The Experience By Emily Charlton A Psychological Character Study of Histrionic Personality Disorder in The Devil Wears Prada

Efron Trivosa Rynoldy[1], Machful Irfan[2], Muhamad Ansori[3],Eka Raesita[4]
Universitas Pertiwi
24350011@pertiwi.ac.id,
25350013@pertiwi.ac.id
23350022@pertiwi.ac.id
25350032@pertiwi.ac.id

ABSTRAK

Meskipun narasi sinematik secara luas diakui sebagai wahana kritik budaya, potensinya sebagai studi kasus diagnostik untuk patologi kepribadian masih kurang dieksplorasi, terutama terkait karakter sekunder. Penelitian ini menjembatani psikologi karakter dan diagnostik klinis dengan mengkaji tokoh Emily Charlton dalam film The Devil Wears Prada (2006) karya David Frankel melalui kerangka sub-klasifikasi Theodore Millon untuk Gangguan Kepribadian Histrionik (Histrionic Personality Disorder/HPD). Melampaui fokus kajian-kajian terdahulu pada narsisme Miranda Priestly dan transformasi profesional Andy Sachs, penelitian ini memposisikan Emily sebagai subjek tersendiri dalam patologi kepribadian, dengan menyelidiki persoalan-persoalan terkait diri (self-related issues) apa yang ia tampilkan dan bagaimana persoalan tersebut termanifestasi dalam relasi-relasi kerjanya. Secara metodologis, penelitian ini menerapkan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, menggunakan analisis isi deduktif untuk memetakan dialog dan perilaku Emily pada tujuh adegan kunci film terhadap kriteria subtipe Theatrical Histrionic milik Millon. Alih-alih interpretasi umum, penelitian ini menggunakan proses pengodean berbasis adegan (scene-based coding), di mana kutipan-kutipan dialog dikategorikan berdasarkan konstruksi identitas berbasis performa (performance-based identity construction), ekspresivitas yang menuntut perhatian (attention-commanding expressiveness), dan pembingkaian kognitif yang impresionistik (impressionistic cognitive framing). Temuan penelitian mengonfirmasi bahwa Emily menunjukkan profil yang koheren secara klinis, yang ditandai oleh ketiga fitur kardinal tersebut, dan lebih lanjut mengungkap bahwa budaya korporat majalah Runway yang bersifat validasi bersyarat (conditionally validating) tidak menciptakan HPD Emily, melainkan secara aktif mengintensifkannya, berfungsi sebagai akselerator bagi mekanisme koping maladaptifnya berupa peredaan konflik (appeasement), promosi diri yang teatrikal (theatrical self-promotion), dan penyerapan kesalahan (blame absorption). Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi berupa penerapan kerangka klinis Millon yang baru dan spesifik terhadap karakter dalam analisis sinematik, memposisikan tokoh fiktif sebagai situs yang layak secara akademis untuk mengkaji bagaimana lingkungan yang toksik mempatologikan sekaligus menormalisasi tekanan emosional ekstrem sebagai kompetensi profesional.

Kata kunci : Emily Charlton; Gangguan Kepribadian Histrionik; Psikologi Karakter; The Devil Wears Prada; Theodore Millon

ABSTRACT

While cinematic narratives are widely recognized as vehicles for cultural commentary, their potential as diagnostic case studies for personality pathology remains under-explored, particularly regarding secondary characters. This study bridges character psychology and clinical diagnostics by examining Emily Charlton in David Frankel's The Devil Wears Prada (2006) through the lens of Theodore Millon's sub-classification framework for Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD). Moving beyond existing scholarship's focus on Miranda Priestly's narcissism and Andy Sachs's professional

