Horney's Mature Theory

Born in a suburb of Hamburg in 1885, Karen Horney (née Danielsen) attended medical school in Freiburg and completed her studies at the universities of Göttingen and Berlin. She married Oskar Horney in 1909, was in analysis with Karl Abraham in 1910–12, had three daughters between 1911 and 1916, received her M.D. in 1915, and became a founding member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute in 1920. She separated from Oskar in 1926 and accepted Franz Alexander’s invitation to become founding Associate Director of the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute in 1932. In 1934, she moved to New York, where she joined the faculties of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and the New School for Social Research. Because of her critique of orthodox theory, Horney was forced to resign from the New York Psychoanalytic in 1941, whereupon she founded the American Institute for Psychoanalysis, of which she was dean until her death in 1952.¹

Horney’s thought went through three stages. In essays she wrote between 1923 and 1935, she tried to revise Freud’s phallocentric view of feminine psychology while remaining within the framework of classical theory. These essays were largely ignored during her lifetime, but since their republication in Feminine Psychology in 1967, Horney has been widely recognized as the first great psychoanalytic feminist.

Exposed to new ideas and to patients with different problems after she moved to the United States, Horney began to question libido theory, the universality of stages of psycho-sexual development, and many other basic tenets of psychoanalysis. In The Neurotic Personality of Our Time (1937) and New Ways in Psychoanalysis (1939), she replaced biology with culture and disturbed human relationships when explaining the origins of neuroses, and she shifted to a predominantly structural paradigm in which she sought to account for behavior in terms of its current function.

In her last two books, Our Inner Conflicts (1945) and Neurosis
and Human Growth (1950), Horney described in a systematic way the interpersonal and intrapsychic strategies of defense that people develop in order to cope with the frustration of their psychological needs. While each stage of Horney’s thought is important, I believe that her mature theory represents her most significant contribution. It provides explanations of human behavior in terms of currently existing constellations of defenses and inner conflicts that we can find nowhere else. It is this aspect of her thought that I have found to be of most value for the study of literature and that I shall describe here.

According to Horney, we are not simply tension-reducing or conditioned creatures but have present in us an “evolutionary constructive” force that urges us “to realize” our “given potentialities” (1950, 15). We each have a biologically based inner nature, a “real self,” that it is our object in life to fulfill. Horney would have agreed with Abraham Maslow’s account of the basic psychological needs that must be met if we are to actualize our potentialities. These include physiological survival needs, needs for a safe and stable environment, needs for love and belonging, needs for esteem, and the need for a calling or vocation in which we can use our native capacities in an intrinsically satisfying way (Maslow 1970).

Horney sees healthy human development as a process of self-realization and unhealthy development as a process of self-alienation. If our basic needs are relatively well met, we shall develop “the clarity and depth of [our] own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests . . . . ; the special capacities or gifts [we] may have; the faculty to express [ourselves], and to relate [ourselves] to others with [our] spontaneous feelings. All this will in time enable [us] to find [our] set of values and [our] aims in life” (1950, 17). If our psychological needs are seriously frustrated, we shall develop in a quite different way. Self-alienation begins as a defense against “basic anxiety,” which is “a profound insecurity and vague apprehensiveness” (18) generated by feelings of isolation, helplessness, hostility, and fear. As a result of this anxiety, we “cannot simply like or dislike, trust or distrust, express [our] wishes or protest against those of another, but [we have] automatically to devise ways to cope with people and to manipulate them with minimum damage to [ourselves]” (Horney 1945, 219). We cope with others by developing the interpersonal strategies of defense that I shall examine next, and we seek to compensate for our feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy by an intrapsychic process of self-glorification. These strategies constitute our effort to fulfill our
now insatiable needs for safety, love and belonging, and esteem. They are also designed to reduce our anxiety and to provide an outlet for our hostility.

According to Horney, we try to overcome feelings of being unsafe, unloved, and unvalued in a potentially hostile world by moving toward, against, or away from other people. These moves give rise to the neurotic solutions of compliance, aggression, and detachment. Whereas healthy people move flexibly in all three directions, compulsive people are “driven to comply, to fight, to be aloof, regardless of whether the move is appropriate in the particular instance” (Horney 1945, 202). Each solution involves its own constellation of behavior patterns and personality traits, its own conception of justice, and its own set of beliefs about human nature, human values, and the human condition. Each involves also a deal or bargain with fate in which obedience to the dictates of that solution is supposed to be rewarded (see Paris 1991a).

