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# A Personality Assessment of Amy Elliott Dunne

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#### Part One

In the movie *Gone Girl* (Milchan, Donen, Witherspoon & Chaffin, 2014), Amy Elliott Dunne is introduced to the audience as a mysterious but self-assured young woman. As the muse for her parents' highly successful book series "The Adventures of Amazing Amy," Amy has grown accustomed to being the center of attention. She has high self-worth and is aware of her alluring effects on men, finding social interaction with men quite easy (Milchan et al., 2014). Despite her social prowess, Amy dreads large social events, as she is often required to attend due to her role as her parents' muse. It is at a social gathering that Amy first meets her future husband, Nick Dunne, leaving him with an impression of her as calm, controlled, witty and outspoken. The couple seems happy and fond of one another; however, the audience is then exposed to Nick's present impressions of Amy. Nick's version of Amy is highly organized, thoughtful, and detail-oriented, but also critical, unhappy, controlling, and rejecting.

The movie centers on Amy's disappearance, a crime that police suspect Nick is involved in (Milchan et al., 2014). When police try to piece together Amy's disappearance, the audience is informed that Amy has no friends or close relationships at all except for her relationships with Nick and with her parents. Nick claims that the reasoning for this is that Amy is "complicated" and just has very high standards. This antisocial behavioural tendency leads Nick's sister Margo to dislike Amy, stating drama seems to follow Amy and that she is hard to get along with (Milchan et al., 2014). In the time before her disappearance, Amy became isolated and relied heavily on Nick for happiness, becoming miserable in her marriage. Due to her misery, she attempts to change Nick to better match her ideals of perfection, ultimately causing Nick to distance himself emotionally and begin an extramarital affair with his student. Feeling betrayed

by Nick, Amy becomes highly vindictive and plans an elaborate plan to exact revenge on him. Over a series of months, Amy plans and fakes her own disappearance, framing her husband.

Much of Amy's behaviour in the film can be explained and analyzed by two main psychological subdisciplines: the psychoanalytic and biological subdisciplines. The psychoanalytic subdiscipline can provide insight on three main abnormal behaviours that Amy exhibited, such as why Amy was verbally abusive and belittling towards Nick leading up to her disappearance; the reasoning as to why she could have chosen to fake her disappearance and frame Nick; and finally, an explanation as to why upon returning home, Amy manipulates Nick into staying married to her by impregnating herself, unbeknownst to him, with his stored semen (Milchan et al., 2014).

Throughout the film, the viewers were made highly aware of Amy's disdain and outright hatred of Nick. She belittles him at every opportunity, stating that she has standards, and he is not even close to meeting them (Milchan et al., 2014). It is evident that Amy is most troubled by Nick's lack of financial success and apparent inadequate work ethic. The breadwinner of the family due to her family's wealth, Amy feels that Nick is not doing his part in the relationship. Psychoanalytic theory would argue that Amy is relying on projection, a defense mechanism pioneered by Anna Freud. Projection is when an individual cannot accept aspects that they dislike about themselves, and instead project those disliked qualities onto another person (Burger, 2019). Amy had stated to Nick at one of her parents' book launches, that she felt that they capitalized off of her failures in life, distorting them as successes in the "Amazing Amy" books (Milchan et al., 2014). Therefore, Amy may have struggled with feelings of inadequacy through much of her life, feeling as if she were in a competition with a fictional version of herself. Due to "Amazing Amy" being so successful at all of the things Amy failed at in real life, Amy may have begun to project her feelings of inadequacy on Nick. When Amy stated that Nick did not meet her standards, she may have been projecting that she herself does not meet her standards.

Amy was evidently miserable in her marriage and stated many times that she felt like she could or should just disappear (Milchan et al., 2014), reflecting that Amy may have wanted to run away from her unhappy life. Due to psychoanalytic theory's main focus being unconscious drives (Burger, 2019), the theory would likely posit that perhaps due to Amy's unconscious feelings of inadequacy, she may wish to disappear in an elaborate and attention-grabbing way.

