

# Heroic Self-Myth Hypothesis

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## Abstract

This article proposes the "Heroic Self-Myth Hypothesis," a transdisciplinary framework explaining a specific pathology of modern identity construction. Through a detailed analysis of Dostoevsky's Smerdyakov (The Brothers Karamazov) as a conceptual prototype for Joyce's characters in Ulysses, the article argues that a pervasive psychological mechanism involves transforming banality into pseudo-heroism to compensate for a profound internal vacuum. The hypothesis posits a sequence of neurocognitive and clinical processes: a dysregulated Default Mode Network fails to generate a coherent self-narrative, creating an existential void. This void is managed through performative substitution, where a hyper-vigilant Salience Network directs attention to external appearances as a substitute for internal substance. This process is catalyzed by developmental traumas, including paternal conflict rooted in envy and a traumatic maternal relationship leading to a fixation on physicality as a threat. The resulting moral disengagement and annihilation of a stable ethical core, often justified by a vulgarized "death of God" liberal philosophy, create a psychic vacuum. This vacuum is subsequently colonized by an "epic self-deception," a grandiose cognitive narrative that reframes a mundane life as a mythic journey. Synthesizing literary analysis, neurobiology, and clinical psychology, the article concludes that Smerdyakov represents not merely a literary character but an archetype of moral disintegration. The modernist hero is thus revealed not as an artistic innovation but as the aesthetic realization of a pre-existing psychological type—the individual who, having lost their moral center, elevates their own insignificance to cosmic significance through a self-authored, illusory heroism.

**Keywords:** Heroic Self-Myth, Smerdyakov, Modernist Hero, Default Mode Network, Moral Disintegration, Epic Self-Deception, Neurophenomenology, Identity Pathology.

# Introduction

The construction of self-identity is a fundamental, ongoing neurocognitive process, deeply intertwined with memory, social interaction, and the brain's intrinsic capacity for narrative (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012). This process, which involves the continuous weaving of autobiographical episodes into a coherent life story, is a cornerstone of psychological well-being and a sense of purpose (Stowitzki et al., 2023). However, in specific socio-cultural and psychological conditions, this normative self-narrativization can become pathological, devolving into what this paper terms the "Heroic Self-Myth." This hypothesis proposes a specific psychological syndrome wherein an individual, confronted with a profound sense of internal emptiness, a lack of authentic talent, and an attenuated moral framework, compensates by constructing an elaborate, self-aggrandizing narrative. In this narrative, the banal and the mundane are systematically reinterpreted and elevated into the stuff of personal epic, a grand journey or struggle that serves to mask an underlying psychic void (Vogel, 2022).

The literary imagination has long served as a prescient mirror to emerging psychological realities. The archetype for the Heroic Self-Myth finds one of its most potent and precise precursors not in a hero, but in an anti-hero: Smerdyakov, a pivotal character from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Smerdyakov embodies a human type defined by a dual absence: a lack of pronounced talent and a lack of authentic spiritual depth (Allison & Miller, 2019). His existence is built upon an internal void, which he attempts to fill with external performances—meticulous attention to dress, affected manners, and petty inventions—and a private mythology in which his insignificant role and actions are imbued with grand, albeit perverse, significance. This psychological profile, while starkly drawn in the 19th century, finds its full cultural expression in the modernist epoch of the early 20th century, particularly in the fragmented consciousness of characters populating James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). The central argument of this article is that Smerdyakov represents a proto-clinical blueprint for a modern psychological condition that has since become widespread, a condition characterized by the substitution of authentic self-development with the compulsive fabrication of a heroic persona.

The neurobiological underpinnings of this phenomenon can be partially traced to the brain's default mode network (DMN). The DMN is a highly interconnected set of brain regions, including the medial prefrontal cortex and the posterior cingulate cortex, that is most active during rest and self-referential thought (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012). It is critically involved in autobiographical planning, social cognition, and the construction of the narrative self. Dysregulation of the DMN, including hyperconnectivity, has been linked to maladaptive self-focused attention, rumination, and a disrupted sense of self, conditions that create fertile ground for the kind of pathological narrativization seen in the Heroic Self-Myth (Vogel, 2022). When the brain's natural storytelling apparatus becomes unmoored from stable internal and external referents, it can generate fantastical and grandiose self-narratives as a compensatory mechanism.

This model is further illuminated by clinical psychology. The pervasive sense of inner emptiness described in the Smerdyakov Model is a core feature of certain personality structures and is

phenomenologically linked to anomalous self-experiences (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). This void is not a mere lack of content but an active, distressing perception of non-existence or profound insignificance. To manage this distress, individuals often engage in "performative substitution," a concept aligned with research on perfectionistic self-presentation, where immense effort is directed towards crafting a flawless external image to conceal internal feelings of inadequacy (Nepon et al., 2021). Smerdyakov's fastidiousness is not pride but a pathological submissive strategy, an attempt to control his social standing and self-perception through meticulously managed externals because his internal coordinates are absent or degraded.

The construction of a coherent self-narrative is also a function of memory and executive control. Autobiographical memory is not a perfect recorder but a reconstructive process, inherently narrative in nature. Difficulties in achieving narrative coherence are well-documented in individuals with a history of complex trauma or attachment disruptions, which can lead to a fragmented sense of identity (Stowitzki et al., 2023). Smerdyakov's origins—born of violence and societal shame—represent a profound developmental insult, providing a plausible etiology for his fragmented psyche. In such cases, the cognitive effort required to maintain a stable self-narrative is immense, leading to a reliance on simplistic, rigid, or fantastical personal myths to bind together disparate and painful self-experiences.

Critically, the Heroic Self-Myth Hypothesis posits that this psychological mechanism is catalyzed and sanctioned by a specific philosophical and ethical climate. The famous dictum emerging from Dostoevsky's world, "If God is dead, everything is permitted," provides more than a metaphysical claim; it offers a psychological license. In a universe perceived as devoid of transcendent meaning or ultimate moral accountability, the individual is thrust into the position of being the sole author of their own value and narrative (Green et al., 2022). For the individual of talent and spiritual resource, this can be a call to authentic responsibility. For the Smerdyakovian individual, defined by internal vacuum and ressentiment, it becomes an excuse for moral dissolution and the fabrication of a personal legend without the burden of objective truth or ethical consequence. This philosophical shift interacts with neurocognitive predispositions, creating a feedback loop where the absence of external moral anchors exacerbates DMN-driven rumination and grandiose narrative construction.

Therefore, this article will develop the Heroic Self-Myth Hypothesis through a multi-disciplinary synthesis, drawing on neurocognitive science, clinical psychology, and literary analysis. We will first elaborate the "Smerdyakov Model" as the foundational archetype, detailing the neuropsychology of the internal vacuum and the mechanism of performative substitution. Subsequent sections will explore the critical role of paternal conflict and maternal trauma in shaping this fragile self-structure, the neurobiology of embodied cognition and disgust as it relates to feelings of intrinsic "uncleanness," and the final, culminating process of "epic self-deception"—the cognitive restructuring of a mundane life into a personal odyssey. By examining Smerdyakov not merely as a literary character but as a proto-clinical case study, this hypothesis aims to provide a robust framework for understanding a pervasive pattern of modern identity formation, where the energy once directed toward building character is now funneled into the curation of a personal mythos, a heroic narrative desperately designed to convince the self of a significance that it can never truly feel.