In each defensive move, one of the feelings involved in basic anxiety is overemphasized: helplessness in the compliant solution, hostility in the aggressive solution, and isolation in the detached solution. Since all of these feelings are bound to arise under adverse conditions, we make all three defensive moves compulsively and are torn by inner conflicts, since the moves are incompatible with each other. To gain some sense of wholeness, we emphasize one of the moves and become predominantly compliant, aggressive, or detached. Which move we emphasize will depend on a combination of temperamental and environmental factors.

The other trends continue to exist but operate unconsciously and manifest themselves in disguised and devious ways. The conflict between the moves has not been resolved but has gone underground. If the submerged trends are for some reason brought closer to the surface, we experience severe inner turmoil and may become paralyzed, unable to move in any direction at all. When impelled by a powerful influence or the collapse of our predominant solution, we may embrace one of our repressed defensive strategies. Although often experienced as conversion or education, this is merely the substitution of one solution for another.

Horney calls the major solutions compliance, aggression, and detachment in *Our Inner Conflicts* and self-effacement, expansiveness, and resignation in *Neurosis and Human Growth*, where she combines the interpersonal and the intrapsychic. The two sets of terms clearly overlap
and can often be used interchangeably. In *Neurosis and Human Growth*, there are three distinct expansive solutions: the narcissistic, the perfectionistic, and the arrogant-vindictive. There are thus a total of five major solutions: compliance or self-effacement, narcissism, perfectionism, arrogant-vindictiveness, and detachment or resignation. The aggressive solution of *Our Inner Conflicts* corresponds closely to the arrogant-vindictive solution of *Neurosis and Human Growth*, and, as with the other pairs, I shall use whichever term seems most appropriate in a given context.

Self-effacing people often grew up under the shadow of someone—perhaps a preferred sibling, a beautiful mother, or an overbearing father—and sought love and protection through a self-subordinating devotion. They may have had a fighting spirit at one time, but the need for affection won out and they “became compliant, learned to like everybody and to lean with a helpless admiration” on those they “feared most” (Horney 1950, 222).

The strategies they adopted in childhood evolve into a constellation of character traits, behaviors, and beliefs in the adults. They try to overcome their anxiety by gaining affection and approval and by controlling others through their dependency on them. They need to feel part of something larger and more powerful than themselves, a need that often manifests itself as religious devotion, identification with a group or cause, or morbid dependency in a love relationship. Love appears “as the ticket to paradise, where all woe ends: no more feeling lost, guilty, and unworthy; no more responsibility for self; no more struggle with a harsh world” for which they feel “hopelessly unequipped” (Horney 1950, 240).

In order to gain the love, approval, and support they need, basically compliant people develop certain qualities, inhibitions, and ways of relating. They seek to attach other people by being good, loving, self-effacing, and weak. They become “‘unselfish,’ self-sacrificing,” “overconsiderate,” “overappreciative, overgrateful, generous” (Horney 1945, 51). Appeasing and conciliatory, they tend to blame themselves and feel guilty when they quarrel with another, experience disappointment, or are criticized. They are severely inhibited in their self-assertive and self-protective activities and have powerful taboos against “all that is presumptuous, selfish, and aggressive” (Horney 1950, 219). They glorify suffering and use it to manipulate others and justify themselves.

The compliant defense brings with it not only certain ways of feeling
and behaving, but also a special set of values and beliefs. The values “lie in the direction of goodness, sympathy, love, generosity, unselfishness, humility” (Horney 1945, 54). These can be admirable values, but compliant people embrace them because they are necessary to their defense system rather than as genuine ideals. They must believe in turning the other cheek, and they must see the world as displaying a providential order in which people like themselves are rewarded. Their bargain is that if they are generous, loving people who shun pride and do not seek their own gain or glory, they will be well treated by fate and other people. If their bargain is not honored, they may despair of divine justice, they may conclude that they are at fault, or they may have recourse to belief in a higher justice that transcends human understanding. They need to believe not only in the fairness of the world order but also in the goodness of human nature, and here, too, they are liable to disappointment.

In compliant people, says Horney, there are “a variety of aggressive tendencies strongly repressed” (1945, 55). They are repressed because experiencing them or acting them out would clash violently with their need to be good and would radically endanger their whole strategy for gaining love, protection, and approval. It would undermine their bargain with fate. Compliant people’s strategies increase their buried hostility since they invite abuse but also make them afraid of expressing anger or fighting back.

Because of their need for surrender and a safe outlet for their aggression, compliant people are often attracted to their opposite, masterful expansive people whose “egotism, ambition, callousness, unscrupulousness” and “wielding of power” they may consciously condemn but secretly admire (Horney 1945, 54). Merging with such people allows them “to participate vicariously in the mastery of life without having to own it” to themselves (Horney 1950, 244). This kind of relationship usually develops into a morbid dependency that exacerbates compliant people’s difficulties. When the love relationship fails them, they will be terribly disillusioned and may feel that they did not find the right person, that something is wrong with them, or that nothing is worth having.

