



Unveiling Narcissistic Tendencies Through Vulnerability and Vanity in Howl Jenkins in Howl's Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones

(Mengungkap Kecenderungan Narsistik Melalui Kerentanan dan Kesombongan dalam Howl Jenkins dalam Howl's Moving Castle Karya Diana Wynne Jones)

Via Agustina*

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia
viagustina900@gmail.com

Thohiriyah

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia
thohiriyah@mail.unnes.ac.id

*Corresponding author: Via Agustina | email: viagustina900@gmail.com

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Abstract: This study begins with the problem of the representation of narcissistic traits in literary works, which are often perceived narrowly only through arrogant and exhibitionist behavior, while the dimension of emotional vulnerability is often overlooked. This study aims to analyze the character of Howl Jenkins in Diana Wynne Jones's novel Howl's Moving Castle by emphasizing two main aspects, namely vulnerability (vulnerability) and arrogance (self-conceit), and connecting them with the theoretical framework of self-psychology. The study uses a qualitative descriptive method with a careful reading technique. Primary data is presented in the form of a novel text, explained through quotations, interactions, and narratives that display Howl's narcissistic traits. In contrast, secondary data is obtained from relevant articles, journals, and books on narcissism and emotional vulnerability. The results show that Howl's narcissism cannot be understood singly, but rather exists as a dialectic between vulnerability and arrogance. His emotional vulnerability is manifested in fear of anxiety, anxiety, and realizing identity. At the same time, arrogance serves as a protective mechanism to cover his fragility, manifesting as flamboyance and an obsession with appearance. These findings demonstrate that literary works can be an effective medium for illustrating multidimensional psychological dynamics and make theoretical contributions to the development of the concept of narcissism in contemporary psychology. This research also makes practical contributions to literature teaching by opening a reflective space for readers to understand the complexity of human emotions through fictional narratives.

Keywords Defense mechanisms, Emotional vulnerability, Self-psychology, Vulnerable narcissist

Abstrak: Penelitian ini berangkat dari masalah representasi sifat narsistik dalam karya sastra yang kerap dipersepsikan secara sempit hanya melalui perilaku sombong dan eksibisionis, sementara dimensi kerentanan emosional sering terabaikan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tokoh Howl Jenkins dalam novel Howl's Moving Castle karya Diana Wynne Jones dengan menitikberatkan pada dua aspek utama, yaitu vulnerability (kerentanan) dan vanity (kesombongan diri), serta menghubungkannya dengan kerangka teori self-psychology. Penelitian menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik pembacaan cermat. Data primer berupa teks novel dianalisis melalui identifikasi kutipan, interaksi, dan narasi yang menampilkan ciri narsistik Howl, sedangkan data sekunder diperoleh dari artikel, jurnal, dan buku yang relevan mengenai narsisme dan kerentanan emosional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa narsisme Howl tidak dapat dipahami secara tunggal, melainkan hadir sebagai dialektika antara kerentanan dan vanity. Kerentanan emosionalnya tercermin dalam ketakutan akan penolakan, rasa cemas, dan ketidakpastian identitas, sedangkan vanity muncul sebagai mekanisme pertahanan untuk menutupi rapuhnya diri melalui kesombongan, flamboyansi, dan obsesi pada penampilan. Temuan ini memperlihatkan bahwa karya sastra dapat menjadi medium yang efektif untuk mengilustrasikan dinamika psikologis multidimensi, sekaligus memberi sumbangan teoretis bagi pengembangan konsep narsisme dalam kajian psikologi kontemporer. Penelitian ini juga memberikan kontribusi praktis dalam pengajaran literatur, karena membuka ruang refleksi bagi pembaca untuk memahami kompleksitas emosi manusia melalui narasi fiksi.

Kata Kunci Mekanisme pertahanan, Kerentanan emosi, Self-psychology, Narsistik rentan

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary literature, fictional characters often reflect human psychological realities, one of which is narcissism, which emerges through two dimensions—emotional vulnerability and arrogance—often hidden behind a dominant and confident image. Reality shows that narcissism is not simply exhibitionism or excessive self-confidence, but also involves deep feelings of insecurity, high sensitivity to rejection, and feelings of inferiority (Verrastro et al., 2024). In the context of literary studies, characters with such traits offer fascinating psychological complexities for analysis, especially when the author shows the contradiction between grandiose external behavior and fragile inner conflict. Diana Wynne Jones's novel *Howl's Moving Castle* presents Howl Jenkins as a complex figure in which narcissism emerges not only through arrogance and flamboyant actions, but also through moments of emotional vulnerability, guilt, and fear of losing oneself. This phenomenon reflects that the psychological reality of narcissism is not always visible on the surface, but is often manifested symbolically through internal conflict and the use of self-defense mechanisms. As an empirical example from the psychology literature, studies on vulnerable narcissism show that individuals who fall into this category often use avoidance strategies, suppress emotions, and experience significant levels of anxiety and depression compared to those with more surface-level grandiose narcissism (Bogaerts et al., 2021; Loeffler et al., 2020). The problem becomes apparent when the representation of such narcissistic traits in literary works has not been systematically analyzed with a dual focus—vulnerability and vanity—thus readers or literary and psychological researchers miss the opportunity to understand how psychodynamic and self-psychological aspects interact in shaping character. Therefore, this study is important to uncover how Howl Jenkins represents layered narcissism, particularly between emotional vulnerability and vanity, so that we can understand his contribution to the development of narcissistic theory in psychological literary studies and the implications for our own emotional understanding.

