

## The Process of Self Acceptance Portrayed in The Substance Film (2024) by Coralie Fargeat

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### ABSTRACT (11 PT)

Self-acceptance is the ability to acknowledge and embrace both strengths and weaknesses without self-judgment. This study analyzes the process and effects of self-acceptance portrayed in Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* using a literary psychology approach with a qualitative descriptive method. The analysis applies Kübler-Ross's (1973) five stages of grief to explain the self-acceptance process of the main character and Najwa Zebian's (2016) concept to examine its effects. Data were collected through documentation of film dialogues representing self-acceptance. The findings show that the process follows the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The effects are reflected in internal peace and happiness, improved mental health, career, and relations. The film emphasizes the importance of authenticity and critiques social pressures and beauty standards that compel individuals, especially women, to sacrifice their true selves to meet idealized appearances, encouraging the courage to remain authentic despite societal demands.

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### Introduction

Literature is an artistic expression that reflects human emotions, thoughts, and experiences, often conveyed through drama, prose, and poetry. As a medium closely connected to language, literature captures meaning not only through written words but also through spoken and visual forms, including film (Sumardjo & Saini, 1991; Saleh, 2018). Film, as a literary medium, combines visual and auditory elements to communicate messages and explore human experiences (Susanto, 1982). One of the significant intersections between literature and psychology lies in the depiction of human behavior and mental processes. Literary psychology examines these aspects by analyzing psychological elements within a work (Endraswara, 2008).

Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) presents a sharp critique of this issue through the story of Elisabeth Sparkle, a former celebrity who resorts to a mysterious substance to regain youth and societal acceptance. This pursuit of perfection ultimately leads to the erosion of her identity, illustrating the destructive effects of unrealistic beauty standards. The film's exploration of the tension between societal expectations and self-acceptance makes it a compelling object of study. Moreover, its international recognition, including the Best Screenplay award at the Cannes Film Festival (Gates, 2024), reinforces its significance as a subject for academic analysis.

The concept employed in this research is literary psychology, which examines the psychological aspects of characters and their development within a literary work (Endraswara, 2008). Specifically, this study applies Kübler-Ross's (1973) five stages of grief to analyze the process of self-acceptance experienced by the main character, and Najwa Zebian's (2016) perspective to explore the effects of self-acceptance. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of how the main character struggles with pressures shape character transformation. This study aims to analyze the process and effects of self-acceptance as portrayed in *The Substance*. The research seeks to answer the following question: How does the main character in *The Substance* experience the process of self-acceptance, and what effects result from this process.

## **Method**

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the representation of the self-acceptance process in Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024). This approach was chosen because the study focuses on exploring psychological meanings and character development, which are best understood through non-numerical interpretation of dialogue, visual narrative, and symbolic elements. According to Bogdan and Taylor in Margono (2005), qualitative research produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observed behavior, while Moleong (2006) emphasizes that such research relies on words, images, or symbols rather than numbers.

The data were taken from *The Substance* film script. Data were collected using documentation techniques (Arikunto, 2002) by watching the film, reading the script, marking significant dialogues, and classifying them according to the stages of self-

acceptance based on Kübler-Ross's (1973) theory and Najwa Zebian's (2016) concept of its effects. The data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) model, which includes: (1) data reduction summarizing and focusing on relevant elements; (2) data display, presenting findings in descriptive form; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, interpreting and confirming results. This method allowed for a detailed examination of how the main character's self-acceptance process is represented in the film and its psychological implications.

## Finding and Discussion

### A. The process of self acceptance

#### 1. Denial

According to Kübler-Ross, denial is a psychological stage in which an individual encounters a reality that is profoundly difficult to accept. At this stage a person tends to reject or not accept the existing reality. In this movie, the denial phase is described by Elizabeth who decides to use "The Substance" serum. This can be seen from the dialogue below:

Elisabeth	: <i>Hallo? I'd like to.....order.</i>
The scientist	: <i>Address?</i>
Elisabeth	: <i>1057 Beverly Canyon.</i>
The Scientist	: <i>Write this down, 35 North Byron Alley.</i>

(00:17:31 – 00:17:41).

The dialogue above shown Elisabeth sparkle, a former aerobics star who lost her popularity and identity with age and the pressures of the entertainment industry. The conversation between Elisabeth and a mysterious person on the other end of the phone with the phrase "*I'd like to order*" refers to the important decision she makes to order "The Substance", a mysterious product that promises physical regeneration or self-transformation. Elisabeth was already at the point of frustration and alienation, finally taking drastic steps to regain her former strength, body, or status. She confidently orders the serum in the hope that a better, younger, and more beautiful version of herself will be present.

