

# Navigating People-Pleasing in “Dissect”: A Creative Autoethnographic Lens

Raja Dewangga Al’Dzaki<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Sebelas Maret, Indonesia

\* [rajadewangaa29@gmail.com](mailto:rajadewangaa29@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

In our firm belief, although many recognize niceness as a trait that can offer mutual benefits, few have endorsed the aspect of self-suffering. Previous theories identified this phenomenon as 'people-pleasing behavior,' wherein individuals were compelled to sacrifice their own feelings to fulfill the needs of others. Motivated to delve deeper, this creative project aims to integrate the collective understanding of this issue into a novella titled “Dissect.” As the story unfolds, the central theme of the desire to break free from burdensome conformity to parental expectations is explored. This creative project aims to provide a deeper understanding of the inherent difficulties associated with the tendency to please others through an examination of living with such inclination and how it leads to acts of self-sacrifice as prompted within the narrative. To thoroughly examine the aspects relevant to people-pleasing behavior, this project employs an autoethnographic approach. Similar in previous research integrating personal experiences, this novella reflects the perspective of Lottie, the main character suffering from people-pleasing behavior, paralleling my own experiences as a people-pleaser. Through Lottie's journey of addressing people-pleasing behavior, this creative project reveals the detrimental effects of extreme people-pleasing, emphasizing that self-sacrifice is often a significant component demonstrating the extent of emotional and psychological investment individuals put into pleasing others.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Confronting the urge to reject others' demands is a far more daunting prospect than simply giving in to the easy comfort of compliance. This innate human tendency cultivates an unhealthy compulsion to prioritize others' needs over our own. When taken to an extreme, this people-pleasing behavior can result in self-destructive actions that profoundly impact an individual's well-being and personal growth. This common human experience is often reflected in many manifestations, including fictionalized narratives. As someone who has grappled with this issue and is an avid fan of thrillers, I am inclined to channel these feelings into a thriller novella, using an exaggerated depiction.

The central theme of 'people-pleasing' in my narrative work is heavily influenced by my experiences as a people-pleaser, shaped within a conservative household. In general, conservatives tend to uphold their moral convictions with high regard, occasionally leading to prejudice against differing moral viewpoints (Altemeyer, 1996; McCann, 2008; Stenner, 2005, as cited in Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). However, the main focus relies on their authoritarian demeanor, sometimes resulting in the limitation of personal freedoms to uphold these beliefs. Consistent with this notion, children raised by conservative parents frequently adopt a 'people-pleasing' behavior, as their autonomy is often restricted, compelling them to conform closely to parental expectations. Drawing from my life, I often find myself suppressing my desires to align with my parents' expectations, which they deem appropriate. While experiences may vary among those raised in conservative settings, a common thread persists: the sacrifice of personal identity in favor of pleasing others.

Discussing narrative works, exploring the motif of the people-pleaser within fictional narratives opens intriguing avenues for analysis. However, integrating this theme into specific genres such as thrillers poses a challenge due to their infrequent overlap. Despite this, Darren Aronofsky's film *Mother!* (2017) illustrates the harmful effects of people-pleasing behaviors. In the film, the character 'Mother' epitomizes people-pleasing behavior by consistently accommodating the demands and needs of others, including her husband and uninvited

guests who invade their home. She sacrifices her comfort and well-being to cater to them, even when it clearly endangers her. Although the issue itself is not explicitly stated, the film demonstrates how far a people-pleaser will go to suppress their own feelings, exhibiting a tendency toward self-sacrifice.

Based on the previous discussion, individuals who engage in people-pleasing behavior often struggle to assert their own needs. Researchers generally agree on this point, but the conceptual framework offers differing perspectives. Magee (2024) argued that people-pleasing behavior is driven by negative external factors, including family dynamics and societal expectations, such as trauma, authoritarian or permissive parenting styles, being raised by an addict, rigid gender norms, cultural pressures, and stigma and oppression. In contrast, Braiker (2001) contends that the behavior stems from internal factors, with various psychological components interconnecting in what she identifies as the 'disease to please triangle,' where thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reinforce each other in a tightly knit loop. Regardless of whether the causes are external pressures or internal compulsions, people-pleasers invariably feel compelled to sacrifice their own crucial needs for the sake of others. Moreover, this pervasive issue at hand also prompts a critical and deep inquiry when it is viewed by those who do not bear the burden: Why is it so challenging for them to voice their own personal needs clearly and assertively? How does this complex behavior intersect with significant issues of identity, self-worth, and personal growth? Thus, within the intricate context of my story, this thorough exploration raises a crucial and poignant question amidst these complexities: How does people-pleasing affect the act of self-sacrifice?