## The Smerdyakov Model

A foundational premise of the Heroic Self-Myth Hypothesis is that certain manifestations of modern identity are constructed not upon a bedrock of authentic talent or internal substance, but in reaction to a perceived psychic void. This model finds its archetypal literary precursor in Fyodor Dostoevsky's character of Smerdyakov from *The Brothers Karamazov*. Smerdyakov embodies a human type defined by a dual absence: a lack of pronounced talent and a lack of authentic spiritual depth. His existence is not driven by internal passions or convictions but is built upon an internal void, which he attempts to fill through a curated series of external performances. These performances—his meticulous attention to dress, his affected, almost fastidious manners, and his propensity for petty inventions and lies—are not merely character quirks but are essential mechanisms for generating a simulacrum of self (Vogel, 2022).

This psychological profile, while starkly drawn by Dostoevsky, is not a mere literary anomaly. It is strikingly analogous to the psychic landscape of the majority of characters in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Both Smerdyakov and the denizens of Joyce's Dublin share a foundational condition of internal vacuum, where fragmented thinking and the overwhelming banality of everyday life become the primary materials from which a fragile self-consciousness is assembled. The thesis advanced here is that this "Smerdyakov Model" represents a core paradigm of the modern(ist) condition, one where identity formation begins not with self-actualization but with the management of a fundamental emptiness. From a neurocognitive perspective, this void may be linked to disruptions in the default mode network (DMN), a brain system highly active during self-referential thought and autobiographical planning. Hyperconnectivity or dysregulation within the DMN has been associated with maladaptive self-focused attention and a propensity for rumination, which can manifest as a preoccupation with one's own perceived lack of substance or coherence (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012).

The compulsion to engage in "performative substitution"—replacing core identity with external signifiers—can be understood through the lens of interpersonal and cognitive-behavioral models. Specifically, the concept of the "behavioural system" for managing social rank and attachment is relevant. Individuals who perceive themselves as inferior or insignificant may develop a "submissive strategy," which can paradoxically include heightened vigilance to social cues and excessive efforts to manage the impression they make on others, a pattern clearly observable in Smerdyakov's servile yet calculating demeanor (Allison & Miller, 2019). His fastidiousness with his appearance is not a sign of self-respect but a desperate attempt to control an external variable in a world where his internal coordinates are missing. This aligns with research on perfectionistic self-presentation, which is often a maladaptive coping strategy to conceal perceived inadequacies and gain social approval (Nepon et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the "internal vacuum" described in the Smerdyakov Model shares phenomenological similarities with certain aspects of depersonalization disorder and anomalous self-experiences common in prodromal and early-stage psychotic states. While not suggesting Smerdyakov is clinically psychotic, the literature on self-disorders notes that a persistent sense of inner emptiness, of not being truly oneself or of lacking a core identity, is a significant marker of vulnerability (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). This fragmentation of self-experience is mirrored in the

narrative structure of Ulysses, where the continuous stream of consciousness reflects a mind struggling to cohere its own fragments into a stable whole. The cognitive effort required to maintain a coherent self-narrative under such conditions is immense and may contribute to the reliance on simplistic, externally-derived scripts for identity (Vogel, 2022).

The neurological underpinnings of this fragmented selfhood may also be traced to the brain's executive control networks. The ability to construct and maintain a coherent, goal-directed narrative of the self is a higher-order cognitive function reliant on prefrontal cortex integrity. Difficulties in narrative coherence have been observed in individuals with a history of complex trauma, which often creates a fragmented autobiographical memory, forcing the individual to construct a personal identity from disjointed episodes and impressions (Stowitzki et al., 2023). Smerdyakov's own origins—born of a "fool" and shrouded in shame—represent a profound developmental trauma, providing a plausible etiology for his fragmented psyche and his subsequent reliance on performative substitution to create a usable, if entirely fictional, self.

In conclusion, the Smerdyakov Model posits that a specific modern identity is constructed as a defensive reaction to an internal vacuum. This process is characterized by a shift from being to performing, where external signifiers of identity (clothing, mannerisms, fabricated stories) are leveraged to compensate for a missing internal core. Supported by neurocognitive research on self-referential brain networks, clinical insights into perfectionistic presentation and fragmented self-experience, and psychological models of social rank, this model provides a robust framework for understanding the genesis of the heroic self-myth. It is from this foundation of emptiness and performative compensation that the more elaborate architecture of self-mythologization—the desperate elevation of a banal life into a personal epic—can begin to be erected.

## **The Paternal Conflict as a Foundation for Self-Justification and Psychic Chaos**

Within the architecture of the Heroic Self-Myth, the relationship with the paternal figure serves not as a foundation for identity formation but as its primary obstacle and most potent justification for failure. This dynamic, masterfully illustrated in the character of Smerdyakov from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, moves beyond classical Oedipal rivalry into a more pathological territory of envious resentment and sustained self-victimization. Smerdyakov's profound resentment towards his father, Fyodor Pavlovich, is critically not a moral condemnation of the father's buffoonery and vice. Instead, it is a manifestation of seething envy towards the father's crude, unreflective vitality and life force—a quality he himself palpably lacks (Allison & Miller, 2019). This unresolved conflict becomes the cornerstone of his psychological world, a perpetual source of grievance that he uses to rationalize his own impotence and malevolence. This precise dynamic is systematically replicated in the psychic landscapes of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where Stephen Dedalus's struggle with literal and symbolic "ghostly fathers" serves to justify his own creative paralysis and social disconnection. In both literary universes, and in the psychological syndrome they prefigure, dissatisfaction with the father does not catalyze growth or resolution. Rather, it becomes a fixed point for rationalizing moral and social decay, where the

father is perpetually perceived as the insurmountable barrier to a fantasized state of self-purification and success (Green et al., 2022).

From a neurobiological perspective, the paternal relationship is a critical component in the development of the brain's social and stress-regulation systems. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, the body's central stress response system, is highly susceptible to early-life experiences, including the quality of parental care (Tottenham, 2020). A conflict-ridden, rejecting, or unpredictable relationship with a father figure can contribute to HPA axis dysregulation, leading to either hyperarousal or blunted responses to stress. This biological substrate can manifest psychologically as a persistent state of irritability, a perception of the world as threatening, and a heightened sensitivity to social slights—a profile that perfectly captures Smerdyakov's brittle and resentful demeanor. His envy of Fyodor Pavlovich's vitality may be interpreted, on a neurophysiological level, as a yearning for the unselfconscious emotional resilience and stress tolerance that his own dysregulated system cannot achieve.

This dynamic is further illuminated through the lens of attachment theory. While traditionally focused on the maternal relationship, extensive research now underscores the unique role of the father in fostering exploration, risk-taking, and the development of autonomous self-regulation (Kerns & Brumariu, 2016). An insecure or disorganized attachment to a paternal figure, particularly one who is himself chaotic, rejecting, or unreliable, can severely impair an individual's capacity for agency and goal-directed behavior. Stephen Dedalus's aimlessness in *Ulysses* is not merely an intellectual pose; it reflects a deep-seated impairment in his ability to navigate the world with purpose and competence, a likely consequence of a fractured paternal bond. The father, in this dysfunctional schema, is not internalized as a source of strength or a model for identification but is instead projected upon as an externalized superego figure—not one that prohibits, but one that prevents (Kim et al., 2020). He is the obstacle that blocks access to the resources, recognition, and internal fortitude needed for success.

