

# Exploration of Mental Disorders in Greek Mythology: An Analysis of Ancient Archetypes

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## ABSTRACT

Mental disorders remain a stigmatized and seldom-discussed subject in contemporary society, where widespread misunderstanding and lack of awareness persist. The purpose of this research is to form archetypes of mental illnesses and symptoms to allow society to learn about and empathize more easily with those who are diagnosed with them. It analyzes the behaviors and experiences of characters from Greek mythology and connects them to specific mental disorders in the present day. Texts such as the *Odyssey* and *Metamorphoses* were used to understand the actions of characters such as Narcissus, Odysseus, Orpheus, Medea, and others. These behaviors were compared to the psychological symptoms of disorders such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, and others. While the ambiguity of Greek mythology and lack of professional diagnosis cannot fully confirm these characters' disorders, it can still create a unique perspective for individuals to understand mental illnesses. As a result, mental disorders can be recognized and explored by those who are less informed about the topic.

## Introduction

Mental disorders present a significant and pervasive challenge within society, affecting individuals across diverse ages and backgrounds. However, the prevailing stigma surrounding these conditions often inhibits open discourse. This lack of dialogue, coupled with insufficient information, hampers recognition and understanding of mental disorders. Consequently, society struggles to comprehend and empathize with those experiencing these conditions. Despite the complexity inherent in mental health, there are avenues to simplify comprehension.

Archetypes, emblematic models embodying universal concepts, elucidate recurring patterns by interconnecting diverse notions. Within the realm of psychological disorders, leveraging archetypes fosters awareness and comprehension among individuals impacted by these conditions. Drawing from ancient Greek mythology, iconic figures like Narcissus and Orpheus exhibit traits akin to contemporary mental health issues. As widely recognized figures, they facilitate more accessible discussions surrounding mental disorders. One pertinent archetype, "the shadow," symbolizes the concealed and suppressed facets of human nature (SAP 2023). Embracing this archetype confronts individuals with the uncomfortable reality of humanity's latent darker aspects. Furthermore, the Oedipus complex, rooted in the renowned character "Oedipus," elucidates the desire for sexual interaction with a parent of the opposite sex. Utilizing a familiar character's name and backstory aids in comprehending this theory through a well-established narrative.

This study endeavors to scrutinize mythological characters, delineating the manifestation of various symptoms akin to mental disorders. Characters from ancient Greek mythology demonstrate an array of symptoms linked to personality, trauma-related, mood, and psychotic disorders. Although diagnosing mythological characters is inherently intricate, their portrayal effectively embodies and signifies specific psychological symptoms.

## Exploration of Mental Disorders in Greek Mythology

### Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-importance and an insatiable desire for admiration (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This disorder finds its origins in the myth of Narcissus, portrayed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus's fixation on his own image, described as being "gazed at himself in amazement, limbs and expression as still as a statue of Parian marble" (Ovid, 2004), disrupted his daily life, hindering regular eating and sleeping patterns. His quest for excessive praise and admiration is evident in statements like "Ah, surely I am young and fair, the Nymphs have loved me" (Ovid, 2004). Moreover, his lack of empathy is highlighted in his ridicule of others, including Echo and the nymphs (Ovid, 2004), collectively depicting him as exhibiting NPD-related behaviors.

Niobe, another character from Greek mythology, exhibits similar symptoms of NPD. Her constant displays of excessive pride regarding her family's importance and her perceived immunity to misfortune, expressed in statements such as "My abundance assures me I'll always be safe...I am far too important a person for fortune's changes to harm me" (Ovid, 2004), surpass ordinary pride. Niobe's grandiose fantasies of superiority, as seen in her claims of outshining even after the murder of her sons and asserting divine beauty, deviated from societal norms in ancient Greece (Ovid, 2004). Her extreme sense of entitlement is exemplified in her disregard for worship at Latona's altar and her disparaging remarks about Latona, displaying a lack of empathy and respect for others, and even the gods (Ovid, 2004). The tragic consequences of Niobe's actions, resulting in the death of her children by Apollo and Artemis and her transformation into a crying statue, reflect the potential repercussions associated with NPD-like behavior. While a clinical diagnosis cannot be applied to mythological figures, their actions in ancient myths closely mirror the recognized symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, suggesting the prevalence of NPD-like behaviors in ancient Greek narratives (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Ovid, 2004).

### Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychological condition that emerges in individuals who have undergone shocking and/or traumatic events (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], n.d.). In Homer's *The Odyssey*, the protagonist, Odysseus, embarks on his homeward journey following the extensive trauma of the Trojan War, a pivotal conflict in Greek mythology. Odysseus exhibits various symptoms that align with PTSD, encompassing re-experiencing, avoidance, arousal and reactivity, and alterations in cognition and mood (NIMH, n.d.). Throughout *The Odyssey*, Odysseus vividly recalls moments from the Trojan War while recounting his narrative to hosts, displaying detailed descriptions akin to flashbacks, symbolizing a reliving of those experiences (Homer, 1997). Moreover, his aversion to revisiting these memories becomes apparent in his protest, "It goes against my grain to repeat a tale told once, and told so clearly" (Homer, 1997), indicating a reluctance to delve into the distressing recollections beyond necessity, in line with avoidance symptoms of PTSD.

Odysseus's heightened suspicion and defensive reaction, evidenced by his distrustful response—"Passage home? Never. Surely you're plotting something else, goddess" (Homer, 1997)—underscore changes in his arousal and reactivity, reflecting a more paranoid and guarded demeanor attributed to the traumatic aftermath

of war. Apart from the Trojan War, Odysseus undergoes additional harrowing incidents—encounters with the Sirens, the Cyclops, Calypso, and the loss of his crewmates—further contributing to drastic shifts in his personality and demeanor. These collective experiences contribute to Odysseus's altered mental state and behavior.

In ancient Greece, frequent wars among neighboring cities and regions were commonplace, subjecting numerous soldiers to brutal conflicts. The *Odyssey*, centered around the aftermath of the Trojan War, perhaps serves not only as a heroic odyssey but also as a narrative depicting the struggles faced by soldiers grappling with the consequences of warfare (Homer, 1997).

## Depression and Grief

Depression, a prevalent mood disorder today, is characterized by pervasive negative emotions that significantly impact daily life (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression linked to specific times of the year, notably winter, shares similarities with the behaviors exhibited by the mythological character Demeter. During the spring, Demeter experiences joy and vitality when her daughter, Persephone, visits. Conversely, when Persephone returns to the Underworld during winter, Demeter plunges into feelings of melancholy and lethargy. This shift in mood parallels the symptoms of SAD, evident in her lack of motivation to aid humans, leading to crop failure (Mayo Clinic, 2021). The Greeks, through the mythical tale of Persephone, might have used this narrative to explain the seasonal emergence of negative emotions among individuals.

Grief, often mistaken for depression due to overlapping symptoms, is typically a transient emotion but can progress to a prolonged grief disorder, disrupting everyday life. In the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus undergoes intense emotional turmoil following his wife Eurydice's death from a snake bite (Ovid, 2016). Orpheus manifests emotional numbness, withdrawing from his surroundings and displaying profound sorrow, which serves as a stark portrayal of prolonged grief disorder (Ovid, 2016). His extended period of mourning, lasting for three years, leads to isolation and a profound sense of loneliness, causing a struggle to return to normalcy. According to the myth, Orpheus attempts to revive Eurydice, indicating an identity disruption as he perceives a significant part of himself in her, contributing to his inability to cope with her loss (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In various versions of the myth, Orpheus meets a tragic end, either killed by Maenads due to his disregard for them or succumbing to suicide, unable to contend with his overwhelming grief.

## Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is characterized by intense mood swings that disrupt emotional regulation (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], n.d.). Though not diagnostically confirmed, the mythological figure Medea from Greek literature exhibits behaviors strikingly aligned with symptoms of BPD. Her impulsive tendencies are evident from the outset as she hastily decides to flee her homeland with Jason, whom she has not yet met, displaying a lack of forethought and deliberation (Ovid). This impulsivity further manifests when she commits fratricide to facilitate her escape alongside Jason, despite no prior indication of a strained relationship with her sibling, underscoring her abnormally impulsive behavior. Moreover, Medea demonstrates a profound fear of abandonment, a hallmark symptom of BPD (NIMH, n.d.). Her possessiveness and clingy behavior toward Jason border on obsession, as she meticulously plans their union even before their initial meeting, striving to ensure his commitment and binding him to their relationship through solemn oaths (*Metamorphoses*). These actions reflect her active attempts to forestall any potential abandonment.

Additionally, Medea's inability to manage her emotions, particularly her intense anger, surfaces when Jason betrays her by taking another wife. While her feelings of rage are understandable, her response escalates to the extreme as she seeks revenge by murdering Jason's new spouse and her own children, demonstrating a

profound inability to control her emotions and impulsively harming others as a consequence of her mood swings (Ovid). In ancient Greece, Medea's story was construed not as an illustration of mental illness but as a portrayal of the manipulative and emotional nature attributed to women. Her actions were more often interpreted as an issue with femininity rather than a recognized mental health condition.