Her disappearance could allow her to start a new life with no association to "Amazing Amy," and the media attention from her disappearance would make her more known for this, rather than for being "Amazing Amy." Additionally, she may have framed Nick for her disappearance due to her belief that framing him would be cathartic and alleviate her aggressive feelings. However, according to psychoanalytic theory, catharsis only breeds more aggression rather than alleviating it (Burger, 2019), and therefore this may explain why Amy got increasingly more aggressive as the film progressed. Lastly, Amy may have planned this missing person case because she unconsciously was hoping that Nick would chase her and beg for her to come home. These unconscious hopes may have been why Amy watched the news the entire time she was missing, why she did not kill herself and frame him for her murder, and why she returned home in the end. She may have believed that she wanted revenge but didn't truly.

The final behaviour that can be explained by the psychoanalytic theory is why Amy decided to impregnate herself with Nick's sperm without his knowledge in an effort to make him stay married to her. Once again, psychoanalysis would suggest that Amy is ruled by unconscious motivations (Burger, 2019). Despite Amy's conscious self informing her that she is self-sufficient, she is not. Instead, deep down, she needs Nick and fears being alone or abandoned. Amy chooses to impregnate herself because she realizes that this is the only way that she will keep Nick. Her dependence on Nick is unconscious because she utilizes the denial defense mechanism (Burger, 2019) in which she pretends that she is in control and unaffected by others; her vulnerability is a weakness to her and therefore has been made unconscious.

In contrast to the psychoanalytic theory, the biological subdiscipline can provide explanations as to why Amy attempted to change and maintain her appearance to align with what she felt Nick would like; why she felt that a pregnancy would be successful in keeping Nick married to her; and finally, why Amy has no empathy despite her ruthless actions. To begin, Amy stated that she remained a size two in clothing and altered her entire personality to reflect a "cool girl" throughout her and Nick's entire marriage, in an effort to make him like her more (Milchan et al., 2014). The biological subdiscipline would state that, according to evolutionary theory, individuals inherit preferences and behavioural tendencies from ancestors as a result of natural selection; therefore, humans tend to generally share the same preferences in mate selection (Burger, 2019). Men typically look for women who are thin, young, and physically attractive (Burger, 2019); this may explain why Amy stayed a strict size two for five years.

Additionally, evolutionary theory states that women look for men who have an abundance of resources (Burger, 2019), and this may explain why Amy was so troubled by Nick's lack of finances.

The biological discipline may also use the evolutionary theory to explain why Amy used pregnancy to keep Nick as her husband, as it is a biological instinct for parents to protect their offspring (Burger, 2019). Men traditionally provided resources to the offspring, and therefore Nick may feel it is wrong for him to leave the marriage and the offspring, depriving them of his resources (Burger, 2019).

Finally, the biological discipline best explains why Amy has the personality that she does. Personality is largely heritable, and therefore Amy was likely born with a susceptibility to disorders such as psychopathy or behavioural tendencies such as lying, narcissism, manipulation, aggression, etc. (Burger, 2019). Amy may have abnormalities in her brain structure that could explain her lack of empathy and general lack of regard for personal safety (Burger, 2019), allowing her to inflict harm on herself, such as when she hit herself in the face with a hammer to feign domestic violence injuries. A healthy functioning brain would not cause individuals to engage in these types of behaviours, and therefore, her biology may be the cause of her disfunction.

#### Part Two

Aligning with the psychoanalytic subdiscipline, the thematic apperception test (TAT) may be useful to assess Amy further. The TAT is a projective test that measures an individual's unconscious feelings (Burger, 2019) and, therefore, will provide the most insight on Amy, as her behaviour seems largely controlled by unconscious feelings. Amy is a compulsive liar, and therefore, it is likely that she is even lying to herself. Consequently, through presenting a series of cards displaying ambiguous photos, Amy's interpretations of those photos can uncover what Amy isn't even aware of consciously. The full list of responses can be found in Appendix A.