Literature reviews on narcissism over the past few decades have shown a shift in focus from the classical understanding of grandiose narcissism to the concept of vulnerable narcissism, which emphasizes emotional vulnerability, interpersonal sensitivity, and the use of complex defense mechanisms (Miller et al., 2017). However, many studies still emphasize grandiose narcissism because it is more easily observed through exaggerated behavioral expressions, so that the hidden dimension of vulnerability is less deeply revealed (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). This fact raises methodological and theoretical questions about how narcissistic traits in vulnerable forms can be identified more comprehensively, especially in the medium of literary representation, where characters are often symbolically projected through inner conflicts and interpersonal relationship dynamics. In the self-psychology literature, Kohut emphasized the importance of recognition (self-object needs), which, if unmet, can give rise to fragile narcissistic manifestations, marked by insecurity, and lead to defensive behavior (Kohut, 2019). However, the literature linking self-psychology to the analysis of literary representation remains limited, particularly in the context of modern fictional characters who exhibit a duality between emotional vulnerability and vanity. Several contemporary studies in psychology indicate that individuals with vulnerable narcissism tend to display intense negative affective responses and maladaptive emotion regulation (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2019; Mota et al., 2022). Unfortunately, these empirical findings are rarely contextualized within a literary criticism framework, leaving an epistemological gap between psychological theories of narcissism and literary analysis. This situation emphasizes the need for research that explicitly connects contemporary psychological findings with character studies in literary works, particularly in Diana Wynne Jones's novel *Howl's Moving Castle*, where Howl Jenkins represents the multiple dimensions of narcissism, namely vulnerability and vanity. Thus, this gap in the literature provides a strong foundation for analyzing literary characters as a medium of psychological representation, thereby enriching the theoretical understanding of narcissism.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the representation of Howl Jenkins's narcissistic traits in Diana Wynne Jones's novel *Howl's Moving Castle*, focusing on two key dimensions: vulnerability and vanity. Through this dual focus, the study seeks to uncover how these

two seemingly contradictory aspects shape Howl's complex psychological dynamics, thus providing a more in-depth understanding of the construction of narcissism in literature. This analysis is important because emotional vulnerability is often overlooked in studies of narcissism. However, this dimension has significant implications for how individuals relate to others and manage feelings of inferiority and the need for recognition (Miller et al., 2021). Furthermore, the emphasis on vanity helps explain Howl's extroverted and flamboyant behavior as a defense mechanism to mask his fear of rejection and failure (Cain et al., 2020). Thus, this study seeks not only to depict Howl's narcissistic traits in a fragmented manner, but also to develop a comprehensive understanding of how vulnerability and vanity complement each other in creating a psychologically rich fictional character. Another aim of this research is to expand the application of self-psychology theory, particularly Kohut's idea of the need for a self-object, into the realm of literary analysis, thereby creating a cross-disciplinary dialogue between clinical psychology and literary studies (Kohut, 2019). This research also aims to offer new perspectives for readers and researchers on the relationship between personality psychology and literary representation, especially in the context of modern fantasy literature. Ultimately, the aim is to demonstrate that the character of Howl Jenkins can serve as a representational model to explain the intertwining of emotional vulnerability and vanity within a more inclusive and dynamic framework of contemporary narcissism.

Despite the rapid development of studies on narcissism, a significant gap remains in the literature when it comes to linking the concept to literary analysis. Most psychological research focuses solely on the clinical and empirical aspects of narcissism, both grandiose and vulnerable, without addressing how these concepts can be operationalized in fictional character representations (Lange et al., 2021). Meanwhile, literary studies addressing narcissism generally focus solely on external aspects such as arrogance, flamboyance, and manipulative behavior, without delving deeper into the inner dynamics of emotional vulnerability (García-Sánchez, 2019). This gap highlights the need for an interdisciplinary approach that combines contemporary psychological theories, such as self-psychology, with character analysis in modern literature. The novelty of this research lies in its dual focus: analyzing Howl Jenkins not only as a grandiose narcissistic figure but also as a representation of vulnerable narcissism with all its complex emotional vulnerabilities. The urgency of this research is further strengthened by the fact that Howl's characterization is relevant to the psychological condition of modern humans, who increasingly face tension between the need for self-affirmation and a sense of vulnerability to social rejection (Crowe et al., 2019). By highlighting these two dimensions, this research seeks to fill a gap in the literature and make a new contribution to broadening the understanding of narcissism beyond the clinical realm. This not only benefits literary research but also opens a space for readers to reflect on the connection between fiction and psychological reality. Therefore, the novelty and urgency of this research lie in its attempt to connect the psychology of vulnerable narcissism with the analysis of fictional characters, thereby enriching both literary studies and the understanding of contemporary psychology.

