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PSY 407: Dark Personalities

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Azula: The Downfall of Avatar's Ultimate Villain

Avatar: The Last Airbender, an animated television show that aired on Nickelodeon, has long been regarded for its complex character arcs and refusal to shy away from mature themes. Much of this praise comes from the unique redemption arc of Prince Zuko, a character that serves as a villain in seasons one and two before joining the heroes in season three. However, Zuko is not the show's true villain. His father, Firelord Ozai, also eludes this title due to his one dimensional, purely evil, nature; he lacks the humanizing depth that is standard of *Avatar: The Last Airbender's* other, greater villains. For this reason, it can be argued that the show's true villain is Azula, daughter to Ozai and sister to Zuko, whose evil is far more complex and realistic. Her character arc, unlike Zuko's redemption, is a slow descent into madness. At the beginning of the show, Azula is a picture of pure evil: sadistic, malicious, and remorseless. However, her story culminates in the ultimate defeat, one that perfectly illustrates her progressive mental cracks shattering into a full psychological break. This paper seeks to examine the ways in which Azula's dark personality contributes to her power and success in the start of the series while also setting up her ultimate downfall at its conclusion.

One of our first introductions to Azula is in her brother Zuko's flashback to his darkest moment: the agni kai, or fire duel, that resulted in his scarring at his father's hand (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Not only did he receive a large physical scar over his left eye, the emotional wound of being disfigured and banished by his own father haunts him throughout the story, catalyzing his journey as a villain. During the flashback to this pivotal movement, we are never shown Zuko being burned by his father. Instead, we only hear his screams of pain as the camera pans to Zuko's little sister Azula, only eleven at the time, clenching her fist in excitement, a sinister smile on her face, and an evil look in her eyes (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). This is one

of the first suggestions of Azula's sadism and psychopathy. While, "Most people experience distress after hurting an innocent person [...] for others, cruelty affords a different emotional experience: It is pleasurable, exciting" (Buckles & Jones et al. 2013). As demonstrated by Azula, even as a child, she drew excitement from watching the suffering of her own brother, an enjoyment that would certainly make her sadistic. Sadism, though not a member of the dark triad of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, has been suggested as a member of the proposed dark tetrad because, "The phenomenon goes well beyond the effects of anger (Bushman & Whitaker, 2010), the instrumental aggression of psychopaths (Fedoroff, 2008; Malamuth, 2003; Woodworth & Porter, 2002), and callous narcissistic entitlement (Baumeister, Catanese, & Wallace, 2002; Campbell et al., 2004) to a pleasure-driven form of aggression" (Buckles et al. 2013). The reality that Azula is not only angry, psychopathic, and narcissistic, but sadistic, elevates her to villain status to a far more dangerous level.

Azula can also be classified as psychopathic. She adheres to the, "central character elements [of] high impulsivity and thrill-seeking along with low empathy and anxiety" (Paulhus & Williams 2002). Throughout her entire series arc, Azula is seen exhibiting little to no empathy for any other character, as well as making highly impulsive decisions in her pursuit of her goals. Importantly, we are shown Azula exhibiting these character traits as early as eleven. Researchers Lynam et al. conducted a longitudinal study on psychopathy and found that scores on psychopathy measures in children would remain consistent through adulthood (Lynam et al. 2007). While we only follow Azula's story for about two years, in that time she remains consistent in her personality traits, even perhaps worsened. Another example of Azula's psychopathy later on occurs during a conversation with one of her crew members, who tells her, "The tides won't allow us to bring the ship in" (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula asks him,

“Do the tides command this ship?” to which her crew member replies, “No” (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula then asks, “If I were to throw you overboard, would the tides think twice about smashing you against the rocky shore?” to which, again, he replies, “No” (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula then suggests, “Well then maybe you should worry less about the tides who have already made up their mind about you, and worry more about me who’s still mulling it over” (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula’s brazen attitude towards murdering one of her own crew members, and her cold, emotionless threat, exemplify her high impulsivity and low empathy, two of the key features of psychopathy. These personality features are what makes Azula such a powerful, terrifying leader; she strikes both fear and inspiration into the hearts of those she leads, who know better than to let her down.