While there are no totaled numerical scores for this assessment, Amy did exhibit several common themes within her responses. After being presented with ten cards, Amy often perceived the main characters in each photo to be in a conflict of some kind, never seeing any positive interactions. In addition, the main character is often seen as in some form of conflict but that it is the other character's fault for this conflict. For example, in photo two of Appendix A,

Amy perceives a high degree of tension among the characters in a scene that was created to measure a participant's cooperation with others, rather than a scene of conflict (Shrestha, 2017). This suggests that Amy is highly motivated by unconscious thoughts—thoughts that typically revolve around conflict and placing the blame on others. For a full review of Amy's responses, please refer to Appendix A.

#### Part Three

Further analysis of Amy's personality can be achieved utilizing the HEXACO PI-R personality assessment questionnaire, which can be found in Appendix B (Lee & Ashton, 2004). The HEXACO is a personality measurement that measures six key personality constructs, including openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, emotionality, and honesty and humility. The first scale of the questionnaire, openness to experience, measures how willing a person is to learn about various topics, how much value they see in nature and art, and how imaginative or conventional they are (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Amy scored a total of 36, which reflects a score of "average-high," meaning that she likely appreciates art and nature, is a generally intellectually curious individual, and has an active imagination (Lee & Ashton, 2004). This score seems quite accurate for Amy, as she is an avid reader, according to Nick (Milchan et al., 2014), therefore appreciating art. Additionally, she is intellectually curious, having two academic degrees and always seeking answers to the unknowns in her life. However, this curiosity may not be because she is genuinely curious, and instead may be because she has a high need for achievement (Burger, 2019) that leads her to have intellectual curiosity as a means to get ahead in life. Lastly, Amy has an incredible imagination, as she was able to imagine the entire missing person/murder plot on her own and conjure up innovative and creative lies that were hard to detect. These tasks would be unsuccessful if not for Amy's creative imagination. The openness to experience score correlates with Amy's personality.

The second scale, conscientiousness, also accurately portrays Amy. Measuring how detail-oriented, disciplined to achieve goals, and organized an individual is (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Amy scored a total of 50, reflecting a very high score. This means that Amy is a highly organized and calculated individual that does everything she can to achieve her goals while being cautious of accuracy and striving for a high level of perfection. Additionally, she is careful in her decisions, avoiding rash and impulsive choices (Lee & Ashton, 2004). This is highly reflective of

Amy, as she was incredibly meticulous and calculated when she planned her own disappearance. This task took Amy months and therefore required an immense degree of discipline to achieve. Amy included several small details in her disappearance, such as fabricating money issues, befriending a neighbour in order to establish a witness to a fabricated domestic violence history, and staging picture frames to arouse suspicion that she wasn't abducted and that Nick had staged it (Milchan et al., 2014). Without these small details, and an immense motivation to achieve her goal of framing Nick, she would not have made a successful plan.

The third scale, agreeableness, measures how well an individual controls their anger or disagreements, whether they compromise, or are forgiving (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Amy scored a total of 19, reflecting a low score. This means that Amy is not an agreeable person and is instead a very unforgiving person who seeks revenge, struggles with anger, and does not compromise or cooperate well in social situations (Lee & Ashton, 2004). This finding is highly accurate, as Amy could not forgive Nick for his affair and enacted a vengeful plot to frame him to cause him pain. She was highly critical of others, including Nick, Margo, Nick's mistress, other women, and men, and often acted in anger. This low score is, therefore, an expected outcome and aligns well with Amy's behaviour.

The fourth scale, extraversion, measures an individual's sociability. For example, a low score reflects a rather antisocial or introverted person who enjoys their time in solitude, whereas a high score reflects an individual who is extroverted and prefers social encounters (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Amy scored an average score of 29, reflecting that she has both introverted and extroverted qualities. For example, Amy dreads large social gatherings, dislikes small talk and has few social relationships, reflecting introverted qualities. However, she also has high self-esteem and confidence, finding herself pleased by positive attention when she went missing, as many news stations covered her story, and much of the country fell in love with Amy. She would disguise herself and sneak onto computers while missing just so that she could read the news about herself (Milchan et al., 2014).