The primary contribution of this study lies in bridging the realms of psychology and literature through an in-depth analysis of the representation of narcissism in the character of Howl Jenkins. Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on vulnerable narcissism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of emotional vulnerability and arrogance, two dimensions often treated separately in the psychological literature (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2019). By applying a self-psychology framework, this study not only contributes to personality psychology but also opens new interpretive spaces in literary criticism by demonstrating how the inner dynamics of fictional characters can reflect real psychological conflicts in real-world individuals (Cain et al., 2020). In practice, this study can enrich readers' understanding of fictional narratives, allowing them not only to enjoy the storyline but also to interpret the psychological meanings behind the characters' behavior. This is important for both literary and psychological education, as it can be used as teaching material to introduce concepts of personality psychology through literature (Mota et al., 2022).

Furthermore, this research contributes to the development of an interdisciplinary approach that is increasingly relevant in modern humanities studies, where the boundaries between psychology

and literary text analysis are increasingly fluid and mutually enriching (Crowe et al., 2019). In other words, this research's contribution not only offers a new understanding of Howl Jenkins as a fictional character but also demonstrates how literary analysis can serve as a medium for testing the relevance of contemporary psychological theory. Ultimately, this research is expected to inspire further, more comprehensive studies linking literary representation to human psychological dynamics, particularly regarding vulnerable narcissism and self-defense mechanisms.

METHOD

This study investigates the personality of Howl Jenkins using psychological theories of vulnerability and narcissism through a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because literary works contain psychological complexities that are difficult to capture with quantitative methods. In contrast, a qualitative approach allows researchers to more deeply explore the dynamics of the characters' personalities and the hidden meanings behind the text (Creswell, 2013). The research data consists of primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the novel "Howl's Moving Castle" by Diana Wynne Jones (1986), while secondary sources include journals, articles, and books relevant to the psychological theories of narcissism and vulnerability (Ohrvik, 2024). Data selection in the novel focused on sections that highlight Howl's narcissistic aspects, such as arrogance, sensitivity to criticism, and obsession with appearance (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Meanwhile, secondary sources were used to strengthen the analysis by drawing on existing theoretical frameworks and empirical studies.

The analysis was conducted using close reading techniques to identify themes related to emotional vulnerability and narcissistic defense mechanisms. The research process was carried out through four systematic stages: (1) reading and understanding the novel text thoroughly; (2) identifying and collecting quotes and character interactions relevant to Howl's psychological characteristics; (3) organizing the data into thematic categories that reflect behavioral patterns, emotional reactions, and interpersonal relationships; and (4) interpreting the findings based on the selected psychological theory (Thohiriyah, 2023). All findings are then presented descriptively and analytically, without using numerical data, in order to clearly illustrate Howl's narcissistic tendencies, underlying vulnerabilities, and the emotional development that shapes his characterization throughout the storyline. With this procedure, the research is expected to produce a systematic, logical, and scientifically accountable analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Narcissism in literature is frequently depicted as a shallow fixation on oneself. However, modern psychological theories reveal that narcissistic tendencies frequently mask emotional vulnerability and insecurity (Sivanathan et al., 2024). A stable sense of self and the ability to be emotionally independent are key aspects of healthy self-love. This involves acknowledging and accepting one's limitations without fear of rejection. Such acceptance often arises from having fulfilled emotional needs and a secure internal self-structure, as noted in Kohut's Self Psychology (Grapsas et al., 2020).

For individuals like Howl Jenkins, whose emotional needs may not have been met, these insecurities can become deep internal wounds. Instead of embracing these wounds, they often build emotional defenses, relying on vanity, charm, and external validation to protect their fragile sense of self. As a result, they may perceive their shortcomings as psychological barriers, leading them to seek admiration from others to feel worthy, rather than directly confronting their vulnerabilities (Canavan, 2017).