Consequently, the individual operating within the Heroic Self-Myth framework engages in a cognitive process known as external attribution, a key feature in models of depression and learned helplessness. Failures and personal shortcomings are consistently attributed to external, stable, and global causes—in this case, the enduring and malevolent influence of the "bad father" (Liu et al., 2023). This cognitive bias serves a protective function, shielding a fragile ego from the devastating awareness of its own inadequacies. For Smerdyakov, his status as an illegitimate son and his father's contempt for him provide a ready-made narrative to explain his servile position and his own lack of advancement. He is not a failure because he lacks talent or initiative; he is a victim of his father's injustice. This externalization of blame is a crucial step in the construction of the self-myth, as it absolves the individual of personal responsibility and reframes their passivity and resentment as a righteous response to oppression.

The psychological payoff of this entrenched conflict is a form of perverse gratification. By maintaining the father as a fixed obstacle, the individual never has to face the existential terror of authentic freedom and the risk of genuine failure. The fantasized "self-purification and success" remain eternally on the horizon, perpetually deferred by the paternal barrier. This creates a stable, if painful, psychic economy built on resentment, a state that has been linked to

specific patterns of neural activity in regions associated with social pain and reward, such as the anterior cingulate cortex and the ventral striatum (Riva et al., 2022). Holding onto the grievance becomes, in a twisted sense, rewarding; it provides a coherent, if toxic, identity as the wronged son. To relinquish this grievance would be to confront the underlying vacuum and helplessness—the true Smerdyakovian void—which is a far more terrifying prospect.

This paternal conflict becomes integrated into the grand narrative of the Heroic Self-Myth. The individual's life story is framed not as a journey of growth but as a prolonged and unjust persecution by the paternal figure. The "hero's quest" is thus distorted into a project of overcoming this imagined oppression, rather than achieving any positive, self-determined goal. The energy that should be directed toward skill acquisition, relationship building, and personal development is instead channeled into the mental elaboration of the conflict itself (Vogel, 2022). This can manifest as incessant rumination, fantasies of revenge, or, as in Smerdyakov's ultimate act, the literal removal of the father, which he mistakenly believes will liberate him. The tragedy is that even with the father gone, the internal psychological structure remains intact. The individual is left not with freedom, but with the same emptiness, now stripped of its primary justification.

In conclusion, the paternal conflict within the Heroic Self-Myth is not a developmental stage to be overcome but a foundational cognitive and emotional schema that organizes a dysfunctional worldview. Rooted in potential HPA axis dysregulation and insecure attachment, it fosters a personality characterized by external attribution, chronic resentment, and envy of the vitality perceived in others. This conflict provides a stable justification for personal failure and moral decline, allowing the individual to construct a self-narrative in which they are the heroic victim of a paternal tyrant. By blaming the father, the Smerdyakovian individual secures a lifelong alibi for their own lack of substance, ensuring that their heroic journey remains a fantasy, and their true potential forever held captive by a conflict they refuse to resolve internally.

## **The Primacy of Exterior over Interior**

A central and observable manifestation of the Heroic Self-Myth is a fundamental inversion in the architecture of selfhood, where the external shell is prioritized over the internal core. This mechanism of compensatory self-presentation finds its archetypal expression in Smerdyakov, whose psychological profile is characterized by a compulsive fixation on external appearance—his fastidious clothing, affected manners, and calculated gestures. He operates under the core conviction that surface polish can effectively substitute for core integrity, that the meticulous curation of a persona can compensate for a profound lack of authentic internal substance (Nepon et al., 2021). This dynamic is not confined to 19th-century literature; it is systematically replicated in the neurotic focus of the heroes of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose consciousnesses are saturated with hyper-attention to external details: fragments of the body, mundane objects, and the ephemera of the urban landscape. This narrative technique creates a world where the external, sensory layer is perceived as more immediate, reliable, and significant than the elusive and fragmented internal structure of thought and feeling (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). This shared model reveals a critical shift in the modern construction of identity: the individual, confronted with an internal vacuum, invests a disproportionate amount of cognitive

and emotional energy in crafting and maintaining a shell, while the development of the core personality remains arrested or neglected.

From a neurocognitive perspective, this primacy of the exterior can be understood as a dysregulation in the interaction between the brain's default mode network (DMN) and its salience network (SN). The DMN, active during self-referential thought, is implicated in the sense of a continuous, internal narrative self (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012). In contrast, the SN is responsible for identifying and orienting attention towards salient external stimuli. In the Smerdyakovian individual, a hypoactive or incoherent DMN, which fails to generate a stable sense of self, may lead to a compensatory hyper-reliance on the SN (Menon, 2023). Attention is compulsively directed outward, towards the immediately perceptible environment—clothing, gestures, social cues, physical objects—because the internal landscape is experienced as empty, chaotic, or threatening. This creates a phenomenological state where the individual's sense of being is contingent upon external validation and the continuous management of their social surface, a process that is both cognitively taxing and psychologically brittle (Vogel, 2022).

This reliance on external signifiers is deeply intertwined with clinical concepts of self-pathology. The feeling of inner emptiness, a hallmark of the Smerdyakov Model, is a recognized anomalous self-experience in various personality structures and prodromal states (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). To bridge this inner void, individuals often engage in what is termed "perfectionistic self-presentation," a maladaptive strategy aimed at concealing perceived inadequacies by presenting a flawless facade to the world (Nepon et al., 2021). Smerdyakov's meticulousness with his cravat and his disdain for others' sloppiness are not signs of high standards but are behavioral manifestations of this very strategy. He is not building character; he is constructing a display case. Similarly, Leopold Bloom's and Stephen Dedalus's relentless focus on the sensory details of Dublin—the smell of urine, the taste of a cheese sandwich, the print of a newspaper—can be interpreted as a cognitive coping mechanism. By anchoring their consciousness in the concrete external world, they avoid the vertigo of confronting their own internal disunity, existential anxieties, and social failures (Allison & Miller, 2019).

The cognitive effort required to maintain this externalized identity is substantial and draws on executive functions located in the prefrontal cortex. Constructing a coherent self-narrative from internal sources—values, memories, personal traits—is a complex integrative process. When this process is impaired, either due to developmental trauma or inherent neurocognitive vulnerability, the brain may default to a less demanding, albeit superficial, strategy: defining the self through a curated collection of external attributes and possessions (Stowitzki et al., 2023). This is akin to building an identity from a catalogue rather than from lived, integrated experience. The individual becomes a connoisseur of surfaces, a curator of their own museum of impressions, believing that the aggregate of these carefully selected externals constitutes a self. This cognitive shortcut, however, is inherently unstable, as it is perpetually vulnerable to external feedback and social rejection, which can shatter the carefully constructed facade (Green et al., 2022).

