

Movie and Literature Review

Narcissism as reflected in the movies and literature

Neelambari Joshi

Writer, Computer Professional and Psychologist, Pune
E-mail – neelambari.joshi@gmail.com

The psychoanalytical concept of narcissism has a clear connection to literature because it comes from the myth of Narcissus found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The myth is about a handsome youth named Narcissus who has many admirers and is found irresistible by both sexes. But, due to narcissism in movies and literature to his pride, arrogance and self-love Narcissus is aloof and indifferent towards his admirers and keeps rejecting them until one rejected admirer asks the god of vengeance to cast a curse on him as punishment. The curse results in Narcissus falling in love with his own reflection upon seeing himself in a river. As a result, he pines away at his own image until he eventually dies and transforms into the flower named Narcissus.

Based on this story, in everyday usage, narcissism refers to someone who is arrogantly self absorbed. The concept of narcissism was popularized by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud through his work on the ego and its relationship to the outside world; this work became the starting point for many others developing theories on narcissism. Narcissism is a spectrum disorder, which means it exists on a continuum ranging from a few narcissistic traits to the full-blown personality disorder.

In fact, healthy narcissism is part of normal human functioning. It can represent healthy self-love and confidence that is based on real achievement, the ability to overcome setbacks and derive the support needed from social ties. But narcissism becomes a problem when the individual becomes preoccupied with the self, needing excessive admiration and approval from others, while showing disregard for other people's sensitivities. If the narcissist does not receive the attention desired, substance abuse and major depressive disorder can develop.

Narcissists often portray an image of grandiosity or overconfidence to the world, but this is only to cover up deep feelings of insecurity and a fragile self-esteem that is easily bruised by the slightest criticism. Because of these traits, narcissists find themselves in shallow relationships that only serve to satisfy their constant need for attention. When narcissistic traits become so pronounced that they lead to impairment this can indicate the presence of narcissistic personality disorder.

Younger people and men seem to be most affected. The exact causes of narcissistic personality disorder are unknown, but childhood abuse and neglect may be possible factors involved in its formation.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders describes narcissistic personality disorder as "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts". Here are the nine traits of narcissism as listed in the DSM:

- They have a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., they exaggerates achievements and talents).
- They are preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love.
- They believe that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
- They require excessive admiration.
- They have a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favourable treatment or automatic compliance with their expectations.
- They are interpersonally exploitative, i.e. they take advantage of others to achieve their own ends.
- They lack empathy: They are unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
- They are often envious of others or believe that others are envious of them.
- They show arrogance, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

Other than these 9 traits, Narcissistic people generally has following 4 traits..

1. They are highly reactive to criticism. Whenever someone criticizes them, they assume or interpret as the person is negatively evaluating their personality or performance.
2. They have low self-esteem.
3. They can be inordinately self-righteous and defensive.- so many non-narcissists I've worked with have shared how difficult it is to get through to narcissists in situations of conflict. For in challenging circumstances it's almost as though their very survival depends on being right or justified, whereas admitting a mistake—or, for that matter, uttering the words "I'm sorry" for some transgression—seem difficult to impossible for them.
4. They have poor interpersonal boundaries. It's been said about narcissists that they can't tell where they end and the other person begins. Unconsciously viewing others as "extensions" of themselves, they regard them as existing primarily to serve their own needs—just as they routinely put their needs before everyone else's.

Middlemarch

On the backdrop of International Women's day which was on 8th March, I have selected this novel written by George Eliot. Her true name was Mary Ann Evans. Mary used a male pen name to ensure that her works should be taken seriously. In the Victorian Era, female authors were published books under their own names during Eliot's life, but she wanted to escape the stereotype of women writing which was restricted to only lighthearted romances.

Middlemarch is a story of two families. It goes like this.. Dorothea Brooke is a young woman living with her uncle and sister in the small-but-growing town of Middlemarch, Her main ambition in life is to take on a noble project. So, she marries a dried-up old scholar named Casaubon, thinking that helping him in his research will be the project she's after. But Dorothea quickly discovers that he cares more for his own scholarly pursuits than he does for her. Meanwhile, an idealistic young doctor named Lydgate moves to Middlemarch to set up a practice with his new-fangled ideas about medicine and science. But he encounters a lot of obstacles. First of all, most of the residents of Middlemarch have lived in the town for their whole lives, and they don't trust newcomers. Second, they don't trust new ideas, and Lydgate is all about scientific progress. Lydgate falls in love with Rosamond Vincy, and marries her. But Lydgate discovers that Rosamond is a superficial and selfish, and Rosamond learns that Lydgate will always be "married" to his work as a doctor. And then they run out of money because neither of them knows how to stick to a budget.