The fifth scale, emotionality, measures an individual's relative anxiety levels in stressful situations, fear of pain, and their views towards attachments with others (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Amy scored a total of 22, indicating an "average-low" score. This reflects that Amy was not overly fearful of pain and did not hold much sentimental value to her attachments with others. This is accurate, however, shocking that it is not lower. Amy does not fear pain, as she was

willing to drain a large amount of her own blood and also hit herself in the cheekbone with a hammer in order to frame her husband (Milchan et al., 2014). Therefore it is to be expected that her score would be low; however, it may not be lower because although Amy did not have any sentimental value towards most relationships, she held some towards her attachment with Nick, believing that he was the one and desperately changing herself to please him. It may be Amy's attachment to Nick that has affected her score, leading to an 'average-low' score rather than simply a low score.

The sixth scale, honesty and humility, measures how truthful individuals are on a variety of measures (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Amy obtained a low score of 12, indicating that she is willing to manipulate others and rules to achieve personal gain, is highly interested in personal status, and desires luxury goods (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Amy had high standards, as stated by Nick, Margo, her parents, and Amy herself, and she believed that she had a higher importance than others, especially Nick. This self-importance and disregard for rules led her to decide to manipulate the pregnant neighbour into believing that she was an abused wife, manipulate the police and media into believing Nick was guilty of her murder, manipulate Desi Collings into protecting her and ultimately cause his death for personal gain, manipulate the police and media into believing that Desi Collings abducted and assaulted her, and finally, manipulate Nick into staying married to her upon her return home (Milchan et al., 2014). Amy was not opposed to manipulating others or breaking the rules because she had such high self-importance that made her believe these actions were excusable.

#### Part Four

In conclusion, Amy Elliott Dunne is a complex woman who is shaped by both her unconscious drives and thoughts and her biological makeup. Her behaviour can be explained by psychoanalytic and biological theories and assessed by psychological self-report inventories such as the HEXACO and the thematic apperception test. Both personality assessments show a high level of accuracy, reflecting Amy as a highly abnormal individual.

# References

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## Appendix A

The Thematic Apperception Test (Murray, 1943). Photos retrieved from Shrestha (2017).

#### Photo 1:



Measures: Concentration and competence (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present situation: Amy may perceive this photo as a young boy who was forced to take violin lessons by his parents, like she was with Cello. She eventually quit to her parent's dismay (Milchan et al., 2014).
- Thoughts and Feelings of the character: boredom, misery, and frustration.
- Preceding Events: Amy may state that he asked to read or do some other activity instead, but his parents told him he had no choice but to practice the violin.
- Final Outcome: the boy is miserable because he has no say or control over his life.

#### Photo 2:



Measures: Cooperation between individuals; how well someone lives with others (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: A woman who is much smarter, more educated, and of higher importance must live among individuals who are only capable of simple things and the bare minimum in terms of achievement.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: the woman feels different from everyone else.

  The others think she is the one who is living life wrong, not them.
- Preceding Events: The woman was forced to move from the big city to live in a rural area and convert to a simpler life.
- Final Outcome: She is miserable and escapes.

# Photo 3 (Called 3GF):



Measures: Depression (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: A woman is crying.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Character: Despair.
- Preceding Events: A woman just found out that her husband betrayed her.
- Final Outcome: She gets revenge.

## Photo 4 (Called 3BM):



Measures: Aggression, impulse control, depression, guilt, and suicidal ideation (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: A woman with scissors of a knife is contemplating killing herself as she cries.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: Anger, despair, helplessness.
- Preceding Events: Someone betrayed her in some way, so she felt that she had to kill herself.
- Final Outcome: She kills herself and leaves a note for the person who betrayed her.

## Photo 5 (Called 4):



Measures: Attitudes towards romantic relationships (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: Amy may believe that a woman is nagging her husband. He wants to go out with his friends or be anywhere but with her, and she is begging him to stay. Amy believed that most couples had dynamics such as that, except her and Nick.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: The woman is weak, and the husband is careless and selfish.
- Preceding Events: They got into an argument and he went to leave, with her chasing after him.
- Final Outcome: The husband does not stay and instead goes out to have fun away from the nagging wife.

