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## Anaïs Nin: A case study of personality disorder and creativity

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### ABSTRACT

Anaïs Nin, diarist and author of autobiographical novellas and erotica, and gregarious socialite, was known for her exotic persona and stormy personal life. The concept of personality disorder and the underlying assumption of the buffering capacity that personality affords to stressors are discussed. Against this background, evidence drawn from Nin's diaries, short stories and two biographies suggests that she conformed to the diagnostic criteria of histrionic personality disorder (HPD), with comorbid borderline and narcissistic features, and numerous Axis I symptoms. The proposed origin of the overall dysfunctional histrionic pattern is attributed to her early developmental history, and the maladaptive cognitive mechanisms of dissociation and repression inferred from her writings and shown to conform to the HPD pattern. Finally, it is argued that while Nin may not have displayed the classic divergent cognitive style thought to underlie the association between schizotypy and creativity, her HPD psychopathology was pivotal in shaping her creative products, most famous of which is her diary.

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### 1. Introduction

Figures of the literary and artistic world are always subject to scrutiny and criticism, and thanks to the body of literature dedicated to their life and work, it may be possible to reconstruct accurate and detailed accounts of their behaviour patterns and psychological profile. Few such figures continue to puzzle audiences and inspire such diverse reactions as Anaïs Nin. Famous for her 35,000-page diary spanning more than 40 years of her life and the erotic novels and short stories that she drew from it, she was also infamous for her promiscuity, stormy personal life, and dramatic persona. Angela Anaïs Juana Antolina Rosa Edelmira Nin y Culmell was born in Neuilly, France, in 1903 to Rosa Culmell, daughter of a rich Cuban family, and Joaquin Nin, a young Spanish composer and pianist. The family returned to Cuba in 1905, where Nin's upbringing was shared between her mother and aunts, and then left again for Europe where her father performed. After J. Nin left his wife and three children for a young heiress, the family moved to New York in 1914, where life was by no means comfortable. It is at that time that the diary emerged which became a repository for her thoughts and ultimately a collection of psychological rather than factual truths. She enrolled for English composition and Intermediate French at Columbia University in 1921, and married Hugo Guiler, a young banker, in 1923. A few years later, the couple moved to Paris where Nin embarked on the life for which she became infamous: her numerous adulterous relation-

ships, including the notable affair with Henry Miller, the incestuous reunion with her father, and the writing of erotica. The couple moved back to America, where Nin continued her promiscuous lifestyle and later illegally married Rupert Pole, 15 years her junior, balancing between a knowing but willingly blind husband in New York and an oblivious lover in San Francisco on what she called the 'bicoastal trapeze'. Her work achieved critical acclaim much later, around the mid '60s, with the publication of her diaries and novels. She died of cancer in 1977.

Nin – a gifted writer and a pioneer in the genre of autobiography and the history of the women's movement – undoubtedly possessed of natural talent and artistic flair. Her prolific literary output was influenced by surrealism and psychoanalytic theory, and is characterised by powerful imagery and raw accounts of the psychological experience of femininity. Alongside her indisputable literary acclaim Nin's turbulent personal life suggests that beneath the artistic persona lay a neurotic and troubled individual, rife with indicators of psychopathology, for which her diaries and other writing served as expressive outlets. Thus, her life and work represent that fascinating coincidence of artistic creativity and psychopathology which has historically been the focus of speculation and debate by philosophers, historians, psychiatrists and psychologists. Creativity, especially in the realm of art rather than science, is associated with personality traits of non-conformism, independence, novelty and sensation seeking (Eysenck, 1995), as well as psychopathological symptoms (Ludwig, 1995, 1998), which may fall short of clear pathology (Barron, 1963; Eysenck, 1995), but conspires nonetheless to support the notion that deviant personality and unconventional behaviour accompany exceptional innovative

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activity and creativity. In the case of writers personality disturbance and depression have been found to be particularly prevalent compared to other artists (Post, 1994, 1996).

Most historiometric research systematically investigates the lives of famous artistic individuals for indications of psychopathological symptoms and relies on their published biographies to draw inferences on the basis of documented actions and events. However, constructing a psychological profile for Anaïs Nin and attempting to understand and evaluate her cognitive, emotional and interpersonal functioning benefit significantly from the nature of her work: her medium was the written word and, in particular, it is her personal diary, spanning most of her adult life, which represents her most significant contribution to literature. This diary grants access to intimate thoughts about herself and significant others, and consequently some insight into her innermost psychological world. Despite never actually admitting to rewriting or editing the diary, it is established that the 7 of the 150 volumes that have seen publication are the end products of extensive, meticulous and creative transcription which Nin carried out throughout her life. While the diary represents a fusion of psychological reality and literary expression, excerpts from the Early Diaries (Vols. 1–4) (Nin, 1978, 1982, 1983, 1985), and three volumes of the later diaries (Nin, 1966a, 1967, 1992) will be analysed and presented throughout this discussion for their psychological and emotional content. Biographical information and excerpts from interviews with Nin's contemporaries will also be drawn from two different published sources (Bair, 1995; Fitch, 1994).