There are numerous predominantly compliant or self-effacing characters in literature who have been analyzed in Horneyan terms. Starting with Shakespeare, these include Helena in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Viola in Twelfth Night, Hamlet, Desdemona, Duke Vincentio in Measure for Measure, Timon of Athens, Prospero (Paris 1991a), the poet in
Shakespeare’s sonnets (Lewis 1985; Paris 1991a), and Antony in Antony and Cleopatra (Paris 1991b). In later writers, there is Fanny Price in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park (Paris 1978b), Thackeray’s Dobbin and Amelia (Paris 1974), Esther Summerson in Dickens’s Bleak House (Eldredge 1986), Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (Paris 1974), Tess in Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles (Paris 1976a), Conrad’s Charley Marlow (Paris 1974, 1993b), the priest in Graham Greene’s The Power and the Glory (Straub 1986), Saul Bellow’s Moses Herzog (Paris 1976b), Alice Mellings in Doris Lessing’s The Good Terrorist (Eldredge 1989), and George Bailey in Frank Capra’s It’s a Wonderful Life (Gordon 1994). As is true for characters exemplifying each of the major solutions, most have inner conflicts and manifest other trends. There are many more characters displaying each solution than I shall cite here, since I am mentioning only prime examples who have already been discussed in print.

People in whom expansive tendencies predominate have goals, traits, and values that are the opposite of those of self-effacing people. What appeals to them most is not love, but mastery. They abhor helplessness, are ashamed of suffering, and need to achieve success, prestige, or recognition. There are three expansive types: the narcissistic, the perfectionistic, and the aggressive or arrogant-vindictive.

The arrogant-vindictive solution is in many ways the opposite of the self-effacing one. Arrogant-vindictive people usually have had a particularly harsh childhood in which they have encountered “sheer brutality, humiliations, derision, neglect, and flagrant hypocrisy.” Like the survivors of concentration camps, they go through “a hardening process in order to survive.” As children, they “may make some pathetic and unsuccessful attempts to win sympathy, interest, or affection but finally choke off all tender needs.” Since affection is unattainable, they scorn it or conclude that it does not exist. Thus they have no incentive to please and can give free rein to their bitter resentment. The desire for love is replaced by ambition and a drive toward “vindictive triumph.” They live for the “day of reckoning” when they will prove their superiority, put their enemies to shame, and show how they have been wronged. They dream of becoming the great hero, “the persecutor, the leader, the scientist attaining immortal fame” (Horney 1950, 202–3).

As adults, arrogant-vindictive people are ferociously competitive: they “cannot tolerate anybody who knows or achieves more... , wields more power, or in any way questions [their] superiority” (Horney 1950,
They have to drag their rivals down or defeat them. They retaliate when injured by hurting their enemies more than they have hurt them. They are ruthless and cynical in their relations with others, seeking to exploit and outsmart everyone. They trust no one and are out to get others before others get them. They avoid emotional involvement and dependency and use the relations of friendship and marriage to enhance their position. They want to be hard and tough and regard all manifestations of feeling as sloppy sentimentality.

Whereas self-effacing people tend to be masochistic, arrogant-vindicative people are often sadistic. They want to enslave others, to play on their emotions, to frustrate, disparage, and humiliate them. Horney does not explain this behavior in sexual terms but sees it partly as their way of retaliating for injuries and partly as a response to their sense of the emptiness and futility of their lives. They develop a pervasive envy of everyone who seems to possess something they lack, whether it be wealth and prestige, physical attractiveness, or love and devotion. The happiness of others "irritates" them. If they "cannot be happy," "why should [others] be so?" The arrogant-vindicative person must "trample on the joy of others" because if they "are as defeated and degraded as he, his own misery is tempered in that he no longer feels himself the only one afflicted" (Horney 1945, 201-2).

Aggressive people regard the world as "an arena where, in the Darwinian sense, only the fittest survive and the strong annihilate the weak." A "callous pursuit of self-interest is the paramount law" (Horney 1945, 64). There are no values inherent in the order of things except that might makes right. Considerateness, compassion, loyalty, unselfishness are all scorned as signs of weakness, "as restraints on the path to a sinister glory" (Horney 1950, 203). Those who value such qualities are fools just asking to be exploited. Aggressive people are sometimes drawn toward compliant types, however, because of their submissiveness and malleability—and also because of their own repressed self-effacing tendencies.

