awards, 4 BAFTA awards, and 4 Golden Globes.

The story of *Amadeus* centers around Antonio Salieri, a musical elite in Vienna who works as a court composer for the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II. The film opens with a scene set in 1823, in which the elderly Salieri attempts suicide by slitting his throat while begging for forgiveness for killing Mozart in 1791. A Catholic pastor, Father Vogler, visits Salieri in a lunatic asylum after the incident and asks him to confess his sins. After initial reluctance, Salieri begins to open up about his life, particularly the period in which he was a respected, well-off court composer for the emperor.

His recollection of the events is told in a fascinatingly diverse expressions of emotion; sometimes in awe, other times intense bitterness. He had a perfect life before Mozart’s arrival in Vienna. He considers the musical prodigy a “boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy” who is nowhere near the paragon of virtue he considers himself to be. After Mozart’s death, Salieri comes to the conclusion that God would rather kill His beloved Mozart than allow Salieri to share in His glory. At the end of the film, he declares himself as ‘the patron saint of mediocrity’.

One of the central issues in *Amadeus* is the notion that some individuals are better than others at certain subject because they are given more to begin with. Hence, when Father Vogler proposes that “All men are equal in God’s eyes”, Salieri skeptically responds, “Are they?”. Salieri questions the truth of the suggestion, as seen through the following remark:

“All I ever wanted was to sing to God. He gave me that longing and then made me mute. Why? Tell me that. If He didn’t want me to praise Him with music, why implant the desire like a lust in my body and then deny me the talent?”

Throughout the story, Salieri begins to hate, not only Mozart, but God, who was initially his object of love and devotion. After years of hard work and prayers, he comes to the conclusion that God favours some more than others. Kernberg (2004) argued that the aim of hatred is “the destruction of a source of

frustration perceived as sadistically attacking the self” (p. 33). Mozart’s arrival has not only shaken the core of his belief, but also the structure in which his entire identity and existence is built upon.

Burke & Stets (2009) proposed three forms of identity: (1) the individual’s role in social structure (role identity); (2) the group where the individual belongs (group identity); and (3) the idiosyncratic personal history and experience of the individual (person identity). For Salieri, these forms of identity can be translated as his status as court composer, the music society of Vienna, and his identity as a musician. Mozart’s presence threatens this entire structure. The things Salieri has long taken for granted are now in limbo. This situation then triggers the destructive side of Salieri’s narcissistic personality. As such, the objective of this paper is to determine the phases through which Antonio Salieri’s Narcissistic Personality Disorder triggers a series of destructive effects for himself and others in *Amadeus*.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Kernberg (2004) believed that narcissism is the “libidinal investment of the self”, in which the self acts as “a substructure of the system ego reflecting the integration of... self-images or self-representations” that come as a result of interactions with other people (p. 45). Hence, as reiterated by Erikson (1968), “the counterplayers of the ‘selves’ are the ‘others’ with which the ‘I’ compares the selves continually – for better or for worse” (p. 217). However, it is important to differentiate normal adult narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Kernberg (1985, 1993) made several distinctions between the two conditions, as shown in Table 1.

In order to better identify individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Kernberg, Weiner, and Bardenstein (2000) proposed nine syndromes commonly found in people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, in which a minimum of **five** syndromes must be present; (1) grandiose sense of self-importance; (2) preoccupation with unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; (3) belief that (the subject) is special and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high status people (or institutions); (4) need for excessive admiration; (5) sense of entitlement; (6) interpersonal exploitation; (7) lack of empathy; (8) envy of others or conviction that others are envious (of the subject); and (9) arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes (p. 179).

Table 1. Distinctive Features of Normal Adult Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder (summarized)

Normal Adult Narcissim	Narcissistic Personality Disorder
Result of healthy object relations	Result of early pathological object relations
Ability to cope with ambivalence and coexistence of good and bad in people	<i>Splitting</i> as defense mechanism; perception of self and others as either entirely good or bad
Stable moral system	Deviant moral system
Stable self concept	Sense of grandiose and aberrations in self-love
Adaptive superego; ability to cope with disparity between the self and the ideal self	Strict superego; fantasies of excessive success in love, beauty, happiness, or influence
Self-esteem is regulated from within	Self-esteem relies heavily on admiration from others
Higher emotional stability; active and effective players	Emotionally vulnerable; undesirable conditions may lead to worthlessness, depression, and extreme anger
Acceptable expression of aggression	Destructive expression of aggression through <i>devaluation</i> of object
Possession of internal structure; an inner voice to tell them they are good enough	No internal structure; failure is imminent and debilitating