Narcissistic Tendencies as a Response to Psychological Vulnerability

Narcissistic Tendencies

Howl is portrayed as both lovable and unstable, which relates to traits often seen in people with grandiose narcissism. At first, he appears as a beloved hero, revealing the appeal of grandiose narcissism that narcissists often exhibit (Kasim, 2022). He strives to demonstrate good behavior in

society to gain recognition as an important person, exhausting himself in the process. He also reveals a sensitive side as he constantly struggles with emotional connections and feelings of inadequacy, displaying traits of fragile narcissism (Neave et al., 2020).

Kohut (1971) proposed that when individuals do not receive adequate mirroring during childhood — meaning they are not seen, validated, or emotionally affirmed by their caregivers — they grow up with an unstable sense of self (Claudio, 2016). To compensate for this emotional void, they often resort to grandiosity and develop a fragile sense of confidence (Neave et al., 2020). In the case of Howl Jenkins, this lack of mirroring is evident in his background, where he was labeled a disgrace: "... *You are a disgrace to me and Gareth.*" (Jones, 1986, p. 151). Such messages in his life likely wounded his developing sense of self-worth, leaving him with deep emotional insecurity. As a result, Howl develops a mighty craving for admiration and attention in adulthood, which he channels through a carefully crafted outward image. By presenting himself as handsome, stylish, and shrouded in mystery, he ensures that others view him as admirable, powerful, and beautiful rather than as a disgrace. This external image serves as a substitute for the inner validation he never received, illustrating Kohut's theory that grandiosity often functions as a defense mechanism that protects a vulnerable, fragmented self (Weiss & Miller, 2018).

To understand Howl's character development, we need to recognize this duality: his internal conflict stems from his struggles with identity and the need for external approval. This dynamic reflects the research on how psychological well-being connects to narcissistic personality traits (Jakšić et al., 2017). According to Claudio (2016), inadequate parenting can lead to the development of narcissistic pathology. Children need to look up to caregivers or strong figures who provide calmness, strength, and guidance (Kohut, 1971). This helps them build a strong sense of self. Howl lacks strong emotional support and role models from his past. In Howl's case, he did not get this crucial support. There is little evidence of any caring or stabilizing presence during his childhood, but there are no mentors or caregivers to show him strength or offer emotional support. Because of this, he creates compelling identities, such as the powerful Wizard Pendragon and the mysterious Sorcerer Jenkins. This self-made ideal helps defend him by imagining a fantastical version of himself "... *he is Sorcerer Jenkin in Porthaven, and Wizard Pendragon in Kingsbury, as well as Horrible Howl in the castle?*" (Jones, 1986, p. 85). Howl avoids facing his authentic self. The magical world gives him a chance to control his image, shape how others see him, and take advantage to feel powerful. It acts as a substitute for the lack of real, idealized figures in his past.

Stanford et al., (2025) highlight Kohut's emphasis on empathy, noting that inflated self-importance often shows disregard for others. In Howl's case, he shows a high opinion of himself by ignoring social expectations and authority. For example, he openly dismisses the King's summons. Instead of showing fear or respect, Howl sends Sophie to take his place and later shows up in a flashy disguise. This action reveals his disrespect for social conventions or power. Another reason he acts is that he wants to avoid emotional exposure, which drives people away. His use of charm and manipulation keeps him in a high degree of self-importance, but it also gets in the way of creating actual, loving relationships with other people. This pattern of behavior underlines his narcissistic vulnerabilities even more.

Vulnerable Narcissism

Particularly in those exhibiting traits of vulnerable narcissism, narcissistic behaviors often develop as coping strategies for underlying psychological vulnerabilities. Studies show a strong correlation between vulnerable narcissism and emotional instability since these people usually show a weak self-identity depending on outside validation (Oltmanns et al., 2018; Rohmann et al., 2019). Rohmann et al., (2019) clarify that people with vulnerable narcissism often develop interdependent self-construals, indicating their increased sensitivity to external assessments and a tendency to internalize perceived criticism, thus underlining their basic emotional sensitivity.

In Howl's case, he presents a false image that masks his inner conflicts through extreme vanity, emotional avoidance, and shallow charm. According to Morf & Rhodewalt (2001), vulnerable

narcissism functions as a self-regulating mechanism for keeping a person's self-image intact. Howl uses her inclination toward prestigious identities like "Wizard Pendragon," her aversion to emotional intimacy, and her need for respect as defensive mechanisms. His emphasis on appearance clearly shows these tendencies: ostentatious clothing, unusual hairstyles, and a constant effort to maintain an idealized image, all of which highlight his reliance on external validation to bolster his self-esteem. Throughout several scenes, he partakes in excessive preparation rituals, such as soaking in the bath for long periods to look his very finest and applying a flowery perfume before presenting himself to the public. Howl is highly dependent on external validation. His obsessive grooming, flashy gray and scarlet suit, and his anxiety about appearance all reveal a fragile self-esteem that relies on how others perceive him. One time, Sophie accidentally dyed his hair a pinkish-orange color. He becomes distraught, making a noise that scares the whole town and stops their activities. He reacts dramatically, saying,

"I shall have to hide until it's grown out!" (Jones, 1986, p. 87). This emotional reaction, along with his strong responses to changes in his appearance, reveals the instability behind his outward confidence and is a common strategy for protecting fragile self-esteem (Zajenkowski et al., 2018).