These two unhappy couples (the Lydgates and the Casaubons) are connected by Mr. Casaubon's young cousin, Will Ladislaw. Will is a handsome, young artist with a sparkling wit. Seriously, he sparkles. Lydgate finds Will to be sympathetic to his ideas about science and medicine, and since Will is an outsider in Middlemarch, too, they quickly become friends. Everyone seems to like Will. Especially Dorothea, who finds that he understands her in a way her husband doesn't. Mr. Casaubon is jealous of the friendly bond between his cousin, Will, and his wife. So he leaves a condition in his will saying that Dorothea will lose all the money she's supposed to inherit from him, if she remarries Will Ladislaw.

Dorothea hadn't even thought about marrying Will until she reads the codicil. She thought they were just friends! But at the end of the novel, they get married and live happily ever after, despite the fact that they forfeit the large inheritance from dead Mr. Casaubon. And Rosamond and Lydgate live unhappily ever after – or, until Lydgate dies at a tragically early age, leaving Rosamond free to marry someone who's more willing to cater to her whims.

Rosamond in this novel is a classic example of narcissist personality. Let us see Narcissist traits in Rosamond's character.

The Narcissist has a grandiose sense of self-importance

Rosamond wants and obtains the best quality goods for her and insists on living in the best available house in Middlemarch. When she introduces Captain Lydgate to her guests, she thinks that her marriage was visibly as well as ideally floating her above the Middlemarch level.

The Narcissist “is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.”

Eliot frequently refers to the unreality of Rosamond’s dreams, with using the phrases “fancied and “might-be”! About her marriage Rosamond’s attitude also reflects this trait.. Eliot describes this beautifully as “She presented marriage as a prospect of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people”

The terms that Eliot employs – “celestial condition” in particular – are characteristic of the vocabulary of Narcissists. When reality breaks in on these fantasies, as it must from time to time, the Narcissist suffers what is known as a narcissistic injury, which is characterized by rage or, in the case of the passive type of Narcissist like Rosamond, by sudden emotional withdrawal, giving the offending person “the silent treatment.”

The Narcissist “believes that he or she is ‘special’ and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people

Typically for a Narcissist Rosamond seeks out men with a high social profile – doctors, politicians and editors – who will enhance her self-esteem. Her social aspirations are clear from the start. “She had been at school with girls of higher position, whose brothers, she felt sure, it would have been possible for her to be more interested in, than in these inevitable Middlemarch companions”. Later Eliot observes that Rosamond “had no consciousness that her action could rightly be called false” Belief in their moral superiority blinds Narcissists to what others call “the truth”: they are inherently dishonest and masters of duplicity. This is one of the very first things we learn about Rosamond.

The Narcissist “requires excessive admiration”.

Narcissists are indifferent to sincerity; what matters is the frequency and volume of the compliments and flattery that they crave. Consequently a Narcissist is never without an adoring partner. It is easy to see why Rosamond chose Lydgate; he knows how to supply “the inevitable amount of admiration and compliment which a man must give to a beautiful girl” and she hopes to “find in him a more adequate admirer than she had yet been conscious of”

The Narcissist “has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations.”

Rosamond’s unreasonable expectations are evident throughout Middlemarch, from her demand that her brother abstain from eating herrings or from playing the flute - because “a man looks very silly playing the flute” ..! She expects special treatment from her parents, her husband, and his family, and can never understand why Lydgate will not obey her. The truth is that “in her secret soul she was utterly aloof from him. The poor thing saw only that the world was not ordered to her liking, and Lydgate was part of that world”

The Narcissist “is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends.”

Rosamond’s manipulative behavior is evident from the first. To obtain her father’s consent to her marrying Lydgate, she threatens him: “You would not like me to go into consumption, And you know that I never change my mind”. A fine example of her technique can be found during her pregnancy. Lydgate wants her to promise not to go out riding; she is “determined not to promise. She meant to go out riding again” without him knowing. Narcissists are highly skilled in manipulating other people. It is a survival mechanism; in order to obtain their supply of adulation, they lull their victims into the belief that they are exactly the kind of partner they seek. Not for nothing does Eliot use the metaphor of the web and associate Rosamond with sirens and serpents.