Just as self-effacing people must repress their aggressive impulses in order to make their solution work, so for arrogant-vindicative people any "attitude of compliance would be incompatible" with their "whole structure of living" and would "shake its foundations." They need to fight their softer feelings: "Nietzsche gives us a good illustration of these dynamics when he has his superman see any form of sympathy as a sort of fifth column, an enemy operating from within" (Horney 1945, 69-
They fear the emergence of compliant trends because this would make them vulnerable in an evil world, would cause them to feel like fools, and would threaten their bargain, which is essentially with themselves. They do not count on the world to give them anything but are convinced they can reach their ambitious goals if they remain true to their vision of life as a battle and do not allow themselves to be seduced by the traditional morality or their own compliant tendencies. If their predominant solution collapses, powerful self-effacing trends may emerge.


Predominantly narcissistic people also seek mastery, but their childhoods are quite different from those of arrogant-vindictive people, as are their strategies of defense. Whereas arrogant-vindictive people have usually been subject to abuse, narcissistic people were often "favored and admired" children who were "gifted beyond average" and "early and easily won distinctions" (Horney 1950, 194). The goal of aggressive people is to prove their superiority to their detractors through achievement; the goal of narcissistic people is to maintain the sense of being exceptional that they imbibed in childhood. "Healthy friction with the wishes and will of others" (18), which Horney regards as an essential condition of sound development, and the need to earn a sense of worth through achievement, are missing in their early experience. They develop an unrealistic sense of their powers and importance, and this creates anxiety of a different kind from that experienced by those toward whom the world has been begrudging. They are afraid of other people whose genuine accomplishments or refusal to indulge them call their inflated conception of themselves into question. Note that Horney does not posit a primary narcissism, as do many other theorists, but rather sees narcissism, like aggression, as a reaction to an unhealthy environment.

As adults, narcissists seek to master life "by self-admiration and the
exercise of charm” (Horney 1950, 212). They have an “unquestioned belief in [their] greatness and uniqueness” that gives them a “buoyancy and perennial youthfulness.” The narcissist “has (consciously) no doubts; he is the anointed, the man of destiny, the great giver, the benefactor of mankind.” He feels that there is “no one he cannot win” and is adept at charming people “with a scintillating display of feeling, with flattery, with favors and help—in anticipation of admiration or in return for devotion received.” His insecurity is manifested by the fact that he “may speak incessantly of his exploits or of his wonderful qualities and needs endless confirmation of his estimate of himself in the form of admiration and devotion” (194).

Like arrogant-vindictive people, narcissists use people and do “not seem to mind breaking promises, being unfaithful, incurring debts, defrauding” (Horney 1950, 195). But they are not “scheming exploiters”; rather, they feel that their needs are “so important that they entitle [them] to every privilege.” They expect unconditional love from others, no matter how much they “trespass on their rights.”

Because their imagination is captivated by “the glory of the dramatic,” narcissists resent “the humble tasks of daily living” as “humiliating.” They have fantasies of “quick and glamorous achievement,” avoid consistent effort and attention to detail, and quickly lose interest as a face-saving device if they encounter obstacles (Horney 1950, 313-15). When disillusioned they may give up their ambitions, telling themselves that they would have accomplished something great if they had decided really to try.

On the surface narcissistic people are “rather optimistic” and “turn outward toward life,” but “there are undercurrents of despondency and pessimism” (Horney 1950, 196). They see the world as a fostering parent, expect continual good luck, and demand the fulfillment of their wishes by fate and other people. Their bargain is that if they hold onto their dreams and their exaggerated claims for themselves, life is bound to give them what they want. Since life can never match their expectations, they feel, in their weaker moments, that it is full of tragic contradictions.

Predominantly narcissistic characters who have been discussed in Horneyan terms include King Lear (Paris 1991a) and Richard II (Paris 1991b) in Shakespeare, Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse (Paris 1978b), Mathilde de la Mole in The Red and the Black (Paris 1974), and Conrad’s Lord Jim (Paris 1974).
In *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Horney gives the least amount of attention to the perfectionistic solution, but she discusses it also in *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, where she argues that an adherence to “rigid and high moral standards” and a “drive toward rectitude and perfection” (1939, 207) are not products of an instinctually based superego but special needs of individuals who have had a certain kind of childhood. They were made to feel worthless or guilty if they did not live up to their parents’ demands, but by conforming to expectations they could put themselves beyond reproach and gain a feeling of superiority. Perfectionists do not revel in a sense of being wonderful, like narcissists, but derive a sadistic satisfaction from their rectitude because it shows others “how stupid, worthless, and contemptible they are.” They want to “strike others with righteous indignation from the height of their infallibility,” to “inflict the same injury” on others that their parents inflicted on them (218–21).