transformation, this research positions Emily as a distinct subject of personality pathology, investigating what self-related issues she displays and how these manifest within her workplace relationships. Methodologically, this research applies a qualitative descriptive approach, using deductive content analysis to map Emily's dialogue and behavior across seven key film scenes against Millon's Theatrical Histrionic subtype criteria. Rather than a general interpretation, the study employs a scene-based coding process in which dialogue excerpts are categorized according to performance-based identity construction, attention-commanding expressiveness, and impressionistic cognitive framing. The findings confirm that Emily exhibits a clinically coherent profile defined by these three cardinal features, and further reveal that the conditionally validating corporate culture of Runway magazine does not create Emily's HPD but actively intensifies it, functioning as an accelerant for her maladaptive coping mechanisms of appeasement, theatrical self-promotion, and blame absorption. Ultimately, this research contributes a novel, character-specific application of Millon's clinical framework to cinematic analysis, positioning fictional personas as academically credible sites for examining how toxic environments pathologize and normalize extreme emotional distress as professional competence.
Keywords: *Histrionic Personality Disorder; Emily Chartlton; The Devil Wears Prada; Theodore Millon; Character Psychology.*

INTRODUCTION

Current research on the psychological function of narrative media suggests that motion pictures operate as more than mere entertainment; they function as diagnostic mirrors for the human psyche, capturing the subtle boundary between normative behavior and personality pathology. While scholars have established that cinema can contextualize psychiatric distress within simulated social hierarchies, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding secondary, non-antagonist characters whose behavioral patterns nonetheless meet clinical diagnostic thresholds. This study addresses this gap by examining Emily Charlton, the assistant to Miranda Priestly in David Frankel's The Devil Wears Prada (2006), through the lens of Theodore Millon's sub-classification framework for Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD).

The current understanding of personality pathology in media is built upon several key pillars, yet each contains limitations that this research seeks to address. Torrico (2024) provides a definitive clinical grounding for HPD, mapping its

diagnostic parameters and emphasizing that chronic emotional volatility and a dependence on physical appearance for self-validation produce significant occupational impairment. While Torrico establishes the exact clinical thresholds required to diagnose the condition, the study is confined to clinical populations and does not extend its criteria to fictional or narrative subjects. Similarly, Berryman et al. (2019) examine how individuals with histrionic traits weaponize vague, dramatic disclosures — a practice termed "vaguebooking" — to extort immediate reassurance from digital networks. (Although Berryman et al., 2019) demonstrate that attention-seeking behavior adapts structurally to its environment, their focus remains on real-world social media users rather than cinematic personas.

From a media-analytical perspective, Asgari Ghalebin (2023) and Cooper (2024) argue that film functions as a virtual diagnostic simulator, allowing fictional characters with cohesive behavioral profiles to be evaluated as legitimate case studies for Cluster B personality pathologies. This supports the notion that motion pictures can be treated as structured clinical data, but their analyses remain general, without isolating a specific character for close textual diagnosis. Gomez (2022) anchors this investigation within literary and media spaces, demonstrating that when characters are subjected to conditional approval or abusive leadership, their narrative arcs frequently mirror the development of maladaptive coping behaviors; however, Gomez's analysis does not extend to a scene-by-scene clinical mapping of any single character. Finally, Ye (2021) provides a comprehensive characterization of Miranda Priestly's narcissistic and authoritarian leadership style within The Devil Wears Prada specifically, inadvertently establishing the environmental stressor that

drives Emily Charlton's psychological deterioration, yet Ye's study centers Miranda as its subject rather than the assistants who absorb her pressure.

The existing literature leaves a significant research gap: while Miranda Priestly's narcissism and Andy Sachs's corporate transformation have been extensively analyzed, no academic work isolates the secondary character of Emily Charlton as a distinct subject of personality pathology. Furthermore, while clinical literature treats HPD as a broad diagnostic category, it has yet to apply nuanced sub-classification frameworks — such as Millon's Theatrical, Appeasing, and Tempestuous subtypes — to literary or cinematic texts. Most studies treat supporting characters as narrative devices rather than as coherent psychological subjects whose dialogue can be systematically coded against clinical criteria.

This study offers a novel contribution by applying Theodore Millon's sub-classification model directly to Emily Charlton's on-screen dialogue and behavior. Unlike previous research that centers on Miranda's tyranny or Andy's transformation, this research analyzes Emily as a self-contained clinical subject, treating her recurring verbal patterns — including her signature line, "I love my job, I love my job" — as diagnostic evidence rather than comic relief. By investigating how Emily's performance of professional identity, her dramatization of ordinary events, and her impressionistic communication style align with Millon's Theatrical Histrionic subtype, this study provides a unique bridge between cinematic character analysis and clinical personality psychology.