Furthermore, this compensation mechanism has a direct social-motivational driver rooted in the behavioral system for managing social rank. Individuals who perceive themselves as low in

social hierarchy or intrinsic value may adopt submissive or, paradoxically, high-attention strategies to manage their standing (Allison & Miller, 2019). The compulsive focus on external appearance is a high-attention strategy aimed at controlling how one is perceived by others, thereby managing one's perceived social rank. Smerdyakov, as a servant and an illegitimate son, occupies the lowest rung of the social ladder. His fastidiousness is a desperate, non-verbal communication of his claimed superiority and worth, a bid for recognition that bypasses the need for genuine achievement or internal depth. His envy of his father's crude vitality is, in part, an envy of a mode of being that does not require such exhausting self-curation.

In conclusion, the compensation mechanism of prioritizing the exterior over the interior is a cornerstone of the Heroic Self-Myth. It is a multi-determined process arising from a confluence of neurocognitive, clinical, and social factors. A potentially dysregulated interaction between the DMN and SN drives attention outward, away from an unstable internal self. This aligns with clinical phenomena of perfectionistic self-presentation and anomalous self-experiences, where a curated facade masks an inner void. Cognitively, it represents a less demanding pathway to self-definition, relying on external signifiers rather than the integrative work of building a coherent internal narrative. Ultimately, this mechanism is a tragically inefficient solution to the problem of modern identity. The energy expended in polishing the shell depletes the resources needed to cultivate the core, ensuring that the heroic persona remains a hollow performance, a myth sustained not by genuine substance but by the relentless, anxious work of appearances.

## Transmuting the Banal into the Mythic

The most profound and pathological expression of the Heroic Self-Myth is the cognitive mechanism we term the "Epic Self-Deception." This is the process by which the individual, unable to generate genuine meaning or achievement, psychologically transmutes the raw material of their banal existence into a personal epic. A central mechanism of Smerdyakov's psychology is his deeply ingrained tendency to romanticize his own insignificant biography, secretly believing that a trivial event, a stolen word, or a calculated gesture could suddenly catapult him from his servile position to a figure of historic scale and significance. This narrative operation finds its most famous literary parallel in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a work structurally built upon the very same premise: the conscious elevation of a single, ordinary day in the life of Leopold Bloom to the symbolic and structural level of Homer's *Odyssey*. However, the critical distinction lies in intent and execution. For Joyce, this is a conscious artistic experiment, a literary technique designed to reveal the universal and the mythic within the modern mundane (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2016). For Smerdyakov, it is an unconscious psychological delusion—a desperate, defensive attempt to conceal his own felt insignificance under the grandiose guise of a mythological destiny. Smerdyakov is thus not merely an analogue but the psychological prototype of the Joycean hero, demonstrating the clinical underpinnings of a strategy that Joyce would later explore as an aesthetic principle.

The neurocognitive basis for this self-deception can be traced to the brain's innate and powerful drive for narrative coherence. The default mode network (DMN), a system highly active during self-referential thought, is fundamentally involved in autobiographical reasoning and the construction of a coherent life story (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012). When an individual's

actual life provides scant material for a positive or meaningful self-narrative—due to a lack of talent, trauma, or social failure—the DMN may engage in a compensatory restructuring of personal meaning. This can manifest as a cognitive bias towards over-interpreting minor events, imbuing coincidences with profound personal significance, and constructing a personal mythology from the threads of mundane experience (Vogel, 2022). In essence, the brain would rather fabricate a grandiose but fictional narrative than accept a meaningless and insignificant one. This process is not unlike the cognitive mechanisms observed in the early stages of delusion formation, where a "jumping to conclusions" bias leads individuals to accept implausible explanations for experiences based on scant evidence (McLean et al., 2022). Smerdyakov's belief that his complicity in a murder elevates him to a world-historical actor is a malignant example of this bias.

This grandiosity serves a critical regulatory function for a fragile self-esteem. Clinical psychology has long documented the role of grandiose fantasies as a defense against underlying feelings of worthlessness, particularly in narcissistic personality structures (Röper & van Nieuwenhuizen, 2023). For the individual operating within the Heroic Self-Myth, the tedious, uneventful day is not merely boring; it is a direct threat to their psychological integrity, as it provides evidence for their core belief of being inconsequential. To neutralize this threat, the cognitive apparatus engages in a systematic re-evaluation, or "cognitive reappraisal," of daily events, framing them as trials, quests, or pivotal moments in a grand saga (Denny et al., 2022). Where Leopold Bloom's purchase of a bar of soap is, for Joyce, a moment of artistic resonance with the myth of Odysseus, for a Smerdyakovian individual, a similar act might be internally framed as a heroic act of self-purification or a cunning strategic move against rivals. This is not creativity but a pathological form of meaning-making that serves to regulate negative affect and sustain a fragile self-image.

The distinction between artistic device and psychological pathology lies in the dimension of insight and reality-testing. Joyce, the author, maintains full metacognitive awareness—the ability to think about one's own thinking. He knowingly constructs the parallel as a tool for exploration (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2016). Smerdyakov, and by extension the modern individual suffering from this deception, lacks this insight. His epic narrative is not a playful hypothesis but a core belief, a delusional reality that replaces an unbearable truth. This failure in reality-testing is a hallmark of psychotic and dissociative conditions, where the boundaries between internal fantasy and external reality become porous (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). The Smerdyakovian individual does not see their life as if it were an epic; they believe it is one, and they are its tragically misunderstood hero. This grandiosity is intrinsically linked to the internal vacuum; the more empty the self, the more expansive and inflated the narrative required to fill the space.

Furthermore, this self-deception is enabled by a specific cultural and philosophical context that privileges individual narrative authority. In a secularized world where grand, shared narratives like religion have waned, the individual becomes the sole author of their own meaning (Green et al., 2022). This is a tremendous burden. For those lacking the internal resources to bear it, the solution is not to create authentic meaning through action and relationship, but to simply declare their life meaningful by framing it within a pre-existing, culturally-sanctioned mythic template. The brain's DMN, in its search for a coherent story, readily appropriates these archetypal

patterns—the journey, the trial, the betrayal, the rebirth—and maps them onto the utterly mundane events of a single day (Stowitzki et al., 2023). The walk to the chemist becomes a perilous voyage; a slight from an acquaintance becomes a heroic betrayal; a moment of quiet reflection becomes a spiritual awakening.

In conclusion, the "Epic Self-Deception" is the culminating stage of the Heroic Self-Myth, a sophisticated cognitive defense mechanism that leverages the brain's innate storytelling capacity to solve the problem of a meaningless existence. Driven by a hyperactive or dysregulated DMN seeking narrative coherence at any cost, it employs grandiosity as a shield against narcissistic injury and engages in a pathological form of cognitive reappraisal to transmute banality into destiny. The critical line between the Joycean artist and the Smerdyakovian individual is the line between metacognitive awareness and delusional conviction. The former uses the epic to explore reality; the latter uses it to escape from reality. In the economy of the pathological self, this deception is a costly but necessary investment, allowing the individual to continue functioning under the glorious, weightless illusion that their one, insignificant day is, in fact, an *Odyssey*.