As adults, perfectionists feel superior because of their “high standards, moral and intellectual, and on this basis look down on others” (Horney 1950, 196). They easily feel guilty but regard this as a virtue because it proves their “high sensitivity toward moral requirements.” If the analyst points out that their self-recriminations are exaggerated, they may feel that the analyst is inferior and “cannot possibly understand” them (Horney 1939, 220). Unlike narcissists, perfectionists work hard and pay obsessive attention to details. What really matters is not the details themselves “but the flawless excellence of the whole conduct of life” (Horney 1950, 196). Only this will reduce their anxiety, make them feel superior to others, and give them a sense of controlling their own destiny.

Since they are pursuing the impossible, perfectionists must find ways to defend themselves against failure and its consequences. One defense is to equate “standards and actualities—knowing about moral values and being a good person” (Horney 1950, 196). While they deceive themselves in this way, they may insist that others live up to their standards and “despise them for failing to do so. [Their] own self-condemnation is thus externalized.” The imposition of their standards on others leads to admiration for a select few and a critical or condescending attitude toward most people.

The bargain of the perfectionist is based on a legalistic conception of the world order: “Because he is fair, just, dutiful, he is entitled to fair treatment by others and by life in general. This conviction of an infallible
justice operating in life gives him a feeling of mastery” (Horney 1950, 197). Success is not a matter of luck, of being the favorite of fortune, as it is for the narcissist, or of superior shrewdness, talent, and ruthlessness, as it is for the arrogant-vindicative person; rather, it is a proof of virtue. Ill fortune may mean that he is not really virtuous or that the world is unjust. Either conclusion shakes him “to the foundations of his psychic existence,” invalidating “his whole accounting system” and conjuring up “the ghastly prospect of helplessness.” If he recognizes “an error or failure of his own making,” self-effacing trends and self-hate may come to the fore.

Predominantly perfectionistic characters who have been analyzed in Horneyan terms include Brutus and Coriolanus (Paris 1991b), Othello, Cordelia, and Macbeth before the murder (Paris 1991a) in Shakespeare; Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe (Eldredge 1982); and three characters in Jane Austen—Elinor Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility, Knightly in Emma, and Anne Elliot in Persuasion (Paris 1978b).

People who are predominantly resigned or detached usually have had a childhood in which there were “cramping influences” against which they “could not rebel openly, either because they were too strong or too intangible.” Demands were made for love, understanding, conformity, or emotional support that threatened to “engulf” them. They felt that they had to submit to these demands in order to obtain love, but they also wanted to rebel against “the bonds put around” them. They handled this situation by withdrawal. Putting “an emotional distance between [themselves] and others,” they no longer wanted affection nor did they want to fight. This helped them preserve their individuality, but they had to put a check on their feelings and “retract all those wishes and needs which would require others for their fulfillment.” While retracting their wishes made them more independent, it also sapped their “vitality and main[ed their] sense of direction” (Horney 1950, 275–76).

Whereas self-effacing people crave love and expansive people seek mastery, detached people worship freedom and independence. They want to be left alone, to have nothing expected of them, to be subject to no restrictions. They have a “hypersensitivity to influence, pressure, coercion or ties of any kind” (Horney 1950, 266, emphasis in original). They may react with anxiety to physical pressure from clothing, closed spaces, long-term obligations, the inexorability of time, the laws of cause and effect, traditional values and rules of behavior, or, indeed, anything that interferes with their absolute freedom. They want to do what
they please when they please, but since they are alienated from their spontaneous desires, their freedom is rather empty. It is a freedom from what they feel as coercion rather than a freedom to fulfill themselves. Their desire for freedom may take the form of a craving for serenity, which means for them “simply the absence of all troubles, irritations, or upsets” (263).

Detached people disdain the pursuit of worldly success and have a profound aversion to effort. They have a strong need for superiority and usually look on their fellows with condescension, but they realize their ambition in imagination rather than through actual accomplishments. They make themselves invulnerable by being self-sufficient. This involves not only living in imagination but also restricting their desires. In order to avoid being dependent on the environment, they try to subdue their inner cravings and to be content with little. They cultivate a “don’t care” attitude and protect themselves against frustration by believing that “nothing matters.”

Detached people withdraw from both other people and themselves. They seek privacy, shroud themselves “in a veil of secrecy,” and, in their personal relations, draw around themselves “a kind of magic circle which no one may penetrate” (Horney 1945, 75–76). They withdraw from themselves by suppressing or denying their feelings. Their resignation from active living gives them an “onlooker” attitude that often enables them to be excellent observers both of others and of their own inner processes. Their insight divorced from feeling, they look at themselves “with a kind of objective interest, as one would look at a work of art” (74).