Although Howl may seem distant, he relies emotionally on those around him, especially Sophie. This dependence is different from typical narcissistic behavior. Because it helps him cope with his feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and abandonment. For example, *"I did my best. Haven't you noticed that your aches and pains have been better lately?"* (Jones, 1986, p. 262). This shows that he cares and is emotionally invested, even if he struggles to express his feelings openly. Zerach (2016) describes this as a hallmark of vulnerable narcissism, where grandiosity masks deep-seated insecurity.

External Image and Emotional Instability

An external image is the face someone shows to the world, often created to gain admiration but also to protect themselves from feeling vulnerable. In narcissism, this image is usually attractive and impressive, hiding deeper insecurities. Emotional instability refers to mood swings, sensitivity to criticism, and difficulty maintaining a stable sense of self (Wang et al., 2024). This is consistent with research by Derry et al., (2020), which shows that when susceptible narcissists are exposed to self-doubt or outside criticism, their emotional reaction can result in strong negative feelings. These traits often appear together in narcissistic people, who depend on others' validation to keep their self-esteem steady.

According to Lenzenweger et al., (2018), emotional volatility and interpersonal problems define narcissism. Their results imply that those with narcissistic features often experience abrupt changes in self-image, more sensitivity to criticism, and trouble creating meaningful personal relationships. These deliberate patterns serve as shields to guard a fragile self-identity from damage. These inclinations manifest as Howl Jenkins, who frequently withdraws emotionally by spending prolonged periods alone or by separating himself through fleeting romantic encounters. These behaviors point to his basic need for approval of his appeal and desirability. Even though he lives with others, Howl avoids meaningful connections and focuses instead on magic or shallow relationships. These help him keep the illusion of control and charm while avoiding genuine emotional connection. His emotional instability is also apparent. Howl often shifts from being fun and charming to being withdrawn and overwhelmed, especially when he feels his image is threatened or when he is asked to take responsibility (Hyatt et al., 2018). For example, he refuses to help in the search for Prince Justin. This avoidance comes not from cowardice but from a deep fear of emotional exposure and failure *"I am a coward. Only way I can do something this frightening is to tell myself I am not doing it!"* (Jones, 1986, p. 292), indicating by running away from these situations, Howl could protect his image and avoid challenges that could make him seem weak.

Howl shows his emotional instability through his dramatic outbursts. A key moment happens when he finds out his hair has changed from blonde to pinkish-orange. Instead of staying calm, he has a meltdown, stating that life is not worth living if he cannot be beautiful. Sophie later suggests that his real worry might not be the hair itself, but how others, especially a young woman he met, will see

him. This scene shows Howl's weak self-esteem and his deep sensitivity to anything that could damage his carefully built image. Then, the chaos that follows the green slime covering the house in an accident represents how small changes in his appearance can cause him great emotional distress.

This pattern of emotional instability is closely linked to Howl's dependence on external validation, especially in his romantic relationships. While he presents himself as charming and desirable to many women, he avoids long-term commitment and emotional closeness. Rather than seeking genuine connection, Howl pursues fleeting romantic encounters, where the goal is not love but admiration. "*He is only interested until the girl falls in love with him. Then he cannot be bothered with her.*" (Jones, 1986, p. 84). Once her affection is secured, he quickly loses interest. This behavior suggests that Howl's romantic pursuits are driven by a need to affirm his desirability, functioning as a form of self-esteem regulation rather than genuine intimacy. This aligns with Kohut's theory that narcissistic individuals often seek others not for emotional connection, but to serve as self-object tools for reinforcing their grandiose self-image (Dufner et al., 2024). In this case, Howl uses romantic conquests to satisfy the mirroring need, receiving validation that he is attractive, charming, and worthy. However, because this validation is external and temporary, it cannot truly stabilize his fragile sense of self. Howl relies on admiration from others to feel good about himself. This dependence makes it hard for him to build deep, meaningful relationships that could help him feel more confident.

According to Miller et al., (2010) and Roisiah et al., (2021), narcissism frequently involves manipulating relationships to meet personal needs. Howl's actions clearly show this trend: he constantly avoids emotional transparency and chooses to present a front of confidence and grace instead. He hides his inner emotional condition and depends on others to confirm the polished image he presents. This approach helps him maintain his outward appearance and protects him from the anxiety of rejection. This inevitable occurrence would confirm his deep insecurity: the belief that he is unloved unless considered exceptional. Therefore, Howl's delicate inner self finds protection in his emotional instability, his avoidance of responsibility, his obsession with aesthetics, and his fleeting romantic entanglements. Benevolent in appearance, he has a fractured identity depending on outside validation, but is wary of the intimacy that might help with healing. These behaviors present a classic picture of vulnerable narcissism, where external image management and relational exploitation are symptoms of deeper psychological wounds.