Envy and Jealousy

As products of the mental condition, theories on the emotions of envy and jealousy are used to support the analyses of the phases through which the destructiveness occurs. Sanders (2014) mentioned several definitions of **jealousy** which include “eager rivalry” and “fear that the good which one desires to gain or keep for oneself has been or may be diverted to another” (p. 26). He also mentioned three antecedent perceptions that distinguish jealousy from envy: (1) The subject has an exclusive relationship with the other person or the object; (2) The subject is in danger of losing that exclusivity or relationship; (3) because the subject has a rival for the affection or possession (p. 26).

Meanwhile, the word **envy**, which originates from the Latin noun *invidia* is described as the “longing for another’s advantages” and “ill will occasioned by the contemplation of another’s superior advantages” (p. 14). The antecedent conditions of envy are: (1) that another person has some possession or quality; (2) that the subject does not have; and (3) that the situation is wrong (p. 15). Sanders (p. 28) also differentiated the two emotions, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences between Envy and Jealousy (paraphrased)

Envy	Jealousy
A desire for another person’s trait or possession	A desire to retain something that belongs to the subject
Does not involve an exclusive bond with the person or object	Involves an exclusive bond with the person or object
Involves social comparison	Involves personal rivalry
Always destructive	Only becomes destructive under <i>fait accompli</i>
Tendency to hatred	Tendency to anger
Considered as a shameful emotion; rarely admitted and may be disguised as other emotions	Fewer defenses due to the more socially-sanctioned nature of the emotion

Phase One: The Acknowledgment of Mediocrity

When young Salieri prays at church, he prays earnestly. His father wants him to go into commerce, but his passion has always been music. Raised in a devout Catholic family, Salieri is convinced that only a divine intervention can change his fate, as he is powerless to disobey his father. In one of his prayers, Salieri says:

“Lord, make me a great composer. Let me celebrate Your glory through music, and be celebrated myself. Make me famous through the world. Make me immortal. In return, I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility.”

This prayer is not a submission to a higher power; it is a negotiation. More importantly, the fantasy of excessive success indicates a Narcissistic Personality Disorder. When Salieri’s father passes away, he is confidently adamant that God has heard his prayers: “Of course I knew God had arranged it all. That was obvious.” This remark has a significant influence on his anger towards God as an adult. He takes his father’s death as a signed contract between himself and God. Thus, when the adult Salieri realizes his mediocrity after Mozart’s arrival, he perceives the situation as more than injustice – God has betrayed him.

Kernberg (2004) believed that in most cases, individuals who suffer from severe narcissistic pathology have parental figures who “seemed to be operating as a good-enough parent but had an underlying indifference toward the patient... and a tendency to narcissistically exploit the patient” (pp. 34-35). When Salieri tells his father about his wish to be like Mozart, his father replies, “Why? Do you want

to be a trained monkey? Would you like me to drag you around Europe doing tricks like a circus freak?" His father is a responsible father and husband, yet he is indifferent towards his children's dreams.

As a form of self-love, narcissism requires the subject to be aware of the identity that he builds around himself. The domains of Salieri's identity are his belief in God, his love for music, and his status as court composer. Dilman (2005) made the following suggestion on the psychology of narcissitic individuals:

What holds him together are his beliefs, his having things for which he cares and in which he is interested, things outside himself. It is in the things which he gives himself to and is loyal to that he finds his identity. This identity, that which makes him who he is, thus not imposed on him. He owns it, he has made it his own. (p. 47)

This statement helps explain why Salieri's defense falls apart when the things that shape his identity are shaken. His *splitting* defense mechanism propels him to see himself as entirely good and Mozart as entirely bad, as he claims, "I was a model of virtue... everybody liked me. I liked myself. Until he came."