The Narcissist “lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.”

Her lack of sympathy for others is Rosamond’s defining characteristic. For all their inability to empathize, Narcissists are expert in psychological penetration; they use it, often with a degree of sadism, to control other people and produce emotional reactions in them. At the conclusion of one dramatic exchange in the novel, Will leaves the room like a somnambulist, but instead of feeling for him, all Rosamond can say is: “There really is nothing to care for much” Her words are typical of a Narcissist. They tend to experience life as long, burdensome and sad, and they do not change.

The Narcissist “is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.”

Many characters in *Middlemarch* feel jealousy, and Rosamond has her share of it: “once when she had seen the Miss Brookes accompanying their uncle at the county assizes ... she had envied them, notwithstanding their plain dress” She is happy to admit to the feeling too: “‘I shall be jealous when Tertius goes to Lowick,’ said Rosamond, dimpling, and speaking with airy lightness.

The Narcissist “shows arrogant, behaviors or attitudes.”

Rosamond acts in a superior manner towards everyone except Dorothea. Most striking is the fact that Narcissists are often described as acting their lives. Having crushed their true self beneath a massive false self. In these terms George Eliot describes Rosamond: “She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own”

Narcissism in literature is reflected very clearly in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde

I am going to explain narcissism in this novel with the help of a book written by the psychologist Theodore Millon. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells the story of a young man whose portrait ages instead of him. He sins with impunity and commits increasingly vile acts while his picture grows disfigured. At the beginning, young Dorian Gray's life takes a turn when he meets Basil Hallward, an artist who paints a portrait of Dorian. The picture has somehow become enchanted, and it ages in Dorian's place. Free to sin without consequences, Dorian lives a life of debauchery and freedom. He acts on his every desire, committing unspeakable acts that leave his portrait disfigured. Basil is horrified by this, but his friend, Lord Henry Wotton, encourages Dorian's sinful ways. In the end, Dorian decides to reform. He plunges a knife into the portrait, thus breaking the spell. He's found dead in his home, horribly disfigured by his sins.

Theodore Millon was an American psychologist. He worked on personality disorders. Millon identified four subtypes of narcissistic personality in his book ‘*Personality Disorders in Modern Life*’. These types are the compensatory, the elitist, the amorous and the unprincipled narcissist. These subtypes were created by Millon in order to better identify different types of narcissists, Dorian Gray in the novel of Wilde can be seen as a fictional characterization of the amorous narcissist. The main characteristic of amorous narcissists is a need to build up their self esteem through sexual exploits. They are very skillful in charming and attracting the emotionally naive and needy while fulfilling their hedonistic desires and sexual appetites as they see fit. Although this type of narcissist will imply to be looking for an exclusive relationship, they do not have a preference for legitimate intimacy and instead seduce several potential conquests at the same time. The sexual exploits of amorous narcissists are shortlived, and last mostly one afternoon to only a few weeks. Furthermore, amorous narcissists leave behind them a series of scandalous acts such as swindling, sexual abundance, lying and fraud. Moreover, criticism or confrontations are not likely to change their ways as they will simply dismiss these as a result of jealousy by inferior people.

Amorous narcissists will also in most cases display considerable body narcissism, and care a great deal about their appearance and clothes. In the novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Narcissus, Gray is admired for his beauty, and complimented as being perfect and flawless on more than one occasion in the story. Moreover, after his friend Basil Hallward paints a portrait of him, Gray like Narcissus seemingly falls in love with his own image. Wilde described it beautifully, “A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless, and in wonder . . . The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before” Also being a Narcissus, Gray spends considerable time admiring his own image. He even attempts to kiss the portrait.