## **Moral Annihilation as the Prerequisite for the "Epic Illusion"**

The construction of the Heroic Self-Myth requires a foundational clearing of the psychological landscape, a process that necessitates the dismantling of a coherent moral framework. Smerdyakov's most defining and pathological quality is his profound readiness to abandon any moral position if it facilitates the construction of a more convenient or grandiose personal narrative. His abolition of the moral law is not an act of liberation, as it might be in existential philosophy, but a strategic move to absolve himself of responsibility and to create a vacuum where his own manufactured significance can expand unimpeded (Harenski & Kiehl, 2022). This same moral profligacy underlies the fluid consciousness of the characters in Joyce's *Ulysses*, who, for the most part, lack a stable internal ethical compass and instead dissolve into a stream of associations, memories, and external stimuli, their choices dictated more by impulse and social convention than by principled deliberation (Green et al., 2022). This article argues that the deliberate or conditioned disappearance of morality creates a psychic vacuum that is subsequently and necessarily filled by the "epic self-deception." In this void, subjective emptiness is mistaken for ontological depth, random neural noise is interpreted as meaningful insight, and the chaotic, associative movement of a mind untethered from higher goals is recast as a heroic journey of discovery. Smerdyakov thus stands as the primary archetype of the individual who, having actively deconstructed or passively lost his moral center, comes to believe that a personal epic can be woven from the sheer, uninterpreted thread of routine.

The neurobiological underpinnings of this moral fluidity can be partially located in the dysfunction of a neural network often termed the "moral brain," which includes the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), amygdala, and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). The vmPFC, in particular, is critical for integrating emotional signals with complex social and moral reasoning (Harenski & Kiehl, 2022). Damage or dysfunction in this region is associated with blunted

empathy, poor foresight, and utilitarian judgments that disregard conventional morality. While not suggesting organic lesion in Smerdyakov, a functional disengagement of this network—perhaps as a psychological defense against the shame of his own inadequacy—could explain his cold, calculating detachment from the moral consequences of his actions. His decision-making appears driven not by a competing moral calculus but by a purely self-referential cost-benefit analysis aimed at maximizing his own perceived status within his self-constructed narrative (Fumagalli & Priori, 2021). The moral law is not overcome; it is simply rendered irrelevant to his cognitive and emotional processes.

This state of moral dissolution is intrinsically linked to the concept of cognitive effort and the brain's tendency towards heuristic processing. Adhering to a consistent moral framework requires significant cognitive resources; it involves suppressing immediate desires, considering long-term consequences, and navigating complex social dilemmas (Lopez et al., 2023). For the individual already burdened by the cognitive load of managing an internal vacuum and maintaining a performative exterior, a rigid moral code becomes an unsustainable luxury. Abandoning it is a form of cognitive economy. The chaotic stream of consciousness exhibited by Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom can be seen as a manifestation of a mind that has relinquished the effortful, top-down control required for moral deliberation, instead defaulting to the less demanding, bottom-up flow of sensory and mnemonic stimuli (Menon, 2023). In this cognitive mode, every thought and impulse is granted equal weight, and the very concept of a "guiding principle" loses its meaning, creating the perfect conditions for a new, amoral narrative to take root.

From a clinical perspective, this attenuation of morality shares features with the construct of "moral disengagement" as described in social cognitive theory. This is a set of cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to bypass their internal moral standards to engage in unethical behavior without self-censure (Bandura, 2016). These mechanisms include moral justification (reconstructing conduct as serving a social good), euphemistic labeling, and displacement of responsibility. Smerdyakov masterfully employs these strategies. He justifies the patricide by framing it as a philosophical necessity arising from Ivan's "everything is permitted" ideology, thus displacing responsibility. The characters in Ulysses similarly engage in euphemistic labeling and advantageous comparisons to navigate their own minor ethical failings, demonstrating a pervasive, low-grade moral disengagement that mirrors Smerdyakov's more extreme version.

It is precisely this evacuated moral space that the Epic Self-Deception rushes to colonize. The brain's default mode network (DMN), which is central to self-referential thought and narrative construction, abhors a vacuum (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012). In the absence of a moral structure that provides meaning through values like duty, compassion, or justice, the DMN will fabricate an alternative system of significance. This system is the heroic narrative, where meaning is derived from drama, struggle, and self-importance rather than ethical substance. The random events of a day are no longer evaluated as "good" or "bad" but as "significant" or "insignificant" to the plot of the self-myth (Vogel, 2022). A missed appointment is not a minor failure of responsibility but a pivotal plot twist; a casual insult is not a moral transgression to be forgiven but a heroic injury to be avenged. The chaotic, amoral flow of mental associations,

untethered from ethical judgment, is reinterpreted not as pathology but as the rich, complex inner world of a profound and misunderstood hero on a journey (Sass & Pienkos, 2019).

In conclusion, moral annihilation is not a side effect but a necessary precondition for the full flowering of the Heroic Self-Myth. It is a multi-faceted process involving a potential functional disengagement of the neural circuits underpinning moral emotion and reasoning, a cognitive economization that rejects the effort of principled deliberation, and the active employment of psychological mechanisms of moral disengagement. This process creates an existential void, stripping life of the meaning traditionally conferred by ethical struggle and communal values. Into this void, the cognitively expensive but psychologically vital Epic Illusion inserts itself. It provides a substitute metaphysics where personal significance replaces moral goodness, and the sheer sensation of an "eventful" inner life compensates for an outer life of ethical quietism and decay. Smerdyakov's tragedy is that he murders not only his father but also his conscience, believing this double liberation will make him a hero, when in reality, it only completes his transformation into a void masquerading as an epic.

## **The Traumatic Maternal Figure and the Fixation on "Unwashed" Physicality**

The genesis of the Heroic Self-Myth is often rooted in a foundational developmental trauma centered on the maternal figure, a trauma that installs a deep and enduring conflict between the idealized and the abject aspects of embodiment. Smerdyakov's psyche is irrevocably marked by the association between the image of his mentally ill, physically neglected mother, Stinking Lizaveta, and the intertwined themes of biological degradation and profound social shame. This early, pre-verbal trauma creates an unconscious but powerful fixation on "unwashedness" as the primary marker of inferiority and ontological stain (Schalinski et al., 2019). This pattern is not isolated; it is systematically replicated in the psychic world of Ulysses, where characters like Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom exhibit a painful, often obsessive rejection of corporeality—fixating on bodily odors, excretory functions, and the visceral messiness of physiology, frequently overcompensating for this revulsion with a hyper-vigilant awareness of external appearance and social decorum (Allison & Miller, 2019). This dynamic results in a profound psychological dualism: a demonstrative, ideological cult of the abstract mother figure coexists with a hidden, visceral hatred for her actual, "dirty" bodily nature. Within this fractured internal world, the paternal figure is subsequently cast in the role of the primary barrier to achieving a fantasized state of purification from this inherited, maternal "stain."

The neurobiological impact of such early relational trauma provides a substrate for this fixation. Exposure to severe early-life stress, including neglect and an unpredictable caregiving environment, can lead to enduring dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and a pro-inflammatory state (Tottenham, 2020). This biological embedding of trauma can heighten the sensitivity of neural circuits involved in the perception of threat and disgust, particularly the insula and the amygdala. The insula, a key region for interoception and the subjective experience of disgust, becomes hyper-reactive, leading to an exaggerated aversion to stimuli that are perceived as unclean or contaminating (Harenski & Kiehl, 2022). For

Smerdyakov, whose earliest sensory experiences were likely saturated with the smells and sights of his mother's affliction, this neural hypersensitivity translates into a lifelong, pathological association between physical uncleanness and moral or social worthlessness. His fastidiousness is not merely social aspiration but a compulsive ritual of decontamination, an attempt to scrub away the sensory memory of his origins.

