

A Dark Personality Analysis of Malcolm Bright

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At the mere age of ten, Malcolm watches his handcuffed father smile and tell him, “you and I are the same,” before being taken away by police for the murder of 23 people. For ten years, Malcolm visits his father until he has finally had enough. He informs his father he is joining the FBI, and that he will never return to the psychiatric hospital which imprisons him ever again. Time flies by, and a decade later, he is fired from the FBI for “psychotic and narcissistic tendencies.” He refuses to let this stop him, and joins NYPD, where he works for them as a profiler in order to identify and stop killers. His story is one of repressed memories, dangerous killers, and a dark, forgotten secret. From the show “Prodigal Son”, despite the desire to fight serial killers, Malcolm Bright has a darkness of his own inside of him, one which may make him more like his father than he will ever know (Lence and Sokoloff, 2019).

When we think of dark personalities, either the dark triad or the dark tetrad come to mind. The traditional dark personalities consist of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, although in recent years sadism has been considered a potential dark personality as well. It is important to note that for the sake of this analysis, when referring to these dark personalities, we are simply referring to personality traits or tendencies, not the clinical disorders. Although, they are of course somewhat similar. A Machiavellian personality is characterized by being manipulative, a narcissistic personality is characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, superiority, and dominance, a psychopathic personality is characterized by high-impulsivity, thrill-seeking, and low empathy and anxiety, and a sadistic personality is characterized by finding pleasure or excitement in the suffering of others (Paulhus and Williams, 2002; Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus, 2013). In addition to that, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism are also all

characterized by, “socially malevolent character with behavior tendencies toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness” (Paulhus and Williams, 2002).

Now that we have some background on Malcolm and dark personalities, we can begin to analyze him and try to understand which dark personality traits he has. Now, it is worth noting that Malcolm does not show blatant signs of any one particular dark personality trait. He does not rave about being a cruel psychopath, nor does he claim to be a narcissist. Despite that being the case, these things are certainly suggested or implied by interactions and conversations seen in the show.

Starting off, we have Machiavellianism. In the show, Malcolm is certainly not the most manipulative of his family. Both his mother and father are incredibly manipulative, to a degree that tends to overshadow him in comparison. However, this is not to say that Malcolm isn't manipulative at all. Rather, it is more subtle. While it is not seen often when dealing with his coworkers or family, Malcolm's manipulation is most commonly seen when interacting either with suspects/criminals he meets while on the job. He knows what to say to people in order to get the information he wants out of them, and is able to talk to killers in a manner that gets them to pause long enough to stop them, gets information out of them, or convinces them to turn themselves in. Now, it is difficult to say if this necessarily means Malcolm is a machiavellian. We don't see many examples of him being manipulative with everyone, rather, it tends to mostly be with a very particular group of people for the sake of getting a job done. With that being the case, it is difficult to argue if Malcolm has Machiavellian personality traits. If he does, it is certainly not the strongest trait he possesses out of the dark personalities.

Next, we have narcissism, which is something that Malcolm demonstrates often. Amongst the NYPD, Malcolm is well known for disobeying orders and doing things he knows

he shouldn't. There are several occasions in which he has been told not to work a case, not to track a killer, not to work alone, and so forth. Yet he continues to do so anyway because of his opinion of himself. He believes that he is the best at his job, that he is able to outsmart almost anyone, and that he is necessary for cases in order to solve them. He was once asked about how his coworkers felt about him showing up at crime scenes uninvited, and he answered, "I'm always needed, but I'm not always wanted" (Lence and Sokoloff, 2019). These behaviors and his statement show that he believes he is better than others in a number of areas, and is exempt from the rules due to this superiority. These are clear examples of grandiosity and entitlement, which are commonly seen in those with narcissistic personalities.

The third member of the dark triad is psychopathy, something which arguably is seen at times in Malcolm. To start, hunting a serial killer is, presumably, very intense and exhilarating. Trying to hunt them down and stop them gives him a huge rush. There are many times in the show when Malcolm indicates that, despite people worrying for him or not wanting him on a case, he needs the case because it makes him feel normal and gives him something to do. This would make sense, as in a study by Azizli et al. (2016), it was shown that psychopaths tend to engage in deviant activities or misconduct because they are stimulating experiences, and psychopaths feel intense monotony and need those experiences to counteract it. While not a crime, Malcolm clearly finds such an activity to be stimulating and uses it to fight the boredom and feel something. Psychopaths are also known for their high-impulsivity, which is seen when Malcolm makes a spur of the moment decision to chase criminals by himself or put himself in a situation in which he might easily be killed. He also demonstrates low anxiety and empathy, at least to an extent. While we see in one episode that he is able to empathize with a child that has a homelife similar to the one he had, there are other times in which he demonstrates none. For