This research therefore employs Theodore Millon's Subtypes of Histrionic Personality Disorder to examine how Emily Charlton's dialogue and behavior in

The Devil Wears Prada function as observable manifestations of HPD. Specifically, it seeks to identify the specific self-related issues displayed by Emily Charlton and to analyze how these manifestations shape her interpersonal relationships under systemic workplace strain, thereby contributing to the progress of interdisciplinary scholarship connecting literature, media studies, and abnormal psychology.

METHODS

To rigorously investigate the psychological dimensions of Emily Charlton, this study employs a qualitative descriptive approach built upon clinical character profiling and deductive content analysis. This design is selected for its capacity to move beyond surface-level entertainment value, systematically converting creative characterization into structured clinical data points. As observed by Gomez (2022) Narrative structures and dramatic screens serve as simulated diagnostic mirrors for the human psyche, capturing the subtle boundaries between normative behavior and psychological pathology (Gomez et al., 2022, p. 14), while cinematic characters provide context-bound case materials that allow researchers to evaluate how intense environmental stressors trigger hidden personality disorders (Cooper, 2024, p. 39). Because this study is anchored to a pre-recorded audio-visual text, it operates without human field subjects or a traditional geographic setting; the research setting is entirely structural and context-bound, confined to the high-fashion corporate environment of Runway magazine depicted in the film. The primary source of data is the full theatrical release of The Devil Wears Prada (2006), directed by David Frankel and distributed by Fox 2000 Pictures, from which targeted, observable audio-visual indices — verbal dialogue, vocal tone, facial expression, and defensive

social maneuvers performed by Emily Charlton — are drawn as the primary textual material for studying behavioral pathology in modern media (Peña & Sarrionandia, 2023, p. 2).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Seven dialogues were purposively selected as the units of analysis for this study, on the basis that each contains at least one dialogue excerpt in which Emily Charlton exhibits behavior indicative of Theodore Millon's Theatrical Histrionic subtype. To ensure analytical consistency, each finding below is presented through a uniform four-part structure: (1) the scene context, (2) the verbatim dialogue excerpt that constitutes the primary data, (3) the finding's designation and timestamp, and (4) the discussion that maps the excerpt onto Millon's cardinal HPD features.

1. The Hiring Walk-Through (00:03:53 – 00:04:18)

SCENE CONTEXT

Runway hallway. Emily Charlton escorts the newly hired Andy Sachs from the elevator to the assistant desk — a routine workplace orientation that lasts less than ninety seconds of screen time. Despite its brevity, this scene is the densest single passage of HPD-indicative language in the entire film. Within four minutes of her first appearance, Emily delivers all three cardinal features of Millon's Theatrical Histrionic subtype: performance-based identity construction, attention-commanding expressiveness, and impressionistic cognitive framing organized around a high-status other. This is not incidental characterization — it is the diagnostic portrait of HPD drawn in its clearest strokes.

FINDING 1: DIALOGUE EXCERPT (00:03:53 – 00:04:18)

> *"Okay, so I was Miranda's second assistant. But her first assistant recently got promoted, and so now I'm the first." — Emily, 00:03:53*
>
> *"I'm trying. Miranda sacked the last two girls after only a few weeks. We need to find someone who can survive here." — Emily, 00:03:58*
>
> *"You didn't just ask me that. She's the editor-in-chief of Runway. Not to mention a legend. You work a year for her, you can get a job at any magazine you want." — Emily, 00:04:18*

DISCUSSION

From the dialogue above we can find the Theatrical Histrionic, as Millon defines the subtype, constructs identity not from internal qualities but from the performance of social position. Scene 1 opens with the clearest possible proof of this mechanism. Emily's very first act upon meeting a new colleague is to announce her rank: 'I was Miranda's second assistant. But her first assistant recently got promoted, and so now I'm the first.' This disclosure is entirely unprompted — Andy has asked nothing about Emily's position. The information is volunteered because, for the Theatrical Histrionic, establishing status is not a social option but a psychological compulsion. Self-worth, in Millon's model, is contingent on the continuous performance of one's place in a visible hierarchy. Emily cannot simply be; she must be ranked.