The scene suggests that Elisabeth's decision to order 'The Substance' reflects an underlying struggle with self-acceptance and a desire to alter her identity.

## 2. Anger

The anger phase is one of the stages after the denial phase, where the individual experiences strong emotions of anger in response to something that happened. The characteristics include feelings of unacceptance, frustration, and a tendency to blame. This can be seen in dialogue below:

Elisabeth : *The...the...growth... - cause if I'm the matrix what came out of me can only be called the growth! **The growth stealing more and more time from me** completely disregarding the consequences. She is irresponsible! She is totally short sighted! **She's a selfish bitch!***

(01:24:19 – 01:24:27).

In the dialogue from the movie "The Substance" seen above, Elisabeth Sparkle is shown in a very different condition from her previous appearance. Old, exhausted, and emotionally fragile. As she speaks over the phone, Elisabeth is experiencing an intense emotional outburst, reflecting her inner conflict and crumbling identity. She expresses her intense anger towards "The Growth" a representation of the younger version of her born from the serum, because she feels that her time, identity, and existence are being stolen. Phrases "*she's stealing more and more time from me*" show anger directed not only at the new entity, but also at herself for losing control. This emotion arises as a reaction to the unfairness and helplessness in the face of the fact that the younger version created to save her is taking over her life, highlighting the transition from denial to anger in the process of self-acceptance. The climax of Elisabeth's anger is expressed with the curse "*She's a selfish bitch!*", which indicates that Elisabeth is no longer able to separate

herself from her own creation. She hates her other self, or her “perfect” self.

### 3. Bargaining

The bargaining phase is one of the stages in the self-acceptance process, where individuals attempt to negotiate internally in response to the adverse events they experience. At this stage, an individual tends to hope that by taking certain actions or changing certain behaviours, the undesirable situation can be improved or even undone. This act of bargaining often reflects a psychological attempt to regain a sense of control over life or circumstances that feel irreversible, even though the individual may rationally realize that such change is difficult or impossible. Here is dialogue that illustrate the bargaining phase:

Fred : *Hey! Why don't we go out for a drink some time now that we've "reconnected"?!  
Elisabeth : Oh uh... I'm kind of...  
Fred : Oh, I'm stupid... of course you're super busy...  
Elisabeth : **But why don't you give me your card... you never know!**  
(00:12:52—00:13:01)*

The bargaining phase in Kübler-Ross' theory is seen in the sentence “*But why don't you give me your card... you never know!*” which shows Elisabeth's subtle attempt to maintain social connections through a seemingly light-hearted but meaningful invitation. Psychologically, this action reflects the sense of loss and loneliness she felt during the collapse of her image and existence. Elisabeth tried to “bargain” with the situation by establishing relationships, as if she wanted to convince herself that she was still worthy of acceptance and respect. Based on self-acceptance theory, this shows that Elisabeth has not fully accepted her current condition; she still relies on external recognition and social connections to cover up her feelings of worthlessness and isolation.

### 4. Depression

The depressive phase is the stage where a person experiences feelings of sadness, fatigue, and loss of interest in daily activities. Some people may also experience acute hallucinations in this phase. It is often considered the toughest phase but is also an important part of self-acceptance. Here is dialogue that depict the depression phase:

***The lights continue to shine. The world continues to spin. Without her.*** (00:16:36—00:16:40).

The depression stage is reflected in the sentence, “*The lights continue to shine. The world continues to spin. Without her,*” which conveys a deep sense of disconnection from the world and the painful realization that life goes on even without her presence. This line expresses emptiness and a loss of meaning, as Elisabeth feels abandoned by the world that once adored her. Psychologically, it reflects symptoms of depression such as feeling worthless, isolated, and powerless in the face of life’s changes. According to the theory of self-acceptance, Elisabeth has not yet come to terms with the reality that her place in the world has shifted; she still bases her self-worth on external attention and validation. As the world appears to move on without her, the emotional wound deepens, showing that she is still unable to make peace with herself.

## 5. Acceptance

The acceptance stage, in the context of self-acceptance, is the final stage in the process of accepting reality. At this stage, individuals begin to recognize that the adverse events they have experienced are real and cannot be changed. Rather than rejecting or denying these circumstances, they begin to make peace with the situation and recognize the need to move forward, although with adjustments to their

perceptions, expectations, and life experiences. Here is a dialogue that illustrates the acceptance stage:

*She wipes her mouth and turns her head from right to left as she looks at herself in the mirror. She's strangely calm... As if this monster vision didn't scare her. Almost fascinating her. **As if it pleased her. As if she was truly seeing herself for the very first time, and finally, accepting herself.***

(01:59:34 – 01:59:39).