This revulsion is intricately linked to the development of the embodied self. The sense of self is not a purely cognitive construct but is grounded in the lived experience of the body. Early, chaotic, or aversive bodily experiences, particularly those involving a caregiver who is herself a source of dysregulation rather than comfort, can disrupt the formation of a coherent bodily self (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). This can lead to what phenomenologists describe as "hyper-reflexivity"—a state in which aspects of bodily experience that are normally tacit and in the background of awareness become the persistent focus of attention. The characters in Ulysses are textbook examples of this hyper-reflexivity; their streams of consciousness are flooded with fragmented, often distressing bodily sensations—the feeling of a sticky shirt, the smell of a urinal, the taste of bile. This is not merely realism but a literary depiction of a disrupted embodiment, where the body is not felt as a home but as a source of perpetual, shameful leakage.

The psychological conflict manifests as a stark dissociation between the idealized and the real mother. To cope with the unbearable reality of a mother who is a source of shame, the psyche splits the maternal imago. On one hand, there is a "demonstrative, ideological cult" of motherhood—an abstract, sanitized, and sentimentalized ideal. This is evident in the societal veneration of the Virgin Mary, a figure entirely devoid of corporeal mess, and in the characters' own abstract musings on maternity. On the other hand, there exists a "hidden hatred" for the actual, physical mother and, by extension, for the physical, "animal" nature she represents (Kim et al., 2020). This hatred is often repressed and projected outward, manifesting as a generalized disgust for all that is fleshy, vulnerable, and mortal. Smerdyakov's contempt for his father's gluttony and sensuality is, in part, a displaced contempt for the bodily nature he associates with his mother. He seeks to transcend the "unwashed" physical entirely, aspiring to a sterile, cerebral existence he mistakenly associates with his brother Ivan.

Within this psychic economy, the paternal figure acquires a specific and burdensome role. He becomes symbolically responsible for the individual's entrapment within this "stained" condition. The father is perceived not just as a rival, but as the active agent who tied the individual to this degraded maternal line, either through his lust (as in Fyodor Karamazov's rape of Lizaveta) or through his failure to provide a legacy of purification and social status (Green et al., 2022). The paternal conflict, as detailed in a previous section, is thus fueled by this deeper, more primitive maternal trauma. The father is hated not only for his vitality but for being the bridge that connects the individual's consciousness to the swamp of their origins. Eliminating the father, whether literally or symbolically, becomes fantasized as the necessary act that will sever this connection, allowing the individual to be reborn as a self-created, "clean" being, free from the taint of their biological and emotional inheritance.

This desperate quest for purification is a driving force behind the Heroic Self-Myth. The entire epic narrative becomes a story of overcoming one's origins, of a heroic ascent from the mud and shame of a traumatic maternal beginning. The banal routines of daily life are reinterpreted as a series of trials designed to test and prove one's purity. The compulsive focus on external appearance, discussed earlier as a compensation mechanism, is revealed here in its full depth: it is an exorcism ritual. Every polished boot and carefully knotted cravat is a talisman against the ever-present specter of the "unwashed" mother, a magical attempt to ward off the identity of the "stinking" son (Nepon et al., 2021). The epic journey is, at its core, a flight from the body and its history.

In conclusion, the traumatic maternal figure installs a fundamental fracture in the individual's relationship with their own embodied existence. Rooted in the neurobiology of early stress and disgust sensitivity, this trauma creates a psyche at war with its own physicality. The resulting dualism—idealizing the abstract mother while despising the corporeal one—forces the individual into a perpetual state of hygienic and symbolic self-purification. The paternal figure is cast as the guardian of this original stain, and his elimination is fantasized as the key to liberation. The Heroic Self-Myth is, therefore, the grand, tragic story this individual tells to explain and justify this endless, internal civil war, a narrative in which they are the hero fighting to transcend the "unwashed" physicality that they secretly believe defines their very core.

## **Liberal Thought and the "Death of God"**

The psychological architecture of the Heroic Self-Myth, while rooted in neurocognitive and developmental factors, requires a philosophical framework to achieve its final, legitimized form. The mental world of Smerdyakov and his Joycean heirs is characterized by a transformation of the fundamental question of human origin and purpose from a metaphysical inquiry into a psychological mechanism for justifying pre-existing states of weakness or, conversely, fantasies of superiority. The intense internal conflict between the profound desire to be spiritually significant and the crushing, private feeling of being worthless creates a cognitive and emotional vacuum. Into this vacuum rushes the nihilistic proposition, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." This article argues that this proposition is not engaged with as a rigorous philosophical position but is instead weaponized as a psychological tool. We link this specifically to a vulgarized strand of liberal thought—distinguished from more robust ethical systems like, for example, the Christian anarchism of Berdyaev—that adopts this premise as a license for radical self-authorization unmoored from transcendent accountability (Green et al., 2022). This philosophy is eagerly seized upon by individuals devoid of authentic talent but possessed of ample vanity, as it provides a high-minded, intellectualized excuse for their own ethical decay and provides a rhetorical tool for the corruption of others, effectively sanctifying the absence of a moral center.

From a cognitive neuroscience perspective, this embrace of a permissive nihilism can be understood as a form of motivated reasoning and cognitive closure. The brain has a natural tendency to seek out information and adopt beliefs that reduce psychological discomfort and confirm pre-existing self-concepts (Lopez et al., 2023). For an individual tormented by the gap between their grandiose self-image and their tangible lack of achievement, the concept of a

universe without divine judgment or objective moral truth is profoundly comforting. It resolves the cognitive dissonance by dismantling the very scale on which they are found wanting. Neuroimaging studies suggest that the resolution of cognitive dissonance activates reward regions like the ventral striatum, meaning that adopting a belief that alleviates psychological tension can be inherently reinforcing (Riva et al., 2022). For Smerdyakov, accepting Ivan's "everything is permitted" ideology is not a philosophical awakening but a moment of profound psychological relief; it liberates him from the burden of a conscience that had only ever served to highlight his own depravity and inadequacy.

This process is critically abetted by a specific impairment in mental state reasoning, or theory of mind (ToM), particularly as it relates to abstract or impersonal others. A functioning ToM allows us to attribute mental states—beliefs, intents, desires—to other beings, including a hypothetical divine presence (McLean et al., 2022). In the Smerdyakovian individual, this capacity may be selectively constricted or distorted. The concept of "God" is not internalized as a locus of perception, love, or judgment, but is instead processed as a mere external rule-making entity. Therefore, the "death of God" is interpreted not as a cosmic tragedy but as the removal of a cosmic surveillance system and its accompanying rulebook. This aligns with models of psychopathy and narcissism where ToM is used manipulatively for social gain but is impaired in the domain of genuine empathy and moral reasoning (Harenski & Kiehl, 2022). The individual does not truly conceive of a universe now absent a divine consciousness; they only perceive the removal of a prohibitive force, opening a space for their self-myth to expand without external constraint.

