

## Envy: The Artist's Undoing

When rivalry causes an artist to feel a parasitic sense of envy, the passion driving an artist's creativity transforms into a destructive form of jealousy rather than a healthy form of competition. In Miloš Forman's *Amadeus*, Antonio Salieri's recognition of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's unmatched talent becomes his curse, to the point where it unravels his faith, corrupts his love for music, and ultimately destroys the lives of both composers. This dramatized 18th-century rivalry exposes the power of envy: that the passion driving the creation of art can become a self-destructive force when poisoned with envy. As the central focus of the film revolves around Salieri's bitterness towards Mozart's talent, I decided to narrow in on the damaging and manipulative nature of envy—specifically, how excessive envy corrupts an artist's love for their craft, transforming admiration into hostility and frustration. This emotional manipulation not only leads to their self-destruction but also challenges the resilience of their devotion to art.

The psychological mechanism behind Salieri's downfall finds resonance in classical philosophy and modern research alike. Sources such as: Seneca's *To Novatus on Anger*; Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*; Ed Sanders' socio-psychological examination in *Envy and Jealousy in Classical Athens*; and Chungwon Kim's study "Envy among Students in Music School" will be used to analyze the film's portrayal of how envy corrupts creative passion.

### Summary

*Amadeus* is a biographical drama told through the confessions of Antonio Salieri, a prominent composer in the Austrian Empire, who recalls the timeline of his relationship with Mozart as well as his relationship with music and God. From the beginning of the film, he acknowledges that his envy ruined his and Mozart's life, and blatantly admits bitterness toward

the public recognition of Mozart's work and the lack thereof of his own compositions. In his life, Salieri was fortunate enough to become a composer, by what he believed to be God's grace, with his main motivations being to celebrate the glory of God through music and to be celebrated himself. Throughout the film, Salieri's relationship with God is based on the fulfillment of his wish, as he vowed to be a virtuous disciple in return. As Mozart's talent is showcased throughout the film, Salieri starts to question God's decision to distribute such genius to Mozart, rather than himself. As Mozart gains the favor of Emperor Joseph II and challenges Salieri's eminence as the court composer, Salieri starts to think hateful, violent thoughts toward Mozart and what he recognized as Mozart's ability to summon "the voice of God" through his music. Salieri obsesses over Mozart's success until he concocts a plan to kill him by slipping him drugs and indirectly commissioning a Requiem Mass from the composer in order to steal the composition after Mozart's death. Throughout this process, Salieri renounces his faith in God and ultimately admits to his mediocrity, admitting to having wasted 30 years of his life on their rivalry.

### **Application of Fromm and Seneca**

In my analysis of *Amadeus*, I chose to examine Fromm's conceptual framework on what it means to love from his book, *The Art of Loving*, and the effects of anger on rational thought according to Seneca's dialogue, *To Novatus on Anger*. According to Fromm, "the main condition for the achievement of love is overcoming one's narcissism" (Fromm 108). While Salieri has an immense love for music, it is corrupted by his selfish desire for recognition and validation from God. Since Salieri cannot overcome his own ego and appreciate Mozart's art for what it is throughout the film, his love for music becomes tainted and selfish, making it easier for envy to take root when his reputation is threatened. If Salieri simply cared about Mozart's ability to

compose with the voice of God, he would merely take inspiration from the genius, rather than becoming frustrated about why he was not given the same talent.

Salieri's relationship with God and music also connects back to Fromm's idea of transactional love that is based on "the idea of mutually favorable exchange" (Fromm 3). While Salieri's love with God is not the romantic love described by Fromm, it contains the same transactional quality. For Salieri, his love for God and music relies on God's gift of music in exchange for his chastity and virtue. As Salieri realizes that, unlike himself, Mozart was granted the talent without governing his behavior or devoting his life to God, he gets frustrated at what he calls God's unjust distribution of talent. If Salieri's love for music was not based on reward (social status, God's favor, pride), he would not struggle with his faith, nor would he let himself become governed by his bitterness.

Salieri's frustration and envy toward Mozart can be interpreted by Seneca's discussion of anger. According to Seneca, it is best to reject the temptation of anger before it takes shape (Seneca I.7.1). Once anger starts to lead one astray, it is difficult to listen to reason as anger will do "whatever it chooses," rather than whatever one lets it (Seneca, I.8.1). Salieri did not resist his early frustrations with Mozart and continued to question why God gave him such talent. His frustration is caused by his insecurities regarding his own mediocrity and social status, causing him to obsess over his anger toward Mozart, as he is the only one skilled enough in the film to appreciate Mozart's genius, yet not skilled enough to match it. The constant frustration builds up until it becomes an all-consuming anger that takes the shape of envy (expressing itself through Salieri's violent thoughts, acute jealousy, and dubious actions against Mozart). Salieri's fixation on his lack of talent leads him astray until he becomes a slave to his own anger. While he remains fascinated by Mozart's ability up until his death, he can only do what his anger toward

God dictates. Salieri lets his frustration fester until it clouds his judgment, ruining his relationship with God and destroying both his life and Mozart's—Salieri was sent to an insane asylum, and Mozart collapsed into death. This concept is further supported by Fromm, as “to use one's reason, is possible only if one has achieved an attitude of humility,” especially when love requires the absence of narcissism as well as the “development of humility, objectivity and reason” (Fromm 111). Essentially, since Salieri's love of music is coupled with his desire to be recognized for his work, he is able to be affected by the fact that Mozart's raw talent is stronger than his and unable to get over the fact. In this sense, Salieri's envy ruined his life.