Of all the personality traits Azula is consistent with, none is clearer, stronger, and more consistent than Machiavellianism. Described at its most simplistic as the manipulative personality, Azula is definitionally Machiavellian in nature (Paulhus & Williams 2002). There is even an iconic callback to Machiavelli’s own famous question, “whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved?” in the show (Machiavelli & Marriott 2001). After one of Azula’s most loyal allies, Mai, betrays her to save Zuko, she tells Azula, “You miscalculated. I love Zuko more than I fear you” to which Azula responds, “No, *you* miscalculated! You should have feared me more!” (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). As we famously know, Machiavelli, too, felt that, “it is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with” (Machiavelli & Marriott 2001). In more detail, “Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970) deals with (a) a cold and cynical world view with pragmatic and immoral beliefs, (b) a lack of emotionality, (c) strategic long-term planning in self-beneficial goal pursuit, and (d) various manipulative behaviors” (Rauthmann & Will 2011). Another example of Azula’s conformity to

the Machiavellian personality type occurs when she travels to the circus to recruit her old schoolmate, Ty Lee, who now works as an acrobat (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). When she asks Ty Lee to join her, Ty Lee declines, saying the circus is her calling (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula says she understands, but will stay to watch her show tonight since she is already there (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). During the show, while Ty Lee is performing acrobatics while perched precariously on a high rope, Azula asks the ringmaster to remove the safety net as it would make it more interesting (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). When he hesitates, insisting it helps the performers feel more safe, she tells him to set it on fire (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). After doing so, Azula asks what dangerous animals they have (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). The ringmaster tells her they have the most extensive assortment of exotic animals, and Azula commands him to release them all (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). The viewer can see Ty Lee sweating and wobbling while doing her acrobatics (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). After the show, she tells Azula she has changed her mind, and would like to join her (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula smiles, knowing she has successfully manipulated Ty Lee, once again using fear and power to get what she wants (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula's manipulation, though clear, is simultaneously covert. While she never explicitly threatens Ty Lee, she makes it clear that she has power to inflict pain and suffering upon her should she refuse her request. Similarly, this manipulation keeps Azula's allies loyal to her, as they know and fear her potential wrath. In controlling her subjects in this manner, she is able to maintain a high level of power and control over those around her. Yet another example of Azula's Machiavellian nature involves the deception and manipulation of her brother, Zuko. In a ruse to capture him as her prisoner, Azula tricks Zuko into believing their father has changed his mind about Zuko's banishment, and wants him to come home (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). After Zuko boards her ship, Azula sweetly tells

her crew to, "Set a course for home" (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). One of her crew members calls out, "You heard her, take the prisoners home" (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Zuko, realizing he was being taken home as a prisoner and not as a prince, tells Azula, "You lied to me!" to which she retorts, "Like I've never done that before!" (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula is able to deceive her brother so effortlessly that he believes her lie despite knowing her inclination towards manipulation, and her plan only falls through due to the failure of her attendant. At this point in her life, it is clear that Azula's Machiavellian nature is benefitting her. Her ability to deftly manipulate and deceive those around her for personal gain results in a meteoric rise to power and infamy in the fire nation. However, Azula's dark personality is only to her benefit up until a certain point. Eventually, it is her own nature that leads to her downfall.

While Azula's Machiavellian nature is obvious, her excessive narcissism runs deeper. Sherry et al. explain, "Narcissism is defined by grandiosity, entitlement, authority, superiority, exhibitionism, vanity, and exploitativeness (Raskin & Terry, 1988)" (Sherry et al. 2014). While Azula is strong in each of these narcissistic characteristics, there is one key element of narcissism that tears her down the most: perfectionism. Sherry et al. (2014) cite Rothstein (1999) who, "emphasized the role of perfectionism in narcissism, arguing the core of narcissism rests in a 'felt quality of perfection'" (Sherry et al. 2014). Azula, in true narcissist form, has meticulously crafted her perfect image, and every choice she makes is in conformity with that image. We first see a glimpse of Azula's dangerous perfectionism towards the start of the series when she is firebending training. After completing her impressive firebending, her teachers tell her, "Almost perfect. Just a hair out of place" as the camera pans to Azula (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula, with a few strands of hair falling in front of her eyes, angrily replies, "Almost isn't good enough" and starts her practice over again (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Although her

firebending itself was perfection, her appearance slightly faltered, which Azula views as a total failure, ruining her practice as a whole. This one slight error is enough to enrage her, as it does not live up to the perfectionistic ideals she holds herself to. As Azula has already been established as both Machiavellian and a perfectionist, it is also appropriate to classify her as a Machiavellian perfectionist. Researchers Sherry et al. (2006) describe this personality type as people who, “(a) perceive others as demanding, controlling, punitive, and hostile toward them, (b) promote an image of perfection, capability, and strength to others, and (c) conceal any hint of imperfection, vulnerability, and weakness from others” (Sherry et al. 2006). Azula's rage at having a hair out of place during training exemplifies point C, her failure to conceal this slight imperfection, which threatens her image of perfection, point B.