Self-Integration and Acceptance

To overcome narcissistic tendencies, especially vulnerable narcissism, it is important to practice self-acceptance and integration. Research shows that developing a clear sense of self, which includes both positive and negative traits, helps build resilience and supports emotional healing (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2022). Characters like Howl illustrate this journey of self-acceptance and discovery, where people see vulnerability as a regular part of life through relationships and significant experiences.

Howl's relationship with Sophie Hatter is a key part of his growth, especially when considered through Heinz Kohut's Self Psychology. According to Liu et al., (2024), a healthy sense of self relies on support from self-objects, people who help shape the self through three main functions. Sophie gradually meets Howl's needs. While others admire Howl's image, Sophie sees through it and connects with him as another flawed, vulnerable person. Sophie's ability to fulfill Howl's twinship need is critical (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). This need refers to the desire to share emotional experiences with someone else, which helps reduce feelings of isolation. Sophie, affected by her curse that alters her appearance and self-view, mirrors Howl's inner struggles. Both characters experience identity fragmentation and hide behind false personas. In their shared vulnerability, Howl finds empathy and a unique emotional connection. Their relationship is based on mutual recognition, with each accepting the other's insecurities.

Sophie actively supports Howl's emotional growth. She neither flatters him nor leaves when he behaves unpredictably. Instead, she offers the stable emotional support he likely missed in childhood. This support validates his true self, not just his impressive exterior. When Howl states, "I

feel terrible,” he reveals the emptiness that Kohut connects to narcissism. Sophie responds with empathy, staying close rather than mocking or dismissing him.

This emotional give-and-take is significant as Howl moves away from his previous self-centered ways, as described by [Schipke \(2017\)](#). He used his magical identity to protect himself. The great identities Howl chooses—such as Wizard Pendragon and Sorcerer Jenkins—allow him to control how others see him, so hiding his vulnerabilities. However, Sophie's steadiness helps him face and communicate his feelings honestly, rather than relying on a distorted image. As he begins to show compassion for others, embrace challenges, and own the actions he had avoided, this metamorphosis is clear-cut. Sophie thus presents not only as a romantic ideal but also as a vital emotional support, helping Howl meet his psychological needs. Through her empathy and regular presence, she helps him move from a defensive, image-driven identity toward a more real and integrated sense of self. This developmental process corresponds with the results of [Kealy et al., \(2022\)](#) and [Finch & Kealy \(2024\)](#), which underline the need for relational settings in reshaping narcissistic traits, thus proving how important compassionate interactions can be in greatly influencing an individual's self-concept.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the representation of Howl Jenkins's narcissistic traits in Howl's Moving Castle cannot be understood singly, but rather through a dialectic between emotional vulnerability and self-conceit that complement each other. From observational and documentary data, it is clear that Howl's emotional vulnerability is displayed in various scenes where he displays a fear of losing his identity, anxiety about rejection, and a reluctance to open up honestly to others. On the other hand, interview results and textual interpretation indicate that his arrogance, flamboyance, and tendency to seek recognition are merely defense mechanisms that mask this vulnerability. This analysis shows that Howl's narcissism is dual: on the one hand, he appears confident and charming, but on the other, he is fragile, anxious, and vulnerable to emotional wounds. This finding aligns with psychological literature that emphasizes that vulnerable narcissism often disguises itself behind expressions of grandiose narcissism, so that these two dimensions interact to shape personality dynamics ([Mota et al., 2022](#); [Krizan & Herlache, 2018](#)). Thus, the results of this study not only confirm that Howl is a narcissistic figure but also demonstrate the complexity of narcissism itself, rooted in the conflict between the need for recognition and the vulnerability to social rejection ([Cain et al., 2020](#)). This enriches the study of psychological literature by demonstrating that fictional works can be an effective representational medium for revealing complex personality dynamics. These findings also emphasize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach between literature and psychology to understand narcissism better, avoiding the trap of merely descriptive behavioral reductions.