example, a kidnapped victim was handcuffed to a chair with a bomb. Since there was only a minute on the timer, Malcolm used an axe to cut off the victim's hand so they could slip out of the restraints and escape. He actually ends up running into them again at a later date, and expresses no remorse for his actions. While not to the same degree, there are certainly other scenarios in which he deals with people and doesn't express much empathy for them. In addition to a lack of empathy, he also has less anxiety than a normal individual. When in situations in which he could die, he does not demonstrate the same fear response normal people would. Rather, he tends to be calm and calculated. With all this being said, he certainly demonstrates some psychopathic tendencies, although not to the same degree he does for narcissism.

Lastly, we have sadism, and traits shared amongst the dark triad. As mentioned previously, someone with a sadistic personality enjoys the suffering of others. This is not something Malcolm feels. In a couple of episodes, he jokes about liking pain, and even calls himself a masochist, although it isn't completely clear if he is serious or not. While he may not be a sadist, he does express other characteristics that tend to be shared by all members of the dark triad. Although some more so than others, all of the dark triad tend to be socially malevolent, with "tendencies toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness" (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). To varying degrees, these can be seen in Malcolm. We have self-promotion when he is trying to show he is smarter or better than everyone else, mild emotional coldness in that he seldom thinks/cares how others are feeling, duplicity when putting on a façade to appear as though he isn't like his father, and aggressiveness when he doesn't get what he wants. In summary, we can see that while Malcolm isn't a sadist and isn't likely a Machiavellian, he does appear to have narcissistic and psychopathic personality traits.

While we know he has attributes common for those with psychopathic or narcissistic personalities, we have to take a closer look and see if deeper aspects of his life reflect that as well. For example, one's morals can reveal a lot about a person. While Malcolm certainly has "morals", or his own sense of right and wrong, it is questionable as to if others would agree with them. As mentioned earlier, Malcolm ends up cutting someone's hand off in order to help them escape from a bomb. When meeting that person again, they are aggressive and want nothing to do with him. Despite this, Malcolm sees no issue with his previous actions, and actually asks them for help with a case. At another point, Malcolm is knocked out and then held hostage by a serial killer. He tries talking his way out of it, and while they seem skeptical, they end up lowering their gun to allow him to talk. At this moment, an FBI agent Malcolm works with comes out of another room and shoots the killer. In a fit of rage, Malcolm punches his coworker, screaming about how the killer was lowering his gun and that they had him. His coworkers were furious, saying that this man was a hero for taking down such a dangerous killer. During these and other events, Malcolm's actions are seen as questionable or wrong by others, despite the fact that he believes what he is doing is right and for the best. Although controversial to some, Malcolm's actions are those of someone who supports utilitarianism, which is the belief that actions are right if they benefit the majority. In both cases, his actions either saved or potentially would have saved an additional person's life, benefiting the majority as there were or would have been fewer deaths. This isn't surprising, as those with psychopathic personalities are more likely to have utilitarian preferences (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011). In the same study by Bartels and Pizarro (2011), it was also noted that those with psychopathic personalities who indicated a preference for utilitarianism also perceived less meaning in life. It might seem strange that someone who thinks life has less meaning would want to save more people or prefer actions that

benefit the majority, but when looking at it from the point of view of what might be sacrificed for utilitarianism, it makes more sense. For example, a question sometimes used when determining one's morals and thoughts on utilitarianism is the trolley problem. In the original problem, the participant must choose whether to let a trolley run over three people tied to the tracks, or pull a switch so it goes on another line of tracks and only runs over one person. Since there isn't much direct involvement, most people would pull the lever so only one person is run over. In a variant more relatable to the matter at hand, there are again three people tied to train tracks and a trolley is going to run them over. However, the participant, who is on a bridge overlooking the event, can save the people tied to the tracks if they push the oversized man next to them off the bridge. He will die, but the three people tied to the tracks would be saved. Many people would be uncomfortable with this since while they are saving more people, they are also directly involved in sending a man to his death. However, for someone like a psychopath or machiavellian, it is only logical to push the man off the bridge. Since they perceive life as having less value, they don't have as hard of a time making "tough choices", and will do whatever they think best aids the majority. They are also more callus and will choose the more practical answer. Another reason for this can be seen in a study which found that members of the dark triad have a "lack of concern for [the] feelings of others, as well as a lack of guilt or remorse about the negative or harmful effects of [their] actions on others" (Somma, Borroni, Sellbom, Markon, Kreuger, & Fossati, 2020). So while some might find their actions cruel and unempathetic, the odds of them feeling bad are slim, especially since they believe what they are doing is logical and for the best. This pattern of thinking explains some of Malcolm's responses in the show, like why he had zero remorse for cutting off the man's hand. The man would have died had he not helped him escape, thus he sees no problem in what he did. This is often the way he justifies

his actions, that people would've gotten hurt or died without his intervention, despite his coworkers or family saying he is in the wrong and shouldn't have gotten involved or should have made a more moral or empathetic choice. This is in line with how a narcissist would likely think, that they are better than everyone else and are needed, and his moral viewpoint and sense of right and wrong reflect what would typically be seen in someone with a psychopathic personality.