Azula's relentless pursuit of perfection sets her up for her ultimate psychological break. Azula's mental cracks first begin to show after Mai's previously discussed betrayal. Being betrayed by one of her closest allies leads Azula to become increasingly skeptical of who she can trust, a response that has a great deal to do with Azula's strong traits of narcissism and perfectionism. As researchers Sherry et al. (2014) explain, “narcissists' grandiose but fragile self-concept leads them to impose perfectionistic demands onto others and to promote an image of perfection in pursuit of others' admiration” (Sherry et. al 2014). After clearly losing the admiration of one of her closest allies, Azula's image of perfection has been threatened, and she begins to spiral. As Sherry et al. (2014) point out, while narcissists' self-concept is grandiose, it is also fragile. Azula's self-concept begins to crack after this initial blow, and the cracks only grow as she continues to feel her power and image slipping from her grasp. One can start to see the extent of this psychological break on the day of Azula's coronation as Firelord (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). On a day that is supposed to celebrate her assumption of power, the culmination

of years of hard work, Azula is too obsessed with perfection and her image to even enjoy the occasion. While she is being pampered by her servants, she finds a pit on one of the cherries she is eating and, to punish the servant who served the cherries, banishes them (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Due to Azula's narcissistic perfectionism, she is outraged, and her response of banishment is disproportionate to the offense of a single cherry pit. This overreaction is consistent with her personality type, as, "narcissistic perfectionists may view themselves as perfect, superior to others, and justified in holding others to their unrealistic expectations" (Nealis et al. 2015). A great deal of research has shown that it is highly common for narcissists to, "impose their standards onto other people. Once others fail to meet these expectations, the narcissistic individual will react with contempt," which is why Azula banished her attendant immediately (Nealis et al. 2015). After this initial banishment, Azula proceeds to fire or banish all of her servants for various reasons until she is left all alone, with nobody left in the palace (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula tries to do her hair herself for her coronation, but fails to do so successfully, as she has always had other people to do it for her (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Growing increasingly frustrated, Azula grabs a pair of scissors, telling herself in the mirror, "Alright, hair, it's time to face your doom," before poorly chopping off a large chunk of her hair (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). She then sees a vision of her mother in the mirror, and tells her, "You think I'm a monster," to which her mother, a projection of Azula's psyche, replies, "I think you're confused. All your life you've used fear to control people" (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula responds, "Well what choice do I have? Trust is for fools, fear is the only reliable way," before throwing a hairbrush at her mother's image in the mirror, shattering it (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). As her mother is not truly present and Azula is speaking to a figment of her imagination, it proves she is aware of her manipulation of others to achieve her goals. It also

reiterates her perfectionism, as she feels foolish having trusted her ally Mai, only to be betrayed and defeated, and has sworn off trusting anyone else as a result.

With a full psychological break clearly imminent, Azula enters, and ultimately loses, her final battle against her brother Zuko. Azula's mental break is perfectly illustrated in this final defeat. After being defeated by her brother and chained to the floor, Azula is completely broken (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Her usually perfect hair, messily cut by her own hand, is strewn about her face (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Azula lacks the cool confidence she usually possesses, and is frantic, panting, and screaming (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Firebending out of her mouth in desperation as she writhes and whimpers on the ground, Azula is no longer a picture of perfection: she's nowhere even close (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). Everything about the scene is painful to watch, as it perfectly illustrates just how far she has fallen. The scene ends by cutting to her brother, shot at an upward angle to emphasize Azula being beneath Zuko, as he looks down at her in pity (DiMartino et al. 2005-2008). As, "perfection is one way narcissists protect their fragile sense of self and avoid the shame that would accompany loss of admiration from others," Azula's fragile self is clearly laid bare to the world in this moment (Nealis et al. 2016). Her primal reaction to defeat makes clear the shame she feels at the destruction of her meticulously crafted persona. Unable to cope with the reality of her failure, Azula is completely broken, almost animalistic, and virtually unrecognizable as the cold, confident, calculated princess she once was. Azula's narcissism and perfectionism, two personality traits that helped her rise to the top at such a young age, perfectly set her up for this spectacular defeat.

Unfortunately, this is where *Avatar: The Last Airbender* leaves Azula: at her lowest, most shameful point. While her rise to glory and plummet to defeat are often left out in discussions about *Avatar: The Last Airbender's* famous character arcs, her powerful storyline deserves more

attention for its fictionalized yet accurate portrayal of sadism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and perfectionism. Though many of these personality traits are what allowed Azula to achieve such power and success, they are also the very things that doomed her to such a sensational defeat at the series' end. In Azula, the creators of *Avatar: the Last Airbender* crafted one of the darkest personalities to ever grace a television screen, not to mention a show designed for children.

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