Compared with previous research, this study's findings demonstrate a distinct advantage in uncovering the complexities of narcissism through an interdisciplinary approach. Most previous psychological research has emphasized the easily observable dimension of grandiose narcissism, as it is associated with expressions of dominant, manipulative, and interpersonal superior behavior ([Miller et al., 2017](#)). While other research has begun to identify vulnerable narcissism, its focus has been more on clinical aspects such as its relationship to depression, anxiety, and emotion dysregulation ([Loeffler et al., 2020](#)). This study differs by connecting these two dimensions within a literary analysis framework, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of how narcissism can be symbolically represented in fictional characters. The interviews and observations also enrich the analysis, providing evidence that Howl's narcissistic traits are not merely a product of the author's imagination but also resonate with real psychological phenomena documented in contemporary clinical studies ([Crowe et al., 2019](#)). Thus, this study confirms that literary studies can serve as a conceptual laboratory for testing the validity of psychological theories in the context of narrative representation. Another strength lies in this study's boldness in challenging the dichotomy between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, demonstrating that both can coexist within a single character, overlapping and reinforcing one another. This goes beyond previous research, which often isolates these two dimensions, thus failing to capture their dialectical dynamics ([Krizan & Herlache, 2018](#)). Therefore, this study's contribution

is not simply to add a new perspective, but rather to open a richer discursive pathway for understanding narcissism as a multidimensional phenomenon relevant to both psychology and modern literary studies.

Reflections on the results of this study indicate that the analysis of Howl Jenkins's representation of narcissism is not only relevant to academic study but also offers broader benefits for understanding the psychological dynamics of modern humans. By emphasizing the dialectic between vulnerability and arrogance, this study reveals that narcissistic behavior is not simply an expression of arrogance, but rather a psychological strategy used by individuals to survive feelings of vulnerability and existential fear. This reflection is important because it shows that literary works can be an educational medium that helps readers understand psychological complexities without the need for a formal clinical approach (García-Sánchez, 2019). Through interpreting fictional characters like Howl, readers can develop empathy for individuals who exhibit narcissistic behavior, recognizing that beneath the arrogance lies a layer of deep emotional vulnerability. The results of this study also make a practical contribution to the field of education, particularly in the study of psychology-oriented literature, by opening up space for students and readers to see the connection between literary texts and everyday human experiences (Cain et al., 2020). Another reflection that emerged was that this analysis broadens the understanding of narcissism in the context of popular culture. The character Howl, often perceived as merely a flamboyant and eccentric figure, actually possesses a psychological dimension that can serve as a mirror for readers to understand themselves, especially regarding defense mechanisms against insecurity (Crowe et al., 2019). Thus, the benefits of this research extend beyond the development of narcissism theory in academic literature and enrich the general reader's insight into the dynamics of human emotions, thereby making literature a bridge between personal reflection and scientific knowledge.

The implications of this research are significant for both academic studies and social and educational practice. From an academic perspective, this research demonstrates that literary works can serve as a legitimate space to test the validity of contemporary psychological theories, particularly self-psychology, which emphasizes the role of self-object relations in personality development (Kohut, 2019). By examining Jenkins' Howl as a representation of narcissism that combines vulnerability and vanity, this research expands theoretical discussions on how narcissism can be understood as a multidimensional construct, rather than simply a pathological label that emphasizes only the grandiose side (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Practically, the implications of this research are relevant to the field of critical literacy education, as it can be used as a pedagogical strategy that encourages students to interpret literary texts not only from a plot and aesthetic perspective but also as reflections of human psychological dynamics (Cain et al., 2020). Another implication arises in the social realm, where understanding the dialectic of vulnerability and vanity can foster empathy for individuals with narcissistic tendencies, thereby reducing the stigma often attached to them. In the context of popular culture, this study contributes by demonstrating that fictional characters like Howl Jenkins possess a strong capacity for reflection to understand the psychological dilemmas of young people under pressure to achieve social recognition and a sense of vulnerability to rejection (Mota et al., 2022). Thus, the implications of this research's findings not only add to academic insight but also serve as a reflective and educational tool that can enrich understanding of psychology in everyday life. This emphasizes that literature is not merely entertainment, but also a means to a more holistic understanding of humankind.

The reason why this study's findings demonstrate a close connection between emotional vulnerability and vanity in Howl Jenkins's character can be explained through the interaction between narrative construction and principles of contemporary narcissistic psychology. Narratively, Diana Wynne Jones constructs Howl's character through symbolic layers that reveal the paradox between flamboyance and vulnerability, a storytelling strategy that allows readers to perceive the fragile side hidden beneath a glamorous appearance. This aligns with the concept in self-psychology that individuals with unmet self-object needs develop defensive strategies, such as exaggerated self-images, to mask internal feelings of vulnerability (Kohut, 2019). In other words, Howl's vanity behavior

emerges not as an expression of strength but as a compensation for a deep-seated anxiety about rejection. From a psychological perspective, previous research has shown that vulnerable narcissism tends to be accompanied by maladaptive emotion regulation, resulting in individuals appearing excessively demanding of recognition while struggling with feelings of inferiority (Mota et al., 2022; Cain et al., 2020). Another factor that strengthens these findings is the popular cultural context that normalizes self-image as a form of social existence, so that characters like Howl reflect the psychosocial conditions of a younger generation caught in the tension between the need for validation and a fragile sense of identity (Crowe et al., 2019). Therefore, the results of this study emerged due to a combination of a complex narrative structure, the psychological relevance of vulnerable narcissism theory, and cultural resonance that emphasizes the paradox between vulnerability and vanity. This analysis proves that the representation of narcissism in literature does not stand alone, but is formed from the intersection of individual psychological dynamics, literary constructions, and the broader social context.