It is acknowledged that such an exercise is necessarily speculative. Nevertheless, it will be argued here that, taken together, the sources consulted suggest that many of the features of Nin's affectivity, cognitive style, and behaviour were clinically abnormal. In particular, the thesis advanced here is that Nin most likely met many of the diagnostic criteria for histrionic personality disorder (HPD), with indications of comorbid borderline and narcissistic personality features, with symptoms of depression, all as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, [DSM-IV-TR], 2000). The role and influence of these psychopathological features on her creativity and literary output will then be explored.

## 2. Anaïs Nin as a case of histrionic personality disorder

Particularly relevant to the concept of disordered personality are social and cultural norms. If normality is defined as conformity to the behaviours and customs typical for one's reference group or culture, then departures from this, in the form of a narrow and inflexible behavioural repertoire as a means of eliciting desired responses from other group members in different contexts, are considered pathological (Millon, 2000). Personality disorders are enduring patterns of inner experience and behaviour, traceable back to adolescence or early adulthood and manifest as marked deviations from the expectations of an individual's culture, in two or more of the following: ways of perceiving and interpreting the self, others, and events (cognition); the range, intensity, lability, and appropriateness of emotional responding (affectivity); interpersonal functioning and impulse control. Thus, a particular constellation of personality traits is considered disordered if it is stable, inflexible, and pervasive across a wide range of personal and social situations, and causes significant distress or impairment in personal or interpersonal functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Personality represents those deeply embedded characteristics that are implicitly expressed in different areas of psychological functioning and behaviour, and covers the entire psychological spectrum of an individual. Therefore, pathology may appear in

every domain of functioning, as well as being reflected in a disordered pattern of behaviour as a whole. Personality disorder is notoriously resistant to treatment, because of its stability and endurance as a pattern of feeling, thinking and behaving with no localisable point of causality. However, it may function as the substrate of a differential inclination to mental disorder, or the matrix from which psychopathological symptoms may spring. Hence, the buffering capacity of a stable personality, as opposed to a disordered one, that allows the disposition to come to terms with psychological challenges in a healthy and adaptive way (Millon, 2000).

Histrionic personality disorder (HPD) is defined as a pervasive pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking. According to the DSM-IV-TR, histrionics may be uncomfortable in situations in which they are not the centre of attention; they consistently use their physical appearance to draw attention to themselves. Their interpersonal interactions are often characterised by inappropriately seductive and sexually provocative behaviour, and they may tend to regard relationships as more intimate than they actually are. Histrionics may display rapid emotional shifts and shallow or exaggerated emotional expression, and are easily influenced by other individuals or external circumstances. They demonstrate theatricality and self-dramatisation, and their style of speech may be excessively impressionistic and lacking in detail. Overall, the clinical manifestation of the histrionic personality is essentially a caricature of the behaviour that Western societies reward and consider popular, successful, outgoing and attractive and is a caricature of femininity: a complex of vanity, immaturity, self-dramatisation, and fragility. It is more frequently diagnosed in women and feminine sex role has been found to be the most strongly associated with the HPD diagnosis (Sprock, 2000). The underlying reason for this potential sex bias remains unclear, however (Blashfield & Davis, 1993).

### 2.1. HPD diagnostic criteria

It is proposed here that Nin displayed these stable, inflexible and pervasive patterns in her cognition, interpersonal behaviour, affectivity, and impulse control, traceable back to her early adulthood. Her unique behaviour pattern comprised dramatic, theatrical appearances and extreme dress sense, shallow affectivity and overly seductive behaviour. Her promiscuity was notorious, and led to numerous affairs, bigamy and even incest with her father. She manipulated and lied to significant others, in order to secure constant acceptance and affection from those around her. Evidence from her diary and biographies is systematically reviewed below in the context of the HPD diagnostic criteria, as specified in the DSM-IV-TR.

#### 2.1.1. Criterion 1: is uncomfortable in situations in which he or she is not the centre of attention

Nin's need to be the centre of attention can be traced back to her early adulthood when, as a young wife, she began to hog the spotlight within the circle of her husband's banking acquaintances and, later, within her own social circle of artists and intellectuals. Her diaries contain numerous references to parties and literary dinners she hosted, her enjoyment of her guests' appreciation, and meticulously recorded details of the compliments she received. In accordance with the histrionic's need for applause and admiration, she would perform Spanish dancing, sing, or read her latest works, assiduously recording her audiences' comments and praise in her diary. As one acquaintance has commented, '[Nin] needed so much, like an actress, to be in the limelight...' (interview with H. Weigel, in Fitch, 1994). Those who did not offer flattery and admiration she condemned as rude or ignorant.

Nin's desperate need for attention is manifest not only in the efforts she made to ensure it, but also in her clashes with those who

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