

WAS THE MYTH OF NARCISSUS MISINTERPRETED BY FREUD? NARCISSUS, A MODEL FOR SCHIZOID–HISTRIONIC, NOT NARCISSISTIC, PERSONALITY DISORDER

Arash Javanbakht

Gods and heroes of Greek myths have been of interest to psychoanalysts, who find them as symbols of human intrapsychic life, evolution, and conflicts. Many of these gods and heroes, like Oedipus, Electra, Eros, and Narcissus, have had their names given to psychological situations, conflicts, and diseases. Freud picked the myth of Narcissus as a symbol of a self-absorbed person whose libido is invested in the ego itself, rather than in other people. The term narcissistic personality disorder, also taken from the myth, describes a self-loving character with grandiose feelings of uniqueness. In this article, I reevaluate the myth of Narcissus and present a different psychoanalytic concept for this story. I view Narcissus as a youth who seeks the image of anima or a feminine mental image in interpersonal love relationships, an image that can never be found in the real external world. This misguided quest for an imaginary love object only results in solitude.

KEY WORDS: Narcissus; myth; schizoid; histrionic; symbolism; Freud; narcissistic.

Several gods and heroes of Greek mythology have been the subject of metaphoric interpretations for human psychic situations and intrapsychic conflicts. According to psychoanalysis and analytical psychology schools, mythical and religious stories are believed to be representatives of intrapsychic life and symbolize evolution, interactions of elements, fears, hopes, and failures, and growth of the human psyche reflected in the language of symbolic stories. Just as the unconscious part of the human psyche makes up the scenario of a dream, so a legend or myth is the reflection of psychic

Arash Javanbakht, M.D., Ibn E Sina Psychiatric Hospital, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran.

Address correspondence to Arash Javanbakht, M.D., No. 180 Banafsheh Street, Sajjad Boulevard, Mashhad, Iran, PC 91876; e-mail: arjavanbakht@gmail.com.

elements and processes of growth. The growth and evolution of the human psyche takes its conscious shape from the patterns set in unconscious archetypes demonstrated in myths and legends. I believe that myths might be of invaluable importance to therapists, who can use them as guidelines of potential human failures and dangers that threaten intrapsychic life. They might even be seen symbolically in patients. These myths, as a metaphoric language of the unconscious mind, are very useful in treatment and in helping people to understand their problem in a symbolic form (Aversa, Baldieri, & Marozza, 2004; Javanbakht, 2004). While in psychoanalysis and analytical psychology many mythological heroes are supposed to be the reflection of human intrapsychic growth, milestones, and conflicts, many other mythological characters, like Oedipus, Electra, Eros, and Narcissus, have had their names given to psychoanalytic concepts and conflictual situations. Narcissus was introduced by Freud in his paper on narcissism, in 1914, to describe the situation in which a personal libido is invested in the ego itself, rather than in other people (A. Freud, 1966; S. Freud, 1953; Gabbard, 1999). Narcissistic personality disorder was also defined accordingly for people who are pathologically interested in their own importance and value (Sadock & Sadock, 2003, pp. 811–812). In this paper, I discuss the myth of Narcissus from an analytical psychological view and reevaluate the meaning of the myth.

MYTH OF NARCISSUS

Narcissus was a very handsome youth who was loved by several beautiful Nymphs whom he spurned. His last lover was a Nymph called Echo who, as a punishment, could only repeat the last words of other people. When Echo expressed her love to Narcissus, he ignored her until she faded away from grief, with only her voice lingering on and on. Of course, Echo was not the first Nymph who had fallen in love with Narcissus. He had broken several hearts. He shunned all of the Nymphs as he had poor Echo. One day a maiden, who had in vain endeavored to attract him, uttered a prayer that Narcissus might at some time feel what it was to love and to receive no return of affection (Kingfisher, 2001; Ovid, 2000, Bk III).

There was a clear fountain, with silver water, to which the shepherds never brought their flocks to drink, or any of the beasts of the forest. Rocks sheltered the fountain from the sun (of consciousness). One day the youth came, fatigued from hunting, hot, and thirsty. He stooped down to drink from the fountain and saw his own image in the water. He thought it was some beautiful water-spirit living there. As he stood gazing with admiration at those bright eyes, Narcissus fell in love with his image

in the water. He brought his lips near to kiss the beloved object and plunged his arms in to embrace it. The image fled at the touch but returned again after a moment and renewed Narcissus' fascination. He could not tear himself away. The youth lost all thought of food or rest, while he hovered over the edge of the fountain, gazing on his own image.

He talked with the supposed spirit: "Why, beautiful being, do you shun me? Surely my face is not one to repel you. The Nymphs love me, and you yourself do not look indifferently upon me." His tears fell into the water and disturbed the image. As he saw it depart, he exclaimed, "Stay, I entreat you! Let me at least gaze upon you, if I may not touch you." With this, and much more of the same passion, he cherished the watery image that consumed him, so that gradually he lost the color, vigor, and beauty that had formerly so charmed the Nymph Echo. Narcissus tried in vain to hold the image but died of a broken heart (Jalic, 2002).

WHAT DOES THE MYTH OF NARCISSUS SYMBOLIZE?