Their withdrawal from themselves is in part an effort to resolve their inner conflicts. In this solution, says Horney, the subordinated trends are not deeply repressed; they are visible to the trained observer and are rather easily brought to awareness. Because detached people are likely to entertain the attitudes of the subordinated solutions, their values are highly contradictory. They have a “permanent high evaluation” of what they regard “as freedom and independence” and cultivate individuality, self-reliance, and an indifference to fate. But they may at one time “express an extreme appreciation for human goodness, sympathy, generosity, self-effacing sacrifice, and at another time swing to a complete jungle philosophy of callous self-interest” (Horney 1945, 94).

In order to reduce their vulnerability, detached people believe, “consciously or unconsciously, that is it better not to wish or expect anything.
Sometimes this goes with a conscious pessimistic outlook on life, a sense of its being futile anyhow and of nothing being sufficiently desirable to make an effort for it” (Horney 1950, 263, emphasis in original). They do not usually rail against life, however, but accept their fate with ironic humor or stoical dignity. They try to escape suffering by being independent of external forces, by feeling that nothing matters, and by concerning themselves only with things within their power. Their bargain is that if they ask nothing of others, they will not be bothered; if they try for nothing, they will not fail; and if they expect little of life, they will not be disappointed.

Predominantly detached characters who have been analyzed in Horneyan terms include Horatio in _Hamlet_, Thersites in _Troilus and Cressida_, and Apemantus in _Timon of Athens_ (Paris 1991a); Mr. Bennet in Jane Austen’s _Pride and Prejudice_ (Paris 1978b); Dostoevsky’s underground man (Paris 1974); and Quentin Compson in Faulkner’s _Absalom, Absalom!_ and _The Sound and the Fury_ (Butery 1989). The detached solution is particularly prevalent in twentieth-century literature, and much work remains to be done with characters who manifest it.

Horney describes childhood experiences typical for those who have adopted each of the major solutions, but most children have a combination of these experiences and develop a combination of defenses. Conflicts between the solutions cause oscillations, inconsistencies, and self-hate. One of the most significant features of Horney’s theory is that it permits us to make sense of contradictory attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs by seeing them as part of structure of inner conflicts. Horneyan theory has a dynamic quality: solutions combine, conflict, become stronger or weaker, need to be defended, generate vicious circles, and are replaced by others when they collapse. This quality of the theory is difficult to convey in exposition, but it will become evident in our discussions of literature.

While interpersonal difficulties are creating the movements toward, against, and away from people, and the conflicts between these moves, concomitant intrapsychic problems are producing their own defensive strategies. To compensate for feelings of self-hate and inadequacy, individuals create, with the aid of their imagination, an “idealized image” of themselves that they endow with “unlimited powers” and “exalted faculties” (Horney 1950, 22). The idealized image, in turn, generates
neurotic claims, tyrannical “shoulds,” and neurotic pride, all of which ultimately increase self-hate.

The content of the idealized image is much influenced by our predominant solution and the attributes it exalts. The idealized image of self-effacing people “is a composite of ‘lovable’ qualities, such as unselfishness, goodness, generosity, humility, saintliness, nobility, sympathy” (Horney 1950, 222). Arrogant-vindictive people see themselves as masters of all situations who are smarter, tougher, more realistic than other people. Narcissists see themselves as prophets and benefactors of mankind who have unlimited energies and are capable of magnificent achievements, effortlessly attained. Perfectionists regard themselves as models of rectitude who achieve a flawless excellence in the whole conduct of life. The idealized image of detached or resigned people “is a composite of self-sufficiency, independence, self-contained serenity, freedom from desires” and “stoicism” (277). In each solution, the idealized image may be modeled in whole or in part on a religious or cultural ideal or an example from history or personal experience.

The creation of the idealized image leads to additional inner conflict. The conflict between the interpersonal strategies is imported into the idealized image, which reflects not only the predominant solution but also the subordinated ones. Since each solution glorifies a different set of traits, the idealized image has contradictory aspects, all of which demand to be actualized. A conflict also arises between pride and self-hate. Individuals can feel worthwhile only if they live up to their idealized image, deeming everything that falls short to be worthless. As a result, they develop a “despised image” of themselves that becomes the focus of self-contempt. A great many people shuttle, says Horney, “between a feeling of arrogant omnipotence and of being the scum of the earth” (1950, 188).

The idealized image evolves into an idealized self and the despised image into a despised self, as people become convinced they really are the grandiose or awful beings they have imagined themselves to be. Horney posits four selves competing with each other: the real self, the idealized self, the despised self, and the actual self. The real (or possible) self is based on a set of biological predispositions that require favorable conditions for their actualization. The idealized (or impossible) self is an imaginary creation that is unrealistically grandiose, and the despised self is unrealistically worthless and weak. The actual self is what a person really is—a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, health and neurosis.
The distance between the actual and real selves will vary, depending on the degree of self-alienation. It will be small in self-actualizing people.