Inspired by my initial exploration of the topic, I delve further into it through a novella titled "Dissect." This meticulously crafted work provides a deeper understanding of the multifaceted challenges associated with people-pleasing by examining the intricate experience of living with this inclination and how it precipitates acts of self-sacrifice within the broader narrative. The story meticulously centers around Charlotte (Lottie), a protagonist who grapples with the profound despair stemming from not achieving her late father's lofty aspiration for her to follow in his footsteps as an artist, compounded by the relentless pressure of outstanding debts. This heavy burden temporarily eases when she encounters someone willing to subsidize her financial woes in exchange for producing paintings for him. Yet, Lottie's ingrained and deep-seated desire to please her father, a trait deeply embedded within her character, becomes a tool for manipulation by this benefactor, ultimately plunging her life into greater turmoil.

In this article, I argue that people-pleasing behavior is a profoundly detrimental habit that can lead to significant self-harm. Extreme people-pleasers often demonstrate their sincerity by engaging in acts of self-sacrifice to make others happy, often at great personal cost. To provide further insightful analysis, I employ an autoethnographic approach to vividly depict people-pleasing behavior within a narrative work. This methodological approach involves meticulously collecting data through personal and shared experiences, which are then thoughtfully reflected in the narrative, particularly through Lottie's tumultuous journey.

## 2. METHOD

I employ an autoethnographic approach to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and creative expression by exploring the issue through personal experiences. This method allows writers to examine topics through their own thoughts and emotions while incorporating the collective experiences of others facing the same issue (Rambo & Ellis, 2020). As a result, readers can perceive academic frameworks in a more holistic and personal manner, capturing a rich sense of relatability.

In this study, I apply the approach to explore the complex and detrimental aspects of people-pleasing behavior as portrayed through a character in my novella, "Dissect." This framework transforms collected data on people-pleasing into a cohesive narrative, illustrated through the journey of Lottie, the main character. By combining theoretical perspectives with self-reflection, this article demonstrates the practical implications of theories in a real-life context, offering insights into the experience of a people-pleaser.

While the autoethnographic approach primarily centers on the author's personal experience, this alone is insufficient to fully address the issue at hand. Therefore, I integrate my own experiences with those of others to create a unified narrative. Additionally, given the creative nature of this work, the collected data were analyzed through the character of Lottie, who serves as a representation of the essence of people-pleasing behavior.

When incorporating the data into the narrative, several considerations are necessary. First, I must identify the elements that most accurately reflect the characteristics of a people-pleaser to integrate them effectively into the plot. Additionally, the environment and contextual details must align with how people-pleasers navigate their interactions and relationships. Consequently, the collected data were transformed into a story that faithfully represents the reality of people-pleasing behavior.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. *The Creation of "Dissect"*

In the creation of my novella *Dissect*, gathering a diverse range of inspirations is crucial for incorporating uniqueness into this ambitious project. Beyond real-life experiences, creative inspirations are essential for adding both a narrative and aesthetic dimension that truly makes the story engaging and memorable. One notable source of inspiration is keen observation of how authors craft titles to convey deeper meanings, nuance, and themes within their stories. The meticulous choice of a title is pivotal in attracting initial interest and curiosity. If the title stands out distinctively, it instigates a moment of reflection and wonder, where one might ponder its deeper implications, enhancing its appeal and resonance.

Consider the film *Mother!* (2017) as an illustrative example, where the title acts as a multifaceted allegory. This allegory, among various rich interpretations, suggests that the title character symbolizes Mother Nature, who is depicted as being devastated by human actions throughout the film's harrowing narrative. This serves to provoke further contemplation on the recurring interactions between humanity and the natural world, fostering a deeper awareness and reflection.

This thought-provoking effect stemming from a carefully chosen title further motivates me to select "Dissect" as the evocative title for my narrative. Not only does this title reflect the horrifying acts of torture or ghastly experiments that inspire the creation of the painting in the plot, but it also serves as a profound metaphor for extracting oneself from deeply ingrained negative behaviors. This layered interpretation aligns seamlessly with the experiences of Lottie, the protagonist, whose habitual need to please others obstructs her true self-expression and fundamental needs. The term 'dissect,' implying a methodical peeling back of layers, metaphorically represents the unveiling of Lottie's suppressed emotions, delicately exposes layer by intricate layer, ultimately leading to her self-discovery and awareness.