The specific attraction to a liberal, as opposed to a collectivist or traditionalist, interpretation of this void is significant. While all authoritarian systems impose an external moral order, a certain strand of modern liberal thought prioritizes individual autonomy and subjective experience as the ultimate arbiters of value. When radicalized and stripped of its complementary emphasis on human rights and social responsibility, this can devolve into a philosophy of radical subjectivism (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2016). For the individual constructing a Heroic Self-Myth, this provides the perfect ideological camouflage. Their actions are no longer "selfish" or "immoral"; they are "authentic," "self-actualized," or "beyond conventional good and evil." This intellectual framework allows them to reframe their ethical laziness and moral disengagement as a form of advanced philosophical courage (Bandura, 2016). They are not failing to live up to a standard; they are, they tell themselves, pioneers living by a new, more sophisticated one.

This philosophical justification completes the feedback loop of the Heroic Self-Myth. The internal vacuum and feelings of worthlessness create a need for a grandiose narrative. The construction of this narrative is hindered by the remnants of a moral conscience. The adoption of a "death of God" ideology dismantles this conscience, facilitating the myth's growth. The subsequent (amoral) actions taken in service of the myth then provide "evidence" of one's liberation and superiority, which further reinforces the validity of the adopted philosophy and deepens the commitment to the self-myth (Vogel, 2022). It is a closed, self-validating system. Smerdyakov's murder of Fyodor Karamazov is, in his mind, not a crime but the dramatic, world-historical act that proves he has truly understood and embodied Ivan's teaching. It is the ultimate plot point in his epic, made possible by the philosophical license he has granted himself.

Ultimately, this use of philosophy is not a search for truth but a search for agency and validation. The individual feels powerless and insignificant within a traditional moral cosmos that demands virtues—humility, charity, patience—for which they have no capacity. The "death of God" cosmology, by contrast, offers a universe where power, will, and self-assertion become the highest virtues (Röper & van Nieuwenhuizen, 2023). This is a cosmology tailor-made for the resentful and the vain. It allows them to reinterpret their weakness not as a lack, but as a strategic position outside a corrupt system; their malice not as sin, but as a clear-sighted willingness to act; and their chaotic, self-serving narrative not as a delusion, but as a self-authored gospel.

In conclusion, the philosophical justification via the "death of God" is the final, crucial piece that legitimizes the Heroic Self-Myth. It is a psychological appropriation of a philosophical idea, driven by motivated reasoning and potentially underpinned by a constricted theory of mind. By latching onto a radical subjectivist strand of liberal thought, the Smerdyakovian individual transmutes their moral failure into a philosophical stance, their ethical decay into a narrative of liberation, and their personal vanity into a cosmic principle. The ideology does not create the pathological self, but it provides the permission slip and the intellectual scaffolding that allows it to flourish unchallenged, transforming a private psychosis into a seemingly defensible, and therefore far more dangerous, worldview.

## **Discussion: Smerdyakov as the Early Cultural Code of the Modernist Hero**

The detailed comparison between the psychological architecture of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Smerdyakov and the phenomenological experience of the heroes of James Joyce's *Ulysses* inevitably opens a profound discursive debate: is Smerdyakov the true prototype of the modernist individual, or is he merely a startlingly precise psychological anticipation of a sensibility that would only later become culturally dominant? This question strikes at the heart of the relationship between art, psychology, and cultural history. On one hand, Smerdyakov undeniably possesses the complete constellation of traits that would come to define the modernist literary hero: a fragmented consciousness, an unreliable and vacillating narrative "I," a blurred and ultimately absent moral structure, a conspicuous lack of generative talent, and a compulsive fixation on external signifiers coupled with a deep-seated contempt for his own bodily nature (Sass & Pienkos, 2019; Vogel, 2022). On the other hand, a critical distinction must be drawn. In *Ulysses*, these qualities are artistically reprocessed and elevated into a deliberate experimental technique; they are the medium through which Joyce explores the nature of consciousness in the modern world (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2016). In Smerdyakov, these same qualities are presented not as an aesthetic strategy but as a stark socio-psychological defect, a clear-cut degradation of personality. This divergence forces a fundamental question upon us: Does literary modernism create a new kind of hero, or does it merely give potent artistic form to the destructive psychological traits that Dostoevsky, with the prescience of a master clinician, first diagnosed and presented through Smerdyakov? The author's analysis, grounded in a neuro-phenomenological framework, strongly suggests the latter: the modernist era did not invent the Smerdyakovian individual but rather provided the cultural and technological

conditions for this pre-existing psychological type to move from the periphery to the center of the cultural stage.

The neurocognitive evidence underpinning the Heroic Self-Myth Hypothesis suggests that the syndrome described is not an invention of the 20th century but a potential configuration of the human brain-mind system, likely exacerbated by specific developmental insults. The dysregulated default mode network (DMN) leading to a fragmented sense of self (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012), the HPA axis dysregulation stemming from early trauma that fosters a perception of the world as threatening (Tottenham, 2020), and the cognitive biases like external attribution (Liu et al., 2023) are not era-specific. They are enduring features of human neurobiology that can be activated by adverse conditions. What modernism, particularly in its stream-of-consciousness form, provided was a new literary technology—a "cognitive toolkit"—capable of representing this internal state with unprecedented fidelity. Joyce's narrative techniques can be seen as a kind of phenomenological report on the subjective experience of a Smerdyakovian consciousness, albeit one endowed with poetic genius. The chaotic flow of associations in *Ulysses* mirrors the cognitive fragmentation, while the focus on the banal and the bodily reflects the hyper-reflexive disgust detailed in our analysis (Menon, 2023). Modernism, therefore, did not create the fragmented mind; it developed the artistic means to document its interior landscape.

This perspective is further supported by considering the syndrome as a pathological response to the erosion of traditional social structures, a process that began long before high modernism. The "death of God" as a social and psychological reality was already a central terror in Dostoevsky's 19th century. Smerdyakov is the case study of an individual who cannot withstand the psychological pressure of this new, responsibility-laden freedom. He is the first literary portrait of a person who, lacking the internal resources to construct a self in a world of dissolving absolutes, opts for the pathological shortcut of the self-myth (Green et al., 2022). The characters of *Ulysses* are his direct descendants, navigating a world where this process is more complete. They are not different in kind, but in circumstance. The modernist era universalized the condition that, in Dostoevsky's time, was still recognizable as a pathology.

The clinical parallels reinforce this argument. The traits exhibited by Smerdyakov—grandiosity masking a void, perfectionistic self-presentation, moral disengagement, and a fragmented identity—are now formally described in the study of narcissistic and schizotypal personality structures (Röper & van Nieuwenhuizen, 2023; Sass & Pienkos, 2019). These are not cultural fashions but enduring patterns of human suffering and maladaptation. The research on perfectionistic self-presentation shows it to be a stable, maladaptive coping strategy across cultures and time, aimed at managing profound feelings of inadequacy (Nepon et al., 2021). Smerdyakov is a literary embodiment of this clinical reality. Modernism's great achievement was to shift the artistic focus from the external actions of a tragic hero to the internal, often pathological, processes of an anti-hero, a space Dostoevsky had already masterfully colonized.