## Psychosis

Psychosis is a state that refers to the loss of contact with reality. While it is not a disorder itself, it can be a symptom of several mental illnesses including schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Psychosis can cause delusions, hallucinations, illogical thinking, and other abnormal manners (National Institute of Mental Health). In Greek mythology, there is a common affliction known as “madness” that causes similar behaviors of hallucinations. This is demonstrated in the character Ajax, who is well-known for his major contributions to the Trojan War. In the myth, he is overcome with immense rage over his inability to claim Achilles’ armor, which was taken by Odysseus instead. In addition to Ajax’s internal anger, the story depicts his madness as being caused partially due to the goddess Athena. After this occurs, Ajax experiences psychosis-like “madness” as he attacks a flock of sheep, believing them to be his enemies (Smith, 1849). His reality was distorted as he believed the sheep were humans, showing the similarity between his behavior and a psychotic episode. In most versions of the myth, Ajax is also described as having committed suicide afterward after realizing his past actions, which were unclear in his memory. While his rage and supernatural intervention appear to be the sole causes of Ajax’s hallucinations, other factors may have contributed to his abnormal behavior. This scene is set at the end of the Trojan War, which may have had a serious impact on Ajax’s mental state. Exposure to high stress or trauma can be one factor in causing psychosis; he is likely overwhelmed by emotions after the hero Achilles’ death and the war in general.

## Comparison to Modern Psychological Understanding

### Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Narcissus’ infatuation with himself caused him to break away from social life. A study on narcissism showed that narcissists reported a higher negative mood during interactions with acquaintances (Zhang et al., 2022). They struggle to maintain and make relationships with other people, too preoccupied with themselves, which may cause discomfort in the people around them. This can affect romantic relationships, friendships, and even working with others in the context of jobs. In the myth, Narcissus also appears to have broken the hearts of several nymphs, exhibiting his lack of empathy. People with NPD today behave similarly, as they have difficulty understanding or caring about others’ feelings. They excessively crave the admiration of others and believe that special treatment should be reserved for themselves, making it difficult to regularly converse with people who have NPD. Attending long-term therapy with a professional is advised to create a relationship between the therapist and the patient (National Institute of Mental Health).

Niobe believes herself to be an exceptional person with prodigious children, but this ultimately harms the children as well. In the present day, narcissistic parents may similarly hurt children. While death is less likely, they may still experience negative emotions and suffer mentally as a result of their parent’s NPD. Narcissistic parents often place immense pressure upon their children to make themselves appear superior. Due to this pressure, it was observed that having narcissistic parents may cause the children to develop mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression (Weinstein, 2023). Unlike Niobe’s situation, narcissistic parents may also undermine their children to prevent them from becoming independent humans. In either scenario, both the adult and child experience negative consequences from the parent’s condition.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Odysseus was known as one of the greatest heroes of the Trojan War, but the war itself caused many of his struggles. The war and his arduous journey affected his mental state due to several traumatic experiences. This can bring more awareness to the fact that PTSD can be very common in soldiers and that it should not be stigmatized or seen as a weakness. According to a government study, 29% of veterans who took part in Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) were diagnosed with PTSD (National Center for PTSD). Throughout the book, Odysseus is shown to be very suspicious of others such as Calypso and the Phaeacians. Today, people suffering from PTSD often exhibit the same symptoms, as they are much more wary and on guard. This can create rifts in relationships, so those who are close to people with PTSD should understand that trauma may heavily affect one's ability to trust others. Furthermore, those with PTSD are afraid of reliving their trauma or feeling the same emotions, like how Odysseus is reluctant to recount his past. This information can be used to understand how to approach and treat people with PTSD today in a way that makes them comfortable. Additionally, it allows others to be more cautious when discussing topics that may trigger a traumatic memory. These triggers may be thoughts, objects, people, or any related reminder of the event.

## Depression and Grief

Demeter's behavioral change is due to the absence of her daughter, Persephone, during the winter. While this is not directly correlated with the climate, it is similar to how people with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) often change due to the absence of sunlight or certain weather. Seasonal depression may be dismissed as a simple preference for specific seasons, but it can have a serious impact on one's lifestyle. It can cause severe lethargy as Demeter shows during the winter, along with sleeping problems, difficulty concentrating, and feeling hopeless (Mayo Clinic, 2021). This can affect life at school, disrupt daily habits, cause negative changes in relationships, and more. Thus, knowing about the myth of Demeter and her behavioral changes can help understand those with SAD. It is difficult for them to control their mental state during the winter, and there are real consequences that may follow.