Crucially, the ranking itself is relational rather than intrinsic. Emily does not say 'I am talented' or 'I work hard.' She says she is Miranda's first assistant — a title whose entire value derives from Miranda's status, not Emily's own. This is the

defining grammatical signature of the Theatrical Histrionic's sociable self-image: identity is constructed as a possessive relationship with a high-status other. 'Miranda's' is doing the identity work; 'first' is merely the ordinal position within that other's orbit. Emily exists, in her own linguistic framing, as a satellite — not a planet.

2. Miranda's Imminent Arrival (00:04:41 – 00:05:02)

SCENE CONTEXT

Runway bullpen. Emily receives a text that Miranda is arriving early. She treats this as a crisis. When the panicking attacks her, she become so theatrical and make a lot of noise at the entire aisle.

FINDING 2: DIALOGUE EXCERPT (00:04:41 – 00:05:02)

"(on telephone) She's on her way! Tell everyone!" — Emily, 00:04:41

"Her driver just text-messaged. Her facialist ruptured a disc. God, these people." — Emily, 00:04:52

"That... I can't even talk about it." — Emily, 00:05:02 [regarding Andy]

DISCUSSION

As we can see from the dialogue above the imperative 'Tell everyone!' is not operationally necessary — Miranda's early arrival would be communicated through normal channels. Emily's insistence on broadcasting the information constructs herself as the indispensable communications hub, transforming a logistical update into a performance of competence. This is the histrionic's interpersonal attention-seeking enacted through professional language. Furthermore the line 'God, these people' is a two-word phrase carrying multiple HPD signatures simultaneously: (1)

the invocation of the divine ('God') as an emotional amplifier; (2) the contemptuous collectivization ('these people') that places Emily above a disreputable class; and (3) the clipped, impatient cadence that signals emotional lability — rapid oscillation between states. This phrase captures Millon's biophysical lability in its purest verbal form.

'That... I can't even talk about it' — referring to Andy — constitutes theatrical speechlessness, a rhetorical device by which the histrionic amplifies contempt through ostentatious silence. The grammatical ellipsis ('That...') performs disgust without naming it, which is itself a form of impressionistic, feeling-first cognition: the HPD subject registers emotional reactions before — and instead of — analytical thought.

3. Miranda Arrives: Unsolicited Apology (00:06:27 – 00:06:36)

SCENE CONTEXT

Runway hallway. Miranda criticizes Emily for failing to confirm an appointment — despite Emily having confirmed it.

FINDING 3: DIALOGUE EXCERPT (00:06:27 – 00:06:36)

> *"I know. I'm so sorry, Miranda. I actually did confirm last night." — Emily, 00:06:27 – 00:06:36*

DISCUSSION

From the sentence above that Emily is trying to convey, we can acknowledge the syntactic sequence 'I know. I'm so sorry' — before Emily offers any factual clarification — reveals the HPD's regulatory mechanism of blame absorption. Millon identifies the Appeasing Histrionic subtype as one who will

accept fault reflexively to preserve the approving relationship. The apology arrives before the defense, which tells us that Emily's primary cognitive priority in this moment is not accuracy but relational maintenance. The adverb 'so' in 'I'm so sorry' functions as a lexical intensifier: it amplifies the emotional display beyond what the situation demands. Millon notes that HPD individuals calibrate the volume of their emotional expression not to the actual stimulus but to the perceived attention-value of the reaction. A measured 'I'm sorry' would suffice; 'so sorry' is a performance.

The repetition of Miranda's name in direct address ('I'm so sorry, Miranda') is not pragmatically required — Miranda knows who is being addressed. Its inclusion is a paralinguistic attachment gesture: the histrionic uses the authority figure's name to create the sensation of personal intimacy and to strengthen the relational bond that provides her with validation.

4. Runway Bullpen: Andy Meets Emily at the Desk (00:04:28 – 00:04:35)

SCENE CONTEXT

Runway bullpen. Emily orients Andy to the professional standards of Runway, framing the workplace as aspirational and exclusive.