Beyond the title, it is crucial to consider the unique theme that shapes the storyline. As I explored various works within the thriller genre, I became aware of the nuanced ways in which different stories tackle similar themes. For example, I appreciate thrillers themed around entrapment, but I find them more captivating when the narrative takes a unique direction. The series "The 8 Show" (2024) illustrates this point well; it revolves around characters who are ensnared in a 'show' where they earn money as time ticks. This narrative strategy stands in contrast to the psychological entrapment depicted in "Get Out" (2017) or the physical abduction featured in "Split" (2016).

Although it adopts differing stylistic choices, my story "Dissect" follows a plot similar to the aforementioned series and movies, focusing on the theme of 'entrapment.' In my narrative, this theme materializes in the journey of Lottie, the protagonist. Faced with financial difficulties, she agrees to take an offer from Lukas to alleviate her situation, which ultimately traps her in his house. This sense of entrapment is also highlighted by her tendency to be a 'people-pleaser,' a trait that confines her to comply with others' demands.

Another aspect that contributes to the story's uniqueness is the creation of something remarkable. Given that my novel centers on a thriller with torturous scenes, I sought inspiration from various films and novels. For example, the "Saw" franchise is renowned for its antagonist's diabolical traps, making the torture scenes a hallmark of its appeal. In "Dissect," I intend to capture a similar inventiveness in villainy. My main character employs a unique form of torture; she crafts a grim work of art through painting, using it to mirror the suffering of her victims and to convey her own emotions.

In transforming these ideas into a tangible form, I also expand my imagination through reading novels that contribute to shaping my writing style. For instance, Nick Cutter's "The Deep" (2015) serves as an excellent inspiration. The book delivers a chilling narrative, yet it is Cutter's carefully selected diction that unlocks the essence of its thriller genre. Each time the narrative ventures into eerie territories, Cutter's skill in weaving rich, immersive, and often grotesque details effortlessly transports readers into its foreboding world. This capacity to elicit a profound and visceral reaction deeply motivates my ambition to craft a narrative of similar influence. Consequently, Cutter's novel plays a significant role in molding the unique narrative style that emerges from my imagination.

Aside from choosing the right diction, I am inspired by the effective incorporation of sensory details in fiction. Such vivid descriptions actively engage the physical senses, thereby deepening the narrative's immersion and eliciting strong emotional responses. For instance, in "The Deep," Nick Cutter skilfully portrays scenes shrouded in darkness; his prose vividly captures sensations such as the light brush of nervous breaths against one's neck or the eerie 'whush-whush' sounds whispering from the shadows. In a similar vein, my quest to enrich my storytelling with sensory imagery draws inspiration from Chloe Gong's work "Our Violent Ends" (2021). Gong's adept use of language not only helps me advance my writing beyond the basics but also prevents it from being merely repetitive. Regarding sensory details, instead of a straightforward description like "She has teary eyes," Gong depicts it more vividly as "Her tears refused to fall, but they hovered in a thick sheen over her eyes" or "Her eyes prickling with tears."

To put it simply, the creation of "Dissect" that I undertook emerged from a rich tapestry of inspirations—ranging from personal passions and observations gleaned from my surroundings to deep self-reflection and a vivid

imagination. Thus, to develop my thoughts further and more cohesively, I organize my thoughts meticulously and sketch a detailed plan by jotting it all down in extensive notes. This crucial phase entailed drafting elaborate character profiles, meticulously plotting the narrative arc, and carefully pinpointing the inherent conflicts driving the story. Furthermore, I condense all these diverse thematic elements into a singular, cohesive concept, which ultimately centers on the struggle of being trapped and the profound desire to break free from the burdensome chains of conformity. This central theme comes to vivid life as I woven it intricately into a written story through detailed and evocative depictions of the protagonist's actions and emotions, meticulously revealing her inner turmoil as her poignant story unfolded.