With the formation of the idealized image, the individual embarks upon a “search for glory,” as “the energies driving toward self-realization are shifted to the aim of actualizing the idealized self” (Horney 1950, 24). What is considered to be glorious depends on the major solution. Horney does not see the search for glory, the quest of the absolute, the need to be godlike as essential ingredients of human nature but as reactions to the frustration of basic needs. It is when people feel themselves to be nothing that they must claim to be all.

For many people the search for glory is the most important thing in their lives. It gives them the sense of meaning and feeling of superiority they so desperately crave. They may experience depression or despair if they feel that their search for glory will never succeed. They fiercely resist all encroachments on their illusory grandeur and may prefer death to the shattering of their dreams. The search for glory is a “private religion” the rules of which are determined by the individual’s neurosis, but glory systems are also a prominent feature of every culture. They include organized religions, various forms of group identification, wars and military service, and competitions, honors, and hierarchical arrangements of all kinds.

The creation of the idealized image produces not only the search for glory but the whole structure of phenomena that Horney calls the pride system. We take an intense pride in the attributes of our idealized selves and on the basis of this pride make “neurotic claims” on others. At the same time, we feel that we should perform in a way that is commensurate with our grandiose conception of ourselves. If the world fails to honor our claims or we fail to live up to our shoulds, we become our despised selves and experience agonizing self-hate. As with our idealized image, the specific nature of our pride, shoulds, claims, and self-hate will be influenced by our predominant solution and by the conflicts between it and subordinate trends.

Our need to actualize our idealized image leads us to impose stringent demands and taboos upon ourselves, a phenomenon Horney calls “the tyranny of the should.” The function of the shoulds is “to make oneself over into one’s idealized self: the premise on which they operate is that nothing should be, or is, impossible for oneself” (Horney 1950, 68). The shoulds are characterized by their coerciveness, disregard for feasibility, imperviousness to psychic laws, and reliance on willpower for fulfillment.
and imagination for denial of failure. There is a good deal of externalization connected with the shoulds. We often feel our shoulds as the expectations of others, our self-hate as their rejection, and our self-criticism as their unfair judgment. We expect others to live up to our shoulds and displace onto them our rage at our own failure to do so. The shoulds are a defense against self-loathing, but, like other defenses, they aggravate the condition they are employed to cure. Not only do they increase self-alienation, but they also intensify self-hate, since the penalty for failure is a feeling of worthlessness and self-contempt. This is why the shoulds have such a tyrannical power. "It is the threat of a punitive self-hate" that "truly makes them a regime of terror" (85).

The shoulds are impossible to live up to because they are so unrealistic: we should love everyone; we should never make a mistake; we should always triumph; we should never need other people, and so forth. The shoulds always demand the repression of needs, feelings, and wishes that cannot be repressed. The shoulds are also impossible to live up to because they reflect our inner conflicts and are at war with each other. They are generated by the idealized image, but the idealized image is a composite of various solutions, each of which produces its own set of demands. As a result, we are often caught in a crossfire of conflicting shoulds. As we try to obey contradictory inner dictates, we are bound to hate ourselves whatever we do, and even if, paralyzed, we do nothing at all. The crossfire of conflicting shoulds is a powerful concept that explains much inertia and inconsistency.

Another product of the idealized image is "neurotic claims," which are our demands to be treated in accordance with our grandiose conception of ourselves. Claims also involve the expectation that we will get what we need in order to make our solution work. Generally speaking, neurotic claims are unrealistic, egocentric, and vindictive. They demand results without effort, are based on an assumption of specialness or superiority, deny the world of cause and effect, and are "pervaded by expectations of magic" (Horney 1950, 62).

Neurotic claims do not achieve their objective, which is confirmation of our idealized image and our predominant solution. If the world fails to honor our claims, as is often the case, it is saying that we are not who we think we are and that our strategy for dealing with life is ineffective. We may react with rage, despair, and self-hate, but we may also reaffirm our claims, which are extremely tenacious, since we depend on them for self-aggrandizement and a sense of control over our lives.
The claims are what we feel entitled to according to the conception of justice that is part of our predominant solution. Although specific expectations will vary from solution to solution, the essential conception of justice remains the same. In a just world, our claims will be honored; if they are not, life is absurd. Since our solution will collapse if the universe is not organized as it is supposed to be, we have a powerful vested interest in preserving our belief system in face of contrary evidence. If we become convinced that the world has belied our expectations, we may go to pieces or switch to another solution with a different conception of the universe.