There is one element of Fromm's work that aligns poorly with Salieri and Mozart's situation. According to *The Art of Loving*, there are four necessary conditions for the mastery of an art: discipline, concentration, patience, and supreme concern (Fromm 108-110). While Salieri practices all of these traits and achieves a level of mastery in composition, Mozart holds the natural ability to expertly compose with little effort given to practice the four aforementioned traits during his time in Vienna. While this can be attributed to Mozart's genius, the lack of practice is unacceptable for Salieri and causes him to lose patience and composure. Overall, Fromm's idea of practicing an art is only applicable to those who do not possess an immense amount of talent, although it applies to those who, no matter how diligent, do not possess the same genius quality.

### **Further Research**

To understand the role of envy in the destruction of an artist, one must examine the nature and causes of the emotion. In *Envy and Jealousy in Classical Athens*, Ed Sanders examines the socio-psychological dimensions of envy, jealousy, and other related emotions, drawing on modern theories to analyze their manifestations in human behavior and relationships.

According to Sanders, there are three components of envy: (1) that someone else has a possession or quality; (2) that one does not have it; (3) that this situation is not right (Sanders 15). In the case of *Amadeus*, Mozart contains the musical genius that Salieri lacks and Salieri believes the distribution of talent is unjust. Envy also involves two concerns that are also mirrored in Salieri's experience: the feeling of inferiority, and the undeserved superiority of someone else (Sanders 23). Envy is further used as a coping mechanism for painful situations, such as the feeling of unjust inferiority in the face of greater talent (Sanders 17). This initial feeling can cause one to act destructively against others who they deem to be the cause of their emotion (Sanders 17). When one uses envy as a defense, this causes them to feel shame or guilt for having felt envious, which causes one to make psychological adjustments, or what Elster describes to be the rationalization of feeling envious, causing the emotion to transmute into indignation or anger (Sanders 17). Salieri does the same by believing that Mozart achieved his talent through unjust means, at the expense of Salieri (he believes that God gave Mozart what was meant for himself), which causes his frustration and anger, leading to his spiral into demise. That said, there is a difference between admiration and malicious envy: one can hold entirely positive feelings towards someone with his desired attribute; or, one can attempt to deprive the person of the attribute that causes his envy (Sanders 18). It is harmless if an artist can appreciate the work or talent of another artist without feeling envious; however, if an artist feels malicious envy toward another artist, he can spend all of his energy trying to rid another artist of the trait that makes him envious, similar to the case of Salieri and his vengeful plan to murder Mozart. That said, when an artist focuses all of his energy on destroying another artist and seeking retribution rather than focusing his concentration on his work, he loses his rationality and his artistry starts to suffer.

Based on further research done on the topic, envy can either cause positive or destructive outcomes depending on the circumstances. The study, “Envy among Students in Music School” by Chungwon Kim investigates the “individual differences in susceptibility to envy as well as emotional and behavioral outcomes of envy among music students” (Kim 1). The study found that “emotional envy is more destructive than comparison envy in terms of students’ intrapsychic and interpersonal health” (Kim 129). More specifically, the emotional components of envy, such as bitterness, anger, and jealousy are known to cause “negative emotional and behavioral outcome” while comparison acts as a healthy motivator for students (Kim 129). In the case of Salieri, his relationship with Mozart changed from a healthy motivational comparison to a destructive, obsessive, and bitter attachment. That said, if an artist is able to bypass or neglect the destructive components of envy and focus on what they can gain from the emotion, they are less likely to suffer from the experience, whereas if an artist lets their jealousy fester, they will be led down a problematic road of destruction.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while envy can promote competition among artists, it should not reach the point where it infringes upon the artist’s love for their craft or diminishes their self-esteem. If an artist becomes a slave to envy, as in the case of Salieri, he risks his own undoing, focusing too much on what he lacks rather than what he possesses. This destructive fixation often stems from insecurity and self-doubt—a pattern common among those with fragile self-esteem, who find it tempting to compare themselves rather than cultivate their individuality. However, when an artist redirects that energy toward personal growth and mastery, like the students in Kim’s study who used comparison constructively, they strengthen their sense of self and leave less room for

malicious envy to take root. Ultimately, the artist's greatest challenge is not surpassing others, but maintaining their devotion to art itself.

## Works Cited

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