### 3.2. Understanding People-Pleasing Behavior in “Dissect”

In order to develop the issue at hand into the novel, understanding the conceptual framework is a must. The tendency to be kind to others is fundamentally ingrained in people, and it is generally seen as a commendable trait. Yet, what occurs when such behavior is taken to an extreme? Scholars explore this dilemma through the concept known as people-pleasing. This behavioral pattern, founded on flawed beliefs, entails consistently prioritizing others' needs and feelings ahead of one's own, often to one's detriment (Cohen, 2017; Magee, 2024). Despite seeming like a habit one could easily abandon, it is proven to be challenging. For instance, Cohen (2017) likens this condition to sleepwalking, where an individual feels 'disconnected from their true self,' indicating a loss of control over one's actions and a divergence from one's conscious intentions.

The insights from Cohen and Magee further elucidate that individuals exhibiting people-pleasing behavior operate under the belief that being perceived as 'nice' is essential, as generally, niceness is a trait that garners love and admire. By prioritizing others' feelings, they believe, one can secure love, affection, and approval, while simultaneously avoiding confrontations. This pursuit of external validation is often deeply intertwined with various formative influences and external pressures. Magee (2024) identified six primary drivers of this behavior, highlighting their roots in external factors such as family dynamics and societal expectations. These include experiences of trauma, the influence of authoritarian or permissive parenting styles, being raised by an addict, adherence to rigid gender norms, cultural pressures, and the impact of stigma and oppression.

Complementary to Magee's analysis, which frames the external factors influencing people-pleasing, Harriet Braiker offers a different perspective by exploring the internal factors, the psychological cycle. In her book *The Disease to Please*, Braiker (2001) introduces the concept of the 'disease to please triangle,' comprising several interconnected psychological components: the compulsion to gain universal approval (thoughts), the avoidance of negative emotions (feelings), and the automatic drive to accommodate others compulsively (behaviors). She further added that those psychological components function cyclically, in which the elements—thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—interacting and reinforcing each other in a tightly knit loop. For instance, the belief in avoiding conflict (thought) leads to a fear of confrontation (feeling), prompting compulsive agreeableness (behavior). This pattern, over time, solidifies the initial belief, completing the cycle akin to a full moon's cycle, forming a habit that is hard to control.

Reflecting on the recent discussions, it is evident that the phenomenon of people-pleasing extends beyond simply trying to meet others' expectations. Its foundation does not lie in the mere wish to comply, but rather in a nuanced interplay of emotions. At its core, this behavior is propelled by deep-seated insecurity—a force that drives individuals into a labyrinth of desires, including a craving for acceptance, a fear of rejection, and a striving for harmony. This underlying insecurity, if not addressed, manifests as vulnerability—a state that can be severely exploited.

Given how easily people-pleasers can be manipulated, they may agree to do anything to receive desired responses, even if it requires self-sacrifice. As highlighted earlier, people-pleasers are driven by a desire to serve others. Their personality traits are centered on an excessive concern for others, leading them to put their entire effort into satisfying others in exchange for seeking love, affection, approval, and so forth. Based on this, it can be concluded that self-sacrifice is frequently involved. However, perceptions of self-sacrifice in this context may vary. On the one hand, it is perceived negatively because it involves ignoring one's own feelings and desires, resulting in a loss of self-autonomy. On the other hand, when driven by meaningful motives such as love and care, self-sacrifice can be regarded more positively.

This dual perspective on self-sacrifice is also relevant in the context of caregiving. Caregivers often put aside their own needs and desires to fulfill their caregiving roles. This need for caregiving fosters a sense of dependency, leading caregivers to feel emotionally connected and feel a sense of belonging. Through these interconnected feelings, caregivers define their identity through their relationships with others and by sometimes making sacrifices for them (Nistelrooy, 2014).

The narrative of “Dissect” portrays people-pleasing behavior through the character of Lottie. Throughout her life, Lottie consistently complies with her father's wish for her to become an artist, mirroring his career. Rather than exploring her own needs and desires, she opts to follow her father's expectations, believing this to be the appropriate way to express her love for him. Lottie's story demonstrates that adhering to another person's

expectations can be viewed as a means to earn their love and admiration, while failing to meet those expectations may lead to feelings of rejection or hatred.

Moreover, her aspiration for affection and admiration becomes evident when she meets Lukas, who offers to alleviate her financial difficulties in exchange for creating paintings for him. Despite being coerced into undertaking challenging tasks, the admiration Lukas provides outweighs the inconveniences she encounters. Consequently, she permits her autonomy to diminish, becoming increasingly dependent on external control. This situation deepens the exploration of people-pleasing behavior, revealing an underlying insecurity that seeks fulfillment. As the narrative progresses, she grapples with her genuine feelings, torn between adhering to her convictions and breaking free. This internal conflict is mirrored in the paintings she creates throughout the story, highlighting the profound struggle between external validation and personal integrity.