FINDING 4: DIALOGUE EXCERPT (00:04:28 – 00:04:35)

> *"Andrea, Runway is a fashion magazine, so an interest in fashion is crucial." — Emily, 00:04:28*
>
> *"A million girls would kill for this job." — Emily, 00:04:35*

DISCUSSION

From the dialogue above, 'A million girls would kill for this job' is absolutely the most linguistically dense HPD indicator in Emily's verbal repertoire,

and its recurrence across the film constitutes what may be termed her 'personal catechism' — a ritualized utterance that reinforces her own identity each time it is spoken. The phrase performs three simultaneous HPD functions: (1) hyperbolic quantification ('a million') signals a cognitive style that deals in impressions rather than facts; (2) violent imagery ('would kill') elevates the emotional register far beyond the content; and (3) the implicit claim to membership in a rarefied elite encodes the HPD sociable self-image as belonging to a specially chosen group.

The use of Andy's full name, 'Andrea,' when addressing someone who goes by 'Andy,' is not an error — it is an assertion of dominance and formality that positions Emily as the person who controls the register of interaction. This is interpersonal attention-seeking enacted not through overt drama but through subtle linguistic control.

5. Desk Orientation: The Lagerfeld Anecdote (00:13:21 – 00:13:42)

SCENE CONTEXT

Runway bullpen. Emily instructs Andy never to leave the desk, illustrating the rule with a story about a previous assistant.

FINDING 5: DIALOGUE EXCERPT (00:13:21 – 00:13:42)

> *"When I am not here, Andrea, you are chained to that desk! One time an assistant left the desk. Because she sliced her hand open with a letter opener. And Miranda missed Lagerfeld just before he was about to board a 17-hour flight to Australia. She now works at TV Guide." — Emily, 00:13:21 – 00:13:42*

DISCUSSION

As we can find from the dialogue above, Emily's instruction to 'man the desk' is not delivered as a procedure but as a dramatic narrative with three escalating beats: a physical injury, a missed celebrity encounter, and professional exile. This is Millon's 'flighty' cognitive style rendered perfectly in speech: the HPD individual encodes information not in logical propositions but in emotionally charged stories. The lesson is not 'please stay at the desk' but an affecting tale in which terrible things cascade from a single act of absence.

The phrase 'chained to that desk' is a coercive metaphor: it activates the image of physical restraint (slavery, imprisonment) to describe a professional obligation, a hyperbolic framing that is disproportionate to the subject matter. The HPD characteristic of dramatizing mundane events is precisely exhibited here — Emily cannot give a flat instruction; every directive must carry emotional weight.

The hyper-specific detail '17-hour flight to Australia' deserves particular attention as a linguistic device. Rather than serving as factual precision, it functions as a dramatic credibility marker — the kind of vivid, memorable detail that makes a story feel viscerally real. Millon's impressionistic cognitive domain favors this mode: the HPD individual's communication is organized around creating emotional impact, and specificity is deployed in service of drama rather than accuracy.

6. Andy's First Major Failure (00:48:34 – 00:48:39)

SCENE CONTEXT

Outside Miranda's office. Andy has delivered the incorrect laundry, a minor procedural error.

FINDING 6: DIALOGUE EXCERPT (00:48:34 – 00:48:39)

> *"You went upstairs? You went upstairs. Oh my God. Why didn't you just crawl into bed with her and ask for a bedtime story?" — Emily, 00:48:34 – 00:48:39*

DISCUSSION

The verbatim repetition in Emily's line — 'You went upstairs? You went upstairs.' — delivered first as a question and then as a flat declarative, is a signature HPD rhetorical pattern. The question registers incredulity; the repetition as a statement signals that the speaker is still processing the shock of the violation. This double articulation has no informational content — Andy knows she went upstairs — but exists entirely as emotional performance. Millon's HPD overreactivity, the 'inability to modulate emotional response proportionally,' is contained in this two-sentence structure. The hyperbolic imagery of 'crawl into bed with her and ask for a bedtime story' is the most dramatic linguistic construction in Emily's dialogue. By evoking the intimacy of a bedtime routine to describe the delivery of incorrect coffee, Emily collapses the distinction between minor infractions and catastrophic boundary violations. This is the HPD's cognitive style at its most expressively dramatic: a proportionate response has been replaced by a scene of maximum theatrical impact.