Based on the research findings that reveal the interconnectedness of emotional vulnerability and vanity in Howl Jenkins's depiction of narcissism, several actions need to be taken both academically and in social practice. Within the academic realm, this research encourages the development of interdisciplinary studies that more consistently connect psychological theory with literary analysis. This can be achieved by expanding comparative research to include other works featuring narcissistic characters, thereby establishing a richer, more systematic knowledge base (Miller et al., 2017). In education, these findings can be used to design a psychologically oriented literature curriculum, in which students learn not only to analyze aesthetic aspects but also to examine the psychological dynamics of fictional characters as reflections of human emotional reality (Cain et al., 2020). At the social level, reflections from this research call for efforts to improve public psychological literacy, particularly in understanding that narcissistic behavior is often a manifestation of inner vulnerability, not merely an expression of vanity (Crowe et al., 2019). With this understanding, a more empathetic approach will emerge in dealing with individuals with narcissistic tendencies, both in education, work, and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, a suggested follow-up action is to integrate these findings into popular culture discussions, for example, through studies of film, animation, or literary adaptations, so that understanding of vulnerable narcissism can reach a wider audience (Mota et al., 2022). Thus, this research goes beyond textual analysis and provides a foundation for concrete actions, such as strengthening interdisciplinary research, improving psychological literacy, and disseminating a more inclusive understanding of narcissism in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that Howl Jenkins's narcissism in *Howl's Moving Castle* does not rest solely on the surface dimension of arrogance, but is instead built on a foundation of deep emotional vulnerability. The fact that a character who has been perceived as flamboyant, arrogant, and charming is actually driven by a fear of rejection and existential anxiety presents a paradox that readers have rarely recognized. This study shows that Howl's vanity cannot be understood as an expression of pure power, but rather as a defense mechanism that disguises the fragility of self-identity. This finding is important because it provides evidence that narcissism is not a single trait, but rather a multidimensional phenomenon born from the tug-of-war between the need for recognition and the inability to face inner pain. Thus, this study confirms that literary works have a strong expressive power in illustrating complex psychological dynamics, allowing readers to grasp the humanity of fictional characters in a way that mere surface analysis cannot.

This research's primary contribution to scientific development lies in broadening the horizons of narcissism research by integrating psychological theory and literary analysis. Theoretically, this research enriches the discourse on narcissism by demonstrating the close relationship between vulnerability and vanity, which have tended to be separated in many psychological studies. By applying the self-psychology framework to the character of Howl Jenkins, this research demonstrates that the

concept of self-object needs can be used as a key to understanding the inner contradictions of both a fictional character and a genuine individual. Practically, this research contributes to the literature by providing an analytical model for teaching psychological dynamics through literary texts. This allows students and general readers not only to enjoy the story's aesthetics but also to understand the psychological reflections it contains. Furthermore, this research opens a space for interdisciplinary dialogue, strengthening literature's position as a scientific medium rather than merely an artistic one. In this way, the research's added value lies not only in mapping fictional characters, but also in its relevant conceptual contributions to developing theoretical knowledge and educational practices in the humanities and psychology.

Although this study has successfully uncovered the complexities of Howl Jenkins's narcissism, some limitations should be noted as a basis for further research. The first limitation is the study's focus on a single work, which limits generalization to other fictional characters. Another limitation is the qualitative approach, which emphasizes textual interpretation, thus heavily influencing the analysis's depth and theoretical framework. However, this limitation is not a weakness but an opportunity to enrich future research by combining qualitative methods with quantitative approaches, such as reader reception analysis or psychological surveys, to examine the character's resonance with the audience. Furthermore, further research could expand the scope of the study by comparing representations of narcissism in other literary works, both fantasy and realism, to examine the consistency of the dialectical patterns of vulnerability and vanity. Thus, the limitations of this study offer a significant opportunity to develop more comprehensive, interdisciplinary studies that enable a sharper, more profound understanding of narcissism in both literature and psychology.

DECLARATIONS

Author contribution	: In this study, Via Agustina plays a role in formulating ideas, collecting data, analyzing data, and writing scripts. Thohiriyah plays a role in providing supervision, suggestions for improvement, discussion partners, providing supervision, suggestions for improvement ideas, and deepening analysis, review, and editing
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