Phase Two: The Narcissistic Wound

Mozart wrote his first concerto at the age of four. When he was six, he was giving performances all around Europe. By the time he was nine, he had written four concertos, five symphonies, and ten sonatas. His formidable talent and achievements make the well-respected Salieri, or most musicians for that matter, mediocre by comparison. When Salieri first hears Mozart's music in Vienna, he describes it as "the voice of God". However, this admiration is also a source of frustration for his narcissistic self.

Dweck (2000, 2012) introduced two types of mindset; the *fixed mindset* and the *growth mindset*. Whereas people with *growth mindset* believe that training and efforts can enhance one's quality, those with *fixed mindset* believe that intelligence or other gifts are innate and fixed. Many religious believers subconsciously adopt the *fixed mindset*, because their faith is grounded on the existence of a Creator who gives or withholds certain qualities to each individual. For instance, the verse "For many are invited, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14, NIV) in the Bible implies the notion of a select few. As a devout Catholic, Salieri sees his abilities, and deficits, as 'fate'.

One of the characteristics of pathological object love in Narcissistic Personality Disorder, as suggested by Kernberg (2004), is the "temporary idealization of others that can quickly change to devaluation" and the "incapacity to experience self-critique or mild depression (such as remorse and self-reflection)" (pp. 50-51). These characteristics are evident in Salieri. His initial idolization towards Mozart quickly changes to devaluation of Mozart's characters and musicality whenever he talks to the Emperor or his peers. At the same time, he is unable to see the flaw in his own character. The remorse he feels for the part he plays in Mozart's death is not triggered by guilt, as claimed. Rather, it is a result of the anger he feels for the unfinished requiem he commissions Mozart to do.

Phase Three: Mediocrity Madness

Kernberg (2004) argued that the biggest fear of individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder is being "average" or "mediocre" (p. 50). Clinical studies of people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder reveal envy as "a major affective expression of aggression" (p. 33). The envied object is believed to have "highly desirable qualities" that the subject wants for himself (p. 33). Therefore, envy is recognized as "a form of hatred of another who is perceived as sadistically or teasingly withholding something highly desirable" (p. 33). For Salieri, Mozart's musical gift is not only the source of envy, but also the reason behind his sense of mediocrity.

Spielman (1971) mentioned four components of envy: *emulation*, *narcissistic wound*, *covetousness*, and *anger* (pp. 76-77). These components help explain, in almost chronological order, the phases through which Salieri's acknowledgement of mediocrity turns into destruction and aggression. The first phase, **emulation**, involves a blend of admiration and rivalry. Salieri's first encounter with Mozart in Vienna results in admiration for Mozart's talent, but at the same time, disgust for his obscene behaviour. The synthesis of these two primary emotions results in the secondary emotion of envy, as Salieri questions God's favour upon Mozart, "Why would God choose an obscene child to be His instrument?" The initial admiration and the unsuccessful emulation, tarnished by envy, has turned into bitter rivalry.

The second phase, **narcissistic wound**, is triggered by a sense of inadequacy and injured self-esteem. This phase begins when Mozart playfully criticizes the 'March of Welcome' Salieri writes to welcome him to Vienna. Not only does Mozart say "It doesn't really work", he spontaneously creates smart improvisations on the original composition. As a court composer,

Salieri feels humiliated in front of the Emperor and his peers. His self-esteem also takes another blow when he thinks the Emperor entrusts him with his daughter's piano lessons. He soon discovers that the Emperor refers to Mozart when he asks Salieri about giving his daughter piano lessons.

The third phase, **covetousness**, is visible in Salieri's prayer after Mozart's wife asks his help to secure a position in the court for Mozart:

"I prayed as I had never prayed before. Dear God, enter me now. Fill me with one piece of true music; one piece with Your breath in it, so I know that You love me. Show me one sign of Your favour, and I will show mine to Mozart."

For the second time, he negotiates with God. He covets what Mozart has, and his plan does not stop there. When he feels that God has abandoned him, he secretly hires a maid to serve Mozart's family for free in the hope of learning more about Mozart's financial situation and new compositions.

Finally, the fourth phase, **anger**, which involves spite and harmful thoughts, begins when Salieri learns that Mozart has had his darling girl, Katerina Cavalieri, while being engaged to another woman. Salieri makes the following confession of the incident:

"Was it possible that I was being tested? Was God expecting me to offer forgiveness in the face of every offense, no matter how painful? But why him? Why choose Mozart to teach me lessons in humility? My heart was filling up with such hatred for that little man. For the first time in my life, I began to know really violent thoughts."