The initializing metaphor ('bedtime story') simultaneously accomplishes two things: it mocks Andy by reducing her to a child, and it elevates Emily's own sophistication by contrast. This is the HPD's interpersonal conduct organized around status defence — the threat of Andy's incompetence is neutralized through ridicule, which restores Emily's position as the competent, superior assistant.

7. Runway Hallway (00:50:22)

SCENE CONTEXT

Runway hallway. Andy is about to perform a difficult task and asks Emily for encouragement.

FINDING 7: DIALOGUE EXCERPT (00:50:22)

"No. Shan't." — Emily, 00:50:22 [in response to Andy's 'Wish me luck!']

DISCUSSION

As we can see from the phrase above, 'Shan't' is the single most compressed HPD linguistic indicator in the film, because it encodes the condition in a single lexical choice. The word is archaic, formal, and self-consciously affected — it is not the register Emily uses elsewhere. Its deployment here is therefore a performance: it signals that Emily's refusal is not merely a 'no' but a theatrical gesture of superiority. The HPD sociable self-image requires continuous self-presentation, and even a refusal becomes an opportunity for stylistic display. At the structural level, the two-word response ('No. Shan't.') is itself an HPD indicator: it reveals the morphologic disorganization Millon identifies as characteristic of the histrionic's inner world. Emily cannot offer genuine good will because her structural capacity for authentic altruistic engagement is underdeveloped. The brevity is not economy; it is emptiness. There is no warmth to give, so none is given — and the giving of none is dressed up as wit.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine whether Emily Charlton, a supporting character in David Frankel's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), could be read as a coherent case of Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD) rather than as a minor comic figure. The central message of this research is simple: Emily's dialogue is not random exaggeration for comic effect. It follows a consistent psychological pattern that matches Theodore Millon's Theatrical Histrionic subtype. The findings support this claim clearly. Across seven key scenes, Emily's dialogue repeatedly showed all three cardinal features of the Theatrical Histrionic subtype. First, her sense of self is built through performance-based identity construction, meaning she defines her worth through closeness to a powerful figure rather than through her own qualities. Second, she displays attention-commanding expressiveness, turning ordinary office situations into dramatic events that demand emotional attention. Third, her language reflects impressionistic cognitive framing, where exaggerated and emotionally loaded words replace plain, factual description. Beyond describing Emily's character, this study points to a broader implication. The toxic and conditionally validating culture at Runway does not create Emily's HPD, but it does make it worse. The workplace acts as an accelerant, pushing her coping strategies of appeasement, theatrical self-promotion, and blame absorption to their most intense form. This suggests a wider argument: personality pathology cannot be fully understood without looking at the environment surrounding it. This idea has real-world relevance, since it helps explain how high-pressure workplaces can turn extreme emotional distress into something that looks like professional competence.

The main contribution of this research is methodological as much as it is interpretive. By applying Millon's clinical framework directly to a fictional character's dialogue, scene by scene, this study offers a model for reading fictional personas as legitimate case studies in personality psychology. It shows that literary and film analysis can work together with clinical theory to produce insights that are both academically rigorous and accessible to a general audience.

At the same time, the study has clear limits. It relies on a single fictional text, and it does not fully explore Emily's overlapping traits from the Appeasing and Tempestuous sub-types. These remain open questions for future work. Building on this, future research should expand the analysis to other characters and films for comparison. Quantitative linguistic methods could also be applied to dialogue transcripts to support the qualitative findings with numerical evidence. In addition, future studies could track whether Emily's HPD traits shift or stay stable across the film's three acts, a question this study's scene-based method was not designed to answer. In closing, this research calls for greater attention to secondary characters as valid subjects of psychological analysis, not just supporting roles for the protagonist's story. Scholars, educators, and students of film and psychology are encouraged to apply this same scene-based, evidence-driven method to other characters and texts, so that personality pathology in fiction can be studied with the same precision as in clinical settings.

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