#### Photo 6 (Called 6GF):



Measures: Originally meant to convey a father-daughter interaction, most view it as a romantic relationship and therefore often measures this instead (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: Amy would perceive this as a couple, with a domineering husband who
  is attempting to yell at the wife or berate her for something she did. She often tried to
  portray men as abusers or domineering controllers and would likely see this from this
  photo.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: the wife is shocked and frightened. The husband is confident and enjoying himself.
- Preceding Events: The wife probably dressed up fancy for the husband and nagged him for attention, he eventually lashed out and got into her face.
- Final Outcome: An argument or fight breaks out.

## Photo 7 (Called 7GF):



Measures: Mother-child interaction (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: Amy would state that this portrayed a mother who was telling her child what she expected of her (e.g., how to act, what to like, etc.)
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: the daughter is annoyed and frustrated with the oblivious mother.
- Preceding Events: the mother informed the daughter that she can not quit cello lessons yet; the daughter is defiant.
- Final Outcome: the daughter does as the mother asks.

# Photo 8 (Called 9GF):



Measures: Female peer relationships (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: A girl is standing behind a tree getting ready to attack another girl.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: The girl hiding behind the tree is angry, the girl that is not hiding looks scared.
- Preceding Events: The girl not hiding that is going to get attacked is the mistress of the other girl's husband.
- Final Outcome: The mistress is attacked.

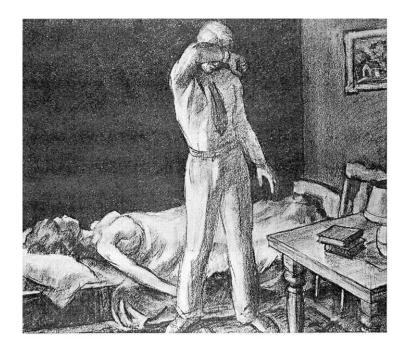
## Photo 9 (Called 11):



Measures: Imaginative abilities (Shrestha, 2017).

- Present Situation: Large birds or some ambiguous beings cross a bridge, with a large snake appearing above.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: Hunger in the snake and oblivion in the birds.
- Preceding Events: The birds are crossing the bridge because it is unsafe at their previous home and are relocating. The snake is the reason it was unsafe at their home and is stalking them.
- Final Outcome: The snake kills and eats the birds.

#### Photo 10 (Called 13MF):



Measures: Sexual and aggressive feelings (Shrestha, 2017).

## Participant Responses:

- Present Situation: A woman has been raped by a domineering man.
- Thoughts and Feelings of the Characters: The man is exhausted from using physical force, the woman is frozen in fear.
- Preceding Events: The man was stalking the woman for a long time and broke into her apartment as she slept and assaulted her.
- Final Outcome: The man gets away with it and the woman suffers because of it.

## Appendix B

## The HEXACO PI-R Self Report Form (Lee & Ashton, 2004):

- 1 I would be quite bored by a visit to an art gallery.
- 2 I plan ahead and organize things, to avoid scrambling at the last minute.
- 3 I rarely hold a grudge, even against people who have badly wronged me.