Salieri is further humiliated when Mozart makes a mockery of his musicality in a costume party. The rage he feels is not only directed to Mozart, but to God, whom he feels has betrayed him completely, as shown through the words he speaks to Father Vogler:

"That was not Mozart laughing, Father. That was God. That was God laughing at me through that obscene giggle... show my mediocrity for all to see. One day, I will laugh at You. Before I leave this earth, I will laugh at You."

Salieri also expresses his anger towards God by burning the Cross he has previously considered as sacred, as he boldly claims:

"From now on, we are enemies, You and I, because You choose for Your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy, and give me for reward only the ability to recognize the incarnation. Because You are unjust, unfair,

unkind, I will block You. I swear it. I will hinder and harm Your creature on earth as far as I am able."

Sanders (2014) believed that envy "often positions itself as a moral emotion" (p. 23). Envious people hide behind the indignation that the other person is doing something wrong. Sanders argued that it is merely "a mask", and that "envy can never be moral" (p. 23). He also insisted that envious people think they are "motivated by a sense of injustice" (p. 25).

Salieri's plan to sabotage Mozart finds its path when he attends Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, an opera he wrote after his father's death. Upon realizing that Mozart is still haunted by his father, he comes to Mozart's house wearing the same mask his late father wore at the costume party. He then asks the terrified Mozart to compose a requiem for a large sum of money. Salieri's plan to play the requiem at Mozart's own funeral and claim it as his own is his way of retaliating with God. He believes that God will be "forced to listen" and "powerless to stop it", and that he can finally laugh at God.

When Mozart dies and his wife stores the unfinished requiem in a cupboard, Salieri is left broken, as he bitterly recounts his defeat to Father Vogler:

"Your merciful God... He destroyed His own rather than let a mediocrity share in the smallest part of His glory. He killed Mozart and kept me alive to torture – 32 years of torture. Thirty-two years of slowly watching myself become extinct, my music growing fainter, all the time fainter, 'till no one plays it at all, and his..."

The depressed Salieri then attempts to commit suicide while begging for Mozart's forgiveness. Kernberg (2004) suggested that suicidal behaviour in Narcissistic Personality Disorder patient is "an expression of rage attacks or temper tantrums when the patient feels frustrated in the context of a relationship that creates intense emotional turmoil" (p. 196).

The final scene of the film takes us to Salieri's days in a lunatic asylum where he finally accepts his mediocrity. He even pardons everyone else, including Father Vogler, as he proudly says, "I will speak for you, Father. I speak for all mediocrities in the world. I am their champion. I am their patron saint. Mediocrities everywhere... I absolve you." As he finishes his lines, the sound of Mozart's laughter is heard, because even though Salieri accepts his mediocrity, he still refuses to admit jealousy or envy. As Elster (1999) put it, envy is "the only emotion we do not want to admit to others or to ourselves" (p. 164).

CONCLUSION

Despite the negative undertone of mediocrity, people with normal adult narcissism do not have the tendency to act destructively on it. However, people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder are more emotionally vulnerable to such fact. The discrepancy between their sense of grandiose and their actual mediocrity can propel them to 'do whatever it takes' to preserve their ideal self. The fear of losing the exclusivity of a relationship or a possession and the anger aroused by the presence of a rival lead to feelings of jealousy and envy, which result in emulation, narcissistic wound, covetousness, and anger. These secondary emotions then lead to destructive effects for both the subject and the object, such as murder, suicide, and madness.

In most cases, the transition from 'sense of mediocrity' to 'mediocrity madness' in individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder can be divided into three phases: (1) the acknowledgment of mediocrity, which normally happens after the emergence of superior individual(s) that threatens the subject's identity; (2) the narcissistic wound, which involves a series of incidents in which the subject's ego is attacked; and (3) the mediocrity madness, which transforms the subject's narcissistic wound, envy, and/or jealousy into destructive actions. Salieri's madness, which puts him in a lunatic asylum, is not a result of mental insanity, since he is able to showcase perfect memory and common sense throughout his conversation with Father Vogler. Rather, it is a different form of madness that is triggered by mediocrity – a mediocrity madness.

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