At the conclusion of the story, she ultimately chooses to demonstrate her love by sacrificing her life to please her father, a decision that leads to her tragic demise. While her death may imply a profound and unwavering dedication to fulfilling her father's wishes, it also symbolizes a bittersweet resolution to her internal struggle. On the one hand, her demise signifies an unyielding commitment to expressing her love for her father, illustrating the extreme lengths to which she is willing to go for his approval. On the other hand, it also represents an escape from the unbearable emotional pain and distress derived from her relentless compliance and self-sacrifice.

Thus, her journey as a people-pleaser aligns with Cohen, Meege, and Braiker's concepts, which collectively state that people-pleasing behavior develops due to the influence of external factors and the interplay of internal psychological components, both working together simultaneously. Furthermore, this suggests that examining people-pleasing behaviors reveals a deep contradiction. Although these behaviors originate from a wish to be accepted and avoid discord, they often mask deeper insecurities and result in significant repercussions for the individual. Moreover, the relentless pursuit of others' approval at the expense of one's own needs and principles progressively undermines a person's sense of self and autonomy. By identifying the insecurities at the heart of people-pleasing, the complex interaction between self-esteem and the pursuit of approval from others can better be grasped. This dynamic illustrates the powerful impact of both societal norms and personal experiences in shaping our actions. Ultimately, her death reveals that while true self-acceptance is challenging, understanding one's issues is crucial for a more authentic and fulfilling life.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

To thoroughly address the core issue within this creative project, I aim to provide a deeper understanding through an exaggerated depiction in a novella. This investigation explores the problem of people-pleasing, particularly in its connection to self-sacrifice. By delving into these intricate themes, I depict the life of Lottie, a character whose experiences poignantly reflect my own struggles with such behavior and its emotional ramifications.

The narrative illustrates how excessive niceness can become harmful if one fails to manage it properly. While humans, as social beings, are inherently taught to exhibit kindness, interpretations of this trait can vary and may lead to misunderstandings, such as the concept of being a "people-pleaser." The protagonist, Lottie, exemplifies people-pleasing behavior as she struggles to live up to her father's expectations. The story follows her quest to become a "successful" artist like her father. However, as the plot unfolds, it becomes evident that her actions are driven by a desire to satisfy her father's wishes rather than her own. Her situation deteriorates further upon encountering the antagonist, Lukas, who cunningly takes advantage of her vulnerability—the overwhelming need for validation and paralyzing fear of rejection. Ultimately, Lottie breaks free from the cycle of people-pleasing by recognizing and embracing her own desires, a theme that is foreshadowed through her artwork and her death.

Reflecting on Lottie's life reveals the complexity of people-pleasing behavior in an individual. Contrary to the common perception that it is an act of mutual kindness, people-pleasing primarily serves to satisfy others' needs, offering benefits only to the recipients and not the individuals who engage in it. Lottie's backstory with her father further demonstrates that people-pleasers do not emerge spontaneously. Instead, aligning with my findings, the root of this behavior lies in the pursuit of external validation, the influence of societal pressures, and deep-seated insecurities that compel individuals to disguise their true desires. Consequently, self-sacrifice is often employed to achieve perceived satisfaction, as seen in Lottie's diminishing sense of self and autonomy.

This behavior perpetuates a cyclical pattern, much like Braiker's concept of the disease-to-please triangle, and will persist unless one acknowledges their feelings and identifies the underlying problem. Although breaking a bad habit can be challenging, gaining insight into one's specific issues can be the key to living a more fulfilling and authentic life.

Additionally, after thoroughly examining the multifaceted issues associated with people-pleasing behavior, I recommend that future researchers adopt a broader perspective by considering different viewpoints and methodologies beyond those presented in this particular study. This should include investigating their connections beyond self-sacrifice. By adopting this broader, more comprehensive framework, the overall understanding of the concept can be significantly deepened, thereby enriching the perspectives of readers and contributing to more

effective interventions and support mechanisms. Specifically, integrating findings from psychology, sociology, and cultural studies could provide a more holistic view that benefits researchers, educators, and therapists alike.

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