The story of Orpheus describes how grief may spiral into a deeper mental issue. After he loses his wife, Eurydice, he experiences many negative emotions and exhibits mentally abnormal behaviors. Today, it is very common for individuals to undergo major life events such as losing someone close or breaking up, which can lead to similar consequences as Orpheus'. His tragic fate was partially due to his inability to socialize with other people after his wife passed away. He isolates himself from others, which draws a parallel to people who suffer from prolonged grief and are often withdrawn from the rest of society. These people with prolonged grief are encouraged to talk to others and socialize, despite their unwillingness to do so.

## Borderline Personality Disorder

Medea's story relates to several behaviors that people with borderline personality disorder (BPD) exhibit in the present day. For instance, her obsession with Jason can correspond to clingy behaviors in a relationship. It is expected that one acts possessive towards their partner to a certain extent, but Medea exhibits an extreme inclination to do so. In the present day, this can lead to controlling behavior that may harm the other person in the relationship. It may even be exacerbated to the point of verbal, emotional, psychological, and/or physical abuse, which is found to be highly correlated with BPD (Mahari, 2023). Additionally, the extreme mood swings of people with BPD can pose a danger for those who are close to the person with the disorder. Medea's story

allows society to understand a deeper perspective of how relationships may be negatively affected by BPD. Furthermore, while Medea's actions to leave her home and murder several people are not likely in the present, they are related to other struggles today besides those related to relationships. People with BPD often engage in reckless driving, irresponsible spending, and substance use (National Institute of Mental Health). By understanding the main cause of such harmful and/or illegal actions, society can create solutions that more directly address the situation.

## Psychosis

Ajax's abnormal condition primarily concerns his psychotic episode, where he behaves erratically and hallucinates. However, pressure from the war and previous events likely caused this event to occur. In ancient Greece, it was thought that "madness" was sent by the gods as a punishment. This repetitive abnormal behavior in Greek mythology suggests that it often occurred in real life, but with limited knowledge of mental conditions, they attributed it to divine powers. This behavior may be linked to the intense emotions such as rage, grief, and anguish, that were observed after distressing events in ancient Greece. In the present day, psychosis is not observed as a random occurrence, but is often the result of stressors and severe emotions (National Institute of Mental Health). It is important to understand that people may be suffering from extreme stress or other emotions, and exhibiting empathy in these scenarios is helpful to both parties. Furthermore, Ajax does not realize his actions during his "madness", similar to how people who have psychotic episodes are in a confused state and distorted state (National Institute of Mental Health). This can help people understand the difficulty of communicating with one experiencing psychosis, and empathize with the person rather than viewing them in a derogatory manner.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that symptoms of mental conditions such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder, PTSD, Depression and grief, and Borderline Personality Disorder, psychosis are closely connected to the behaviors of the mythological characters. These include the Greek characters Narcissus, Niobe, Odysseus, Demeter, Orpheus, Medea, and Ajax. By creating this connection between Greek mythology and mental disorders, society can be introduced to psychological conditions more understandably. From these myths, it is plausible that mental disorders existed in ancient times. While the myths are mostly fictional, they likely include elements of human nature. For instance, cases of trauma can be seen in the present, and Odysseus' abnormal behavior may have been an early representation of this. Some observed behavior in popular Greek myths may be exaggerated, but it is comparable to realistic symptoms of mental disorders.

In the present day, the increasing urgency of mental illnesses requires a larger sense of empathy and awareness from society. To help people with mental health conditions, they should be surrounded by those who are conscious of their struggles. By understanding this concept, society will not ignore or stigmatize the behaviors of people living with mental health issues. In several cases, these symptoms are seen as a sign of weakness and lack of control. Understanding these Greek myths helps counter those beliefs, and instead shed light on the reality of these disorders.

Analyzing a great variety of texts on Greek and Roman mythology can further support the relationship between these characters and the symptoms of mental illnesses. This idea can also be explored more by delving into stories from other cultures related to abnormal human behavior and mental disorders. These stories or myths may be those of ancient Egypt, China, or other areas. Expanding upon this topic could lead to a novel approach to understanding mental health using archetypes. This does not solely need to be related to Greek



mythology, but using characters, in general, to become aware and learn about different mental disorders could prove to be an effective method.

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