In the sentence from The Substance movie script above, Elisabeth is in the bathroom after using The Substance for the last time and transforming into a monster. Then she stands in front of the mirror boldly looking at her shapeless face. The sentence “*As if she was truly seeing herself for the very first time, and finally, accepting herself*” reflects the acceptance phase in Kübler-Ross' theory, where the main character shows calmness and full acceptance of her extreme physical changes. She no longer fears or rejects her appearance but rather begins to look at herself with a sense of wonder and complete acceptance. This shows that she has gone through the previous emotional phases and has finally come to a stage where she can be at peace with herself, in accordance with the essence of self-acceptance in the theory.

#### B. The Effect of Self Acceptance

The effect of self-acceptance is described by Najwa Zebian in her book Mind Platter as a moment for reflection and evaluation of one's surroundings. It involves learning from past experiences, focusing on the future, and developing the ability to see the positive side of situations. Self-acceptance also encourages individuals to trust that external opinions do not define their worth. As a result, even in times of exhaustion or struggle, a person who embraces self-acceptance understands their capacity to endure challenges and protect their well-being. The effects of self-acceptance in her writing can be identified across three key aspects: brings internal peace and happiness, having better mental health, then career and relations. In this research, the researcher found several dialogues that illustrates the effects of self-acceptance.

## 1. Brings Internal Peace and Happiness

*We can sense that she is **utterly happy**, as though she were thoroughly **experiencing her moment of accomplishment and glory as mush on the sidewalk...***  
(02:14:42 – 02:14:45).

In the sentence above from the script of *The Substance*, Elisabeth is in the middle of her own walk of fame, her monster body already broken and almost melted because she was thrown and hit by the audience on stage. Even so, the phrase that Elisabeth felt “*utterly happy*” and “*experiencing her moment of accomplishment and glory*” shows that she had reached a point where she no longer felt ashamed, depressed, or rejected, but celebrated her existence and her success in being herself even in the public space (on the sidewalk). When one not only accepts herself but also feels proud and happy about it. Elisabeth in this sentence seems to have stopped struggling against herself, and is now enjoying a moment of personal victory, which indicates that self-acceptance has led to inner peace and happiness. This sentence reflects the effect of self-acceptance, which is in line with Najwa Zebian's (2016) theory, which states that self-acceptance brings happiness because one stops fighting who one is and starts living wholeheartedly.

## 2. Having Better Mental Health

*“She looks at her reflection in the mirror... her fluorescent leggings now seem **ridiculously out of place.**”*  
(00:50:39—00:50:45)

According to Najwa Zebian, self-acceptance begins when we stop trying to mold ourselves to fit into places or identities that no longer feel authentic. Emphasizes that growth often comes with the painful realization that the version of ourselves we once presented to the world was driven by a need to be accepted or to feel worthy. When we begin to truly accept ourselves, the masks start to feel heavy, and the costumes we wore like Elisabeth's flashy leggings begin to look absurd or misplaced. Elisabeth's reaction to her reflection is not rooted in vanity or shame, but



in clarity. She sees herself differently now, and with that clarity comes discomfort. This moment represents the psychological tension that arises during the early stages of self-acceptance. The awareness that one no longer aligns with their past identity and yet has not fully stepped into their new self. After she is able to accept herself, her mental health is much better than before.

### 3. Career and Relations

***"Two workers putting up a new billboard, replacing her face..."***  
(00:20:00—00:20:10).

The narration "*Two workers putting up a new billboard, replacing her face...*" is a powerful visual symbol of Elisabeth's erasure both socially and professionally. In terms of career and public identity, this moment shows that Elisabeth hasn't just lost her job, but also her image as a public figure, her once-familiar face is literally being taken down and replaced. Psychologically, it deepens her sense of worthlessness and being discarded. Linked to Najwa Zebian's theory of self-acceptance, Elisabeth is forced to confront the fact that the world no longer makes space for who she truly is; she is not allowed to be "owned" or valued in her current form. The replacement of her billboard becomes a confirmation that the world rejects Elisabeth as she is, and this crushes the foundation of her self-acceptance driving her to create Sue as the only way to become "worthy of being seen" again.

### Conclusion

The analysis of *The Substance* shows Elisabeth's journey through the stages of self-acceptance starting from denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Her story reflects how refusing to accept herself causes emotional pain, while acceptance brings peace and freedom. The film criticizes society's pressure and beauty standards that can push people to make harmful choices and lose their true selves. Elisabeth's experiences deliver the main message of the film, supported by other

characters and events that show the weight of public opinion, fading fame, and the temptation of quick fixes. In the end, *The Substance* gives a warning about the danger of depending on others for self-worth and encourages self-awareness, honesty with oneself, and acceptance of change in life.

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