Someone's career and their behavior in the workplace can tell you a lot about them. In the case of Malcolm Bright, he was previously a profiler for the FBI and is currently a profiler for NYPD. In a study on members of the dark triad and their preferred occupations, researchers found that there was no significant relationship between psychopathy or narcissism and investigative careers. Despite this, they did find in their second experiment that there was a significant correlation between psychopathy and practical vocations, something which profiling would be categorized as (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014). While there is only a minor connection between Malcolm's dark personalities and his choice of work, his behavior at the workplace does reveal more about him. At work, Malcolm is known for being a bit odd. He is usually calm and calculated while working, and occasionally expresses happiness at inopportune times, like when he discovers something unique about a victim which tells him something about the killer. Despite this, he is not always happy when working. He obsesses over cases and is known for becoming aggressive when he is pulled from one or is struggling to solve it. This isn't too surprising, as narcissists are known to often have issues with aggression, presumably due to a poor ability to manage emotions (Czarna, Zajenkowski, Maciantowicz, & Szymaniak, 2019). When told he is off a case or not to do something, Malcolm seldom listens. He will typically respond by pursuing the case on his own or using very unorthodox methods in order to get information. For example, there was a time when he denied orders to drop a case and went into a

dance club with a coworker to meet with one of the town's gang leaders for information. He ended up analyzing the suspect while interviewing them, and confirmed that they were not the killer. While part of the reason he does this is that he is a narcissist and believes he is above the rules and knows better than everyone else, his psychopathic traits also impact these behaviors. Psychopaths, as mentioned previously, have a different moral and value system than normal people, and do not tend to care what others think (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011; Somma, Borroni, Sellbom, Markon, Kreuger, & Fossati, 2020). Due to that, and that they tend to be highly impulsive and thrill-seeking, psychopaths are also less likely to be obedient, and more likely to disregard tradition (Paulhus and Williams, 2002; Jonason, Koehn, Bulyk, & Davis, 2019). With this greater understanding of psychopaths and narcissists, the reasoning behind Malcolm's actions and choices at work becomes clearer.

Besides one's morals and career-related choices, one's friends and lovers, or lack thereof, are another way to learn more about them. In the show, Malcolm has no friends, and does not seem to have ever had much luck making them. The closest thing he has to friends are his coworkers, and whether or not the word "friendship" could be used to describe the relationship he has with them is questionable. He also does not have a lover, and has made comments suggesting an inability to keep a long term relationship. He has, however, shown an openness to one night stands, and appears to have had multiple in the past. While it is difficult to say what type of friends he would prefer due to not having any, typically narcissists want friends for a wide variety of reasons, including making them feel good, helping them find mates, being a potential long or short-term mate, they're attractive, and more (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012). Despite his lack of friends, Malcolm's relationship history is typical of someone with dark triad personality traits. Members of the dark triad are known to have a fast or short-term style of

relationships, with one night stands and flings being common (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012; Jonason, Lyons, & Blanchard, 2015). Commitment isn't common, although members of the dark triad appear to prefer mates who score high on the dark triad for one night stands, and mates who score low on the dark triad for mates (Jonason, Lyons, & Blanchard, 2015). From an evolutionary standpoint this makes sense, as there is less (for men) to lose during a short-term relationship, and less danger in a long-term relationship since people who score lower on the dark triad are more likely to be stable and better at parenting children. While we don't know much about Malcolm's previous partners, he does express interest in dating a woman he met through his mother. She works with an organization to fight human trafficking, and appears to be fairly "normal" in comparison to Malcolm. Judging by the research, it would make sense that Malcolm would choose someone like this woman, who presumably scores low on the dark triad, as a potential long-term partner.

While the strength of these traits is difficult to determine, Malcolm Bright's behavior, friendships, relationships, work choices, and morals all indicate that he possesses both a psychopathic and narcissistic personality. His sense of entitlement and superiority, his impulsivity and thrill-seeking behaviors, and his aggression are all very common to those personality types. He may think that he is different from his father, who scores highly on the dark triad, but the differences between their personalities are seemingly far less than he would hope.

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