- 4 I feel reasonably satisfied with myself overall.
- 5 I would feel afraid if I had to travel in bad weather conditions.
- 6 I wouldn't use flattery to get a raise or promotion at work, even if I thought it would succeed.
- 7 I'm interested in learning about the history and politics of other countries.
- 8 I often push myself very hard when trying to achieve a goal.
- 9 People sometimes tell me that I am too critical of others.
- 10 I rarely express my opinions in group meetings.
- 11 I sometimes can't help worrying about little things.
- 12 If I knew that I could never get caught, I would be willing to steal a million dollars.
- 13 I would enjoy creating a work of art, such as a novel, a song, or a painting.
- 14 When working on something, I don't pay much attention to small details.
- 15 People sometimes tell me that I'm too stubborn.
- 16 I prefer jobs that involve active social interaction to those that involve working alone.
- 17 When I suffer from a painful experience, I need someone to make me feel comfortable.
- 18 Having a lot of money is not especially important to me.
- 19 I think that paying attention to radical ideas is a waste of time.
- 20 I make decisions based on the feeling of the moment rather than on careful thought.
- 21 People think of me as someone who has a quick temper.
- 22 On most days, I feel cheerful and optimistic.
- 23 I feel like crying when I see other people crying.
- 24 I think that I am entitled to more respect than the average person is.
- 25 If I had the opportunity, I would like to attend a classical music concert.
- 26 When working, I sometimes have difficulties due to being disorganized.
- 27 My attitude toward people who have treated me badly is "forgive and forget".
- 28 I feel that I am an unpopular person.
- 29 When it comes to physical danger, I am very fearful.
- 30 If I want something from someone, I will laugh at that person's worst jokes.

- 31 I've never really enjoyed looking through an encyclopedia.
- I do only the minimum amount of work needed to get by.
- 33 I tend to be lenient in judging other people.
- 34 In social situations, I'm usually the one who makes the first move.
- 35 I worry a lot less than most people do.
- 36 I would never accept a bribe, even if it were very large.
- 37 People have often told me that I have a good imagination.
- 38 I always try to be accurate in my work, even at the expense of time.
- 39 I am usually quite flexible in my opinions when people disagree with me.
- 40 The first thing that I always do in a new place is to make friends.
- 41 I can handle difficult situations without needing emotional support from anyone else.
- 42 I would get a lot of pleasure from owning expensive luxury goods.
- 43 I like people who have unconventional views.
- 44 I make a lot of mistakes because I don't think before I act.
- 45 Most people tend to get angry more quickly than I do.
- 46 Most people are more upbeat and dynamic than I generally am.
- 47 I feel strong emotions when someone close to me is going away for a long time.
- 48 I want people to know that I am an important person of high status.
- 49 I don't think of myself as the artistic or creative type.
- 50 People often call me a perfectionist.
- 51 Even when people make a lot of mistakes, I rarely say anything negative.
- 52 I sometimes feel that I am a worthless person.
- 53 Even in an emergency I wouldn't feel like panicking.
- 54 I wouldn't pretend to like someone just to get that person to do favors for me.
- 55 I find it boring to discuss philosophy.
- 56 I prefer to do whatever comes to mind, rather than stick to a plan.
- 57 When people tell me that I'm wrong, my first reaction is to argue with them.
- 58 When I'm in a group of people, I'm often the one who speaks on behalf of the group.
- 59 I remain unemotional even in situations where most people get very sentimental.
- 60 I'd be tempted to use counterfeit money, if I were sure I could get away with it.

#### HEXACO-PI-R RESPONSE SHEET (SELF-REPORT VERSION)

Write your responses in the space next to the number, not in the space between parentheses.

Amy's Scores:

Column 1 (Openness to Experience): 36 – Average-High

- appreciate beauty in art and nature
- intellectually curious
- use imagination in everyday life
- likes to hear unusual opinions

## Column 2 (Conscientiousness): 50 – High

• orderly with things and time

- work hard to achieve goals
- pursue accuracy and perfection
- prudent, careful decision making

## Column 3: (Agreeableness): 19 – Low

- find it hard to forgive
- critical of others' shortcomings
- stubborn in defending point of view
- feel anger readily when provoked

## Column 4 (Extraversion): 29 – Average

- avoid small talk, prefer to be alone
- don't feel lively or dynamic
- see positive qualities in self
- confident leading, speaking in groups

## Column 5 (Emotionality): 22 – Average-Low

- not deterred by physical danger or pain
- little anxiety even in stressful situations
- don't need emotional support from others
- little sentimental attachment to others

#### Column 6 (Honesty-Humility): 12 – Low

- flatter others, pretend to like them
- willing to bend rules for personal gain
- want money and expensive possessions
- feel entitled to special status and privilege