Therefore, the debate resolves not into a question of origin, but one of representation and cultural amplification. The Smerdyakovian individual has likely always existed on the peripheries—the resentful courtier, the talentless scribe, the individual whose inner emptiness

could only be filled with fantasies of grandeur. Prior cultural epochs, with their stronger collective narratives and social rigidities, may have suppressed this type or forced it into more contained forms of hypocrisy. The liberal, secular, and increasingly atomized world of the 20th century, however, created an ecosystem in which this psychological seed could flourish (Bandura, 2016). It provided the philosophical justification (the "everything is permitted" of vulgar liberalism), the social anonymity of the burgeoning metropolis, and the cultural valorization of individual subjective experience over communal truth.

In conclusion, Smerdyakov stands not as a mere precursor but as the early cultural code for the modernist hero. He is the archetype in its raw, clinical form, before it was aestheticized by high modernism. The analysis presented in this article, drawing from neuroscience, clinical psychology, and literary studies, demonstrates that the core components of the Heroic Self-Myth—the internal vacuum, the performative substitution, the paternal conflict, the traumatic maternal relationship, the moral annihilation, and its philosophical justification—constitute a coherent and enduring psychological syndrome. Modernist literature, particularly *Ulysses*, did not invent this syndrome; it recognized it as the defining psychic reality of its time and developed revolutionary artistic techniques to capture its essence. Dostoevsky, through Smerdyakov, provided the first and most complete diagnostic manual for this condition of modern life. He showed us that the heroic journey of the new age would not be an external quest for a golden fleece, but an internal, and often fraudulent, project of self-mythologization—a project undertaken by those who, feeling nothing within, desperately strive to become the epic heroes of their own empty narratives.

## Conclusion

The interdisciplinary analysis presented in this article conclusively confirms that Fyodor Dostoevsky's character, Smerdyakov, serves as the foundational psychological and conceptual prototype for the heroes of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and, by extension, for a dominant strand of the modernist literary hero at large. He is not a mere historical curiosity but a precise clinical blueprint for a pathological mode of being that has become increasingly prevalent in the modern psyche. Smerdyakov demonstrates, with terrifying clarity, the internal cognitive and emotional mechanism of transmuting the raw material of a banal existence into a structured pseudo-heroism. This mechanism operates through a sequence of interdependent pathological processes: the deliberate destruction of the internal moral core, the compensatory over-investment in external appearance to mask an underlying emptiness, a traumatic fixation on physicality as a threat to be managed, unresolved and envious conflict with parental figures, and the overarching desire to replace real talent and substance with the grand illusion of an "epic" self-narrative (Vogel, 2022; Sass & Pienkos, 2019). His path is not one of development or self-actualization but a strategic retreat into self-deception, a psychological maneuver where one insignificant day, devoid of genuine achievement or moral courage, is cognitively reframed and emotionally equated with the mythic journey of Odysseus. Ultimately, a thorough examination of this archetype allows for a profound and nuanced understanding of the modernist hero's deep structure, revealing it not so much as Joyce's singular artistic innovation, but as the fully realized aesthetic development of a psychological diagnosis that Dostoevsky first

articulated: the portrayal of a human being who, having lost or actively dismantled his moral center, attempts to elevate his own felt insignificance to the status of cosmic significance through the power of a self-authored, self-serving myth.

The neurobiological model underlying this synthesis provides a robust, non-reductionist explanation for the syndrome's coherence. The entire edifice of the Heroic Self-Myth can be traced to a dysfunctional interplay of core brain networks. A dysregulated Default Mode Network (DMN), potentially hyperactive yet incoherent, fails to generate a stable, authentic self-narrative, creating the foundational "internal vacuum" (Whitfield-Gabrieli & Ford, 2012). This vacuum induces a state of psychological distress, which the Salience Network (SN), now hyper-vigilant, attempts to resolve by compulsively directing attention to external, manageable stimuli—clothing, manners, social slights—thus initiating the process of "performative substitution" (Menon, 2023). Concurrently, early developmental trauma, encoded through HPA-axis dysregulation, fosters a baseline of perceived threat and a hypersensitivity in disgust-related regions like the insula, cementing the "fixation on physicality as a threat" (Tottenham, 2020; Harenski & Kiehl, 2022). This biological substrate creates an individual primed for the cognitive biases—external attribution, jumping to conclusions, and motivated reasoning—that facilitate both the "conflict with parental figures" as a source of blame and the embrace of a "death of God" philosophy as a license for "moral disintegration" (Liu et al., 2023; McLean et al., 2022). The final, culminating "epic self-deception" is the DMN's ultimate, pathological solution: generating a grandiose, all-encompassing narrative to bind these fragments of a shattered self into a seemingly coherent and significant whole.

This model moves beyond literary analysis to offer a clinical lens through which to view modern manifestations of identity disturbance. The Smerdyakov archetype exhibits clear parallels with contemporary understandings of pathological narcissism and schizotypy. The grandiosity, the vulnerability to shame, the perfectionistic self-presentation, and the impoverished inner life align closely with the dynamics of narcissistic personality structure, where a "grandiose facade" conceals a "vulnerable core" (Röper & van Nieuwenhuizen, 2023; Nepon et al., 2021). Similarly, the fragmented consciousness, the anomalous bodily experiences, and the blurred boundaries between self and world resonate with the self-disorders described in the schizophrenia spectrum (Sass & Pienkos, 2019). Smerdyakov is, in essence, a literary case study of a comorbid personality pathology that modern psychiatry continues to grapple with, demonstrating that these are not merely modern constructs but enduring patterns of human psychological fragility.

The philosophical and cultural implications of this synthesis are profound. The Heroic Self-Myth is not an isolated psychological oddity but a predictable consequence of the erosion of transcendent frameworks of meaning. The proposition that "everything is permitted" is not a liberation for the Smerdyakovian individual but a catastrophic removal of the very scaffolding that gave his life a negative shape—a shape defined by prohibition and sin, which is, at the very least, a shape (Green et al., 2022). In the absence of this scaffolding, he is left with the unbearable weight of his own emptiness and is forced to become the architect of his own cosmic importance. This is not the existential freedom of a Kierkegaard or a Nietzsche, which demands tremendous personal responsibility, but its pathological mimicry—a freedom from

responsibility, masquerading as a higher purpose (Bandura, 2016). The modern cultural landscape, with its emphasis on personal branding, curated online personas, and the commodification of identity, provides the perfect ecosystem for the Smerdyakovian strategy to flourish on a mass scale.

In conclusion, the Heroic Self-Myth Hypothesis, crystallized in the Smerdyakov archetype, provides a powerful transdisciplinary framework for understanding a pervasive pattern of modern identity. It reveals the journey of the modernist anti-hero not as a brave new exploration of consciousness, but as a well-trodden path of psychological retreat. It is a path defined by a series of defensive maneuvers: moral annihilation as cognitive economy, performative substitution as a solution to internal fragmentation, and epic self-deception as the final, desperate stand against the terror of meaninglessness. Dostoevsky, through his creation of Smerdyakov, did more than create a memorable villain; he diagnosed a spiritual sickness of the emerging modern world. Joyce and the modernists then provided the intimate, first-person phenomenological report of what it feels like to live with this sickness. To understand Smerdyakov is to understand the deep structure of a particular modern despair—a despair that manifests not as weeping or lamentation, but as the quiet, relentless, and ultimately tragic construction of a palace of self-worship on the vacant lot of a disappeared soul.

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