An important part of the justice system in each solution is what Horney calls a “deal” and what I have called a bargain with fate, the specifics of which will vary with the solution, as I have shown. The bargain is that if we obey our shoulds, our claims will be honored, our solution will work, and our idealized conception of ourselves will be confirmed. I have made a detailed study of this phenomenon in Bargains with Fate: Psychological Crises and Conflicts in Shakespeare and His Plays (1991), where I argue that the leading characters of the major tragedies are thrown into a state of psychological crisis by precipitating events that challenge their bargains with fate.

It is important to recognize that the bargain with fate involves not only an expectation that our claims will be honored if we live up to our shoulds, but also a conviction that we will be punished if we violate them. The justice system of our solution can turn against us, as it does against Macbeth. In some cases, conflicting solutions generate conflicting bargains, ethical codes, and conceptions of justice.

Neurotic pride, says Horney, is “the climax and consolidation of the process initiated with the search for glory” (1950, 109). It substitutes for realistic self-confidence and self-esteem a pride in the attributes of the idealized self, in the successful assertion of claims, and in the “loftiness and severity” of the inner dictates. Since pride turns the compulsive behaviors of the various solutions into virtues, anything can be a source of pride. There is commonly a great pride in the mental processes of imagination, reason, and will, since “the infinite powers” we ascribe to ourselves “are, after all, powers of the mind.” The mind must work incessantly at “maintaining the private fictitious world through rationalizations, justifications, externalizations, reconciling irreconcilables—in short, through finding ways to make things appear different from what they are” (91–94).
Pride is a vitally important defense, but since it is based on illusion and self-deception, it increases our vulnerability. Threats to pride produce anxiety and hostility; its collapse results in self-contempt. We are especially subject to feelings of shame (when we violate our own pride) and humiliation (when our pride is violated by others). We react to shame with self-hate and to humiliation with a vindictive hostility ranging “from irritability, to anger, to a blind murderous rage” (Horney 1950, 99).

There are various devices for restoring pride. These include retaliation, which reestablishes the superiority of the humiliated person, and loss of interest in that which is threatening or damaging. They also include various forms of distortion, such as forgetting humiliating episodes, denying responsibility, blaming others, and embellishing. Sometimes “humor is used to take the sting out of an otherwise unbearable shame” (Horney 1950, 106). We also protect our pride by avoidances, such as not trying, restricting wishes and activities, and refusing to become involved in any serious pursuit or relationship.

Self-hate is usually the end product of the intrapsychic strategies of defense, each of which tends to magnify the individual’s feelings of inadequacy and failure. Self-hate is essentially the rage the idealized self feels toward the self we actually are for not being what it “should” be. Self-hate is in large part an unconscious process, since it is usually too painful to be confronted directly. The chief defense against awareness is externalization, which takes active and passive forms. Active externalization “is an attempt to direct self-hate outward, against life, fate, institutions or people.” In passive externalization “the hate remains directed against the self but is perceived or experienced as coming from the outside.” When self-hate is conscious, there is often a pride taken in it that serves to maintain self-glorification: “The very condemnation of imperfection confirms the godlike standards with which the person identifies himself” (Horney 1950, 114–15). Horney sees self-hate as “perhaps the greatest tragedy of the human mind. Man in reaching out for the Infinite and Absolute also starts destroying himself. When he makes a pact with the devil, who promises him glory, he has to go to hell—to the hell within himself” (154).

As we turn to look at literature from a Horneyan perspective, it is important to keep in mind that we shall find neither characters in books nor people in life who correspond exactly to Horney’s descriptions. Her
types are composites, drawn from her experience with people who share certain dominant trends but who differ from each other in many important ways. The Horneyan typology helps us to see how certain traits and behaviors are related to each other within a psychological system, but once we have identified a person’s predominant solution, we must not assume the presence of all the characteristics Horney ascribes to that solution. It is also important to remember, as Horney observes, that “although people tending toward the same main solution have characteristic similarities, they may differ widely with regard to [their] level of human qualities, gifts, or achievements” (1950, 191). The situation is further complicated by the fact that people experience inner conflicts and display behaviors, traits, and beliefs that belong to more than one solution. Quoting William James to the effect that “‘most cases are mixed cases’” and that “‘we should not treat our classifications with too much respect,’” Horney concludes: “It would be more nearly correct to speak of directions of development than of types” (1950, 191).

If we forget these qualifications, we are liable to put people into categories instead of grasping their individuality, and our analysis will be little more than a reductive labeling. Horney allows for infinite variations and combinations of defenses and recognizes other components of the personality as well. In a brief description, her theory seems highly schematic, but when properly employed it is quite flexible.