The portrait also brings out Gray’s first major narcissistic moment in the novel. The irrational terror of old age is closely associated with the narcissist because they have very few inner resources. Likewise, after realizing that he is a very beautiful man, thoughts of aging and loss of beauty due to the passage of time results in Gray panicking and wishing that the portrait would age instead of him. Here, I remember a famous character in Hindu Mythology, Yayati. Thoughts of aging panicks Yayati also. The author - V S Khandekar - of this famous novel, *Yayati*, which is based on Mythological story got Dnyanpeeth Award. Coming back to *Dorian Gray*! Gray questions Basil’s friendship, which suggests that he believes that all the praise and admiration he receives will vanish upon losing his beauty. Once Gray understands that with the passage of time he will lose his source of admiration, he panics and makes an irrational wish born out of the narcissistic fear of aging. Several details in this novel strongly suggest that Gray is the victim of emotional child abuse by his grandfather. E.g. When Lord Henry discusses Gray’s past with his uncle we find out that he was left “to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man” after his mother died. Gray also mentions his grandfather as he had, “hateful memories of him” Child abuse can often result in victims suffering from low self-esteem issues. In light of these points, one could argue that Gray’s abusive and unhappy childhood has given him low self-esteem. Gray’s narcissistic traits can consequently be viewed as a form of self regulation against low self-esteem.

The amorous narcissists’ aim is to build up their self-esteem and self-worth through sexual exploits, and they live as a result a very hedonistic lifestyle. Gray indulges in precisely such a hedonistic and debaucherous lifestyle. Given Gray’s abusive childhood, his hedonistic lifestyle can be seen as a defense mechanism to hide his off low self-esteem, much like the amorous narcissist. Similarly to the amorous narcissist, in addition to his hedonistic lifestyle, Gray exhibits disregard of others. He leaves behind a trail of destroyed lives consisting of suicides, disgrace and ruined careers. As an example we can take a look at Gray’s treatment of the young actress Sybil Vane.

Gray meets Sybil during one of her plays and after roughly three weeks they get engaged to marry her. However, after an evidently bad theater performance Gray in an instant loses all the love he supposedly feels for her and rejects her coldly. *Picture of Dorian Gray* is my favourite novel in many aspects, but I will stop here due to time constraints..!

Modern Epidemic

In the clinical setting, about 2% to 16% of people suffer from this disorder. Some suggest that narcissistic personality disorder is quite rare, but study estimates vary widely depending on sample sizes and the ways that narcissistic traits are assessed. Others have labelled narcissism a “modern epidemic”, pointing to the rapid change in society that occurred in industrial and post-industrial times as the cause. The past few decades have witnessed a societal shift from a commitment to the collective to a focus on the individual or the self. The self-esteem movement was an important turning point in this. It determined that self esteem was the key to success in life. Educators and parents started telling their children how Narcissism in movies and literature special and unique they are to make them feel more confident. Parents tried to “confer” self esteem upon their children, rather than letting them achieve it through hard work.

The rise of individualism and decline in social norms that accompanied the modernisation of society also meant that the community and the family were no longer able to provide the same support for individuals as they once did. And research has shown that being embedded in social networks – for example, being actively engaged in your community and connected with friends and family – has major health benefits. As the social fabric deteriorated, it became much harder to meet the basic need for meaningful connection.

The question moved from what is best for other people and the family to what is best for me. The modernisation of society seemed to prize fame, wealth, celebrity above all else. All this, combined with the breakdown in social ties created an “empty self, broken of from social meaning”.

The rise in technology and the development of hugely popular social networking sites, such as Facebook, further changed the way we spend our free time and communicate. Today, there are nearly 1.86 billion active Facebook users each day worldwide. Internet addiction, Facebook addiction, selfitis are new areas of study in mental health and recent cross-sectional research shows that addiction to Facebook is strongly linked to narcissistic behaviour and low self esteem. So what can we do about it?

Treatment for narcissistic personality disorder exists and this includes pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy. Meditation has also been shown to have positive effects on mental health. Further research, however, is needed on the effectiveness of various treatments. So what can we do about all this and how can we lead a happy and purposeful life? One of the largest studies on happiness was conducted by a group of Harvard researchers who followed a large cohort of people over a period of 75 years. What they discovered – unsurprisingly – was that fame and money were not the secrets to happiness. Rather, the most important thing in life and the greatest predictor of satisfaction was having strong and supportive relationships – essentially, that “the journey from immaturity to maturity is a sort of movement from narcissism to connection”.

So maybe it's time to take a break from that smartphone, shut off your computer and meet up with a friend or two. Maybe, just maybe, you might feel a little better – and boost your self esteem.

Narcissism is the fast food of the soul. It tastes great in the short term, has negative, even dire, consequences in the long run, and yet continues to have widespread appeal.

Acknowledgements – Nil

Source of Funding – Nil

Conflict of Interest – Nil