The main concept drawn by Freud from this myth was Narcissus' interest in his own reflection in the water, which was interpreted as extreme love of one ego for existence (Palmowski, 1989). Freud did not consider that this love was a punishment and not present at first. The chastisement was because Narcissus had rejected the love expressed by the Nymphs for him. Another point not presented by Freud was that Narcissus fell in love with a reflection in water rather than his own being!

I prefer to look at the story of Narcissus from a different point of view than Freud. I perceive the myth of Narcissus as a reflection of a story of an attractive youth who is of interest to many other people (especially women). This young person is in a stage of life that craves love and attachment. He has a mental image of what he is trying to find in his candidates of love. Whenever a realistic love and relationship is proposed, he rejects it because that lover person differs from his mental image. The more he searches to find his perfect dream girl, the less he finds her in real people, as that image has no real presence.

As the myth recounts, Narcissus falls in love with his reflection in the water. In symbolic language, water represents the unconscious mind. Therefore, the reflection of Narcissus in the water differs from himself; the reflection of one's character in the water of the unconscious can be very well understood by the Jungian concept of Anima/Animus, which is defined as the unconscious character of man/woman, respectively.

In other words, Narcissus is the symbol of a youth who, rather than living in the real world and looking for a tangible and real love, seeks his

mental image of anima in his environment, a quest that is surely in vain. This quest for finding that mental image of anima is repeatedly presented in the myths and legends as the quest of the hero to find a woman of whom he has only seen a picture. This ambiguous beautiful image, or picture, is the best place for anima to be reflected, as it makes the hero take a journey to find the owner of the image. In every potential relationship, when the object of love is still not well known, the lover can reflect his mental image of anima on the ambiguous beloved. In this case, the lover may feel he is finding his soul-mate. However, whenever the lover comes close to the person whose vague image he has been seeking, he will find it different from the anima character in his own mind and the image in the water gets disturbed! As a result, the person rejects his lover and escapes from the relationship. (Just as Narcissus spurned several beautiful Nymphs who tried to love him. They were attracted to his beauty while he reflected his passion for his anima on them at first.)

Since Narcissus will never find what he looks for in his real objective environment, he will have to manage to live forever in his internal mental world, looking for that image to revive. This person will be withdrawn and is condemned to live a lonely life. He will never be able to experience real external object love because as soon as he gets close to a woman to love, he will find her different from what he has been looking for (whenever he reaches the image in water to hold it, the image disappears). Therefore, he will not be able to love a real woman. This person is condemned to live and die alone despite several opportunities for love that he encounters in his life.

This can be understood much better if we review narcissistic personality disorder. People with this personality are not resolved in their internal mental world images. People with narcissistic personality disorder are characterized by a heightened sense of self-importance and grandiose feelings of uniqueness (which come from a deep feeling of inferiority). They are in severe need of other people's approval and attention. It is clear that individuals with such a personality disorder cannot live alone and withdraw from society! They need to socialize, as their source of energy and good feelings is other people who admire them and give them thorough attention and adoration. Since narcissists are incapable of asserting their own sense of adequacy, they seek to be admired by others (Kernberg, 1975). Conversely, the character of Narcissus symbolizes individuals withdrawn from others and lost in their internal mental worlds. Narcissus does not need admiration and others' attention! His task is not to prove to other people that he is very important and most valuable; his problem is that he looks for his mental image of anima/animus in passion and love relations. Rather than depend on people's praises, Narcissus is a

person who cannot love because he is unable to find the proper love object outside of his mental image. Finally, despite what is defined in narcissistic personality disorder, Narcissus is not an arrogant person who needs others to worship him. Narcissus is withdrawn from them and is lost in a false internal journey of finding anima/animus or whatever unrealistic mental image of the opposite sex he/she has in his/her mind.

The story of Narcissus may be seen by clinicians in youth who are unable to find love and are indecisive, people who can never find the girl/boy they have always been looking for, their Adam/Eve, or their so-called soulmate. Finally it seems the myth of Narcissus, rather than symbolizing what Freud defined, reflects the inability of individuals to experience love and attachment in the real objective world because of their highly misguided search for the mental image of anima/animus in real life. The explanation of this cognitive psychoanalytic mistake to the youth who are in such a situation and efforts to resolve the conflict and so bring the beloved unconscious image to consciousness might be very helpful. This would save such youth from the fate of a fantastic mental quest to find an image that does not exist in the external world and so guide them to experience the world as it is. Experts should also help them to differentiate this precious mental image from reality.

A DIFFERENT LOOK AT THE MYTH OF NARCISSUS

There could be a somewhat different look at the myth of Narcissus. Although the conscious intention of Narcissus was to be alone and he managed to reject all the love that was proposed to him by the Nymphs, it is apparent that Narcissus could not have been loved and attracted others' attention unless he liked it to happen. If he really did like to be alone, he could easily have behaved in a way to be less attractive to others. Here is also another cue for my claim that he was not of a so-called narcissistic personality type. A narcissistic person does not attract other people except the dependent ones and the Nymphs did not seem to be of that type. In fact, people rarely can fall in love with an arrogant, narcissistic person.

Putting all these facts together, I think that we are observing a person with two essential needs: to be alone and to be loved: A schizoid person who needs to be approved of and loved, a schizoid-histrionic personality type.

His need from other people is their confirmation that he is good, lovely, and worthy of being loved. On the other hand (which I think is more basic), he cannot make a close external object love relationship. Here comes the major conflict: two essential needs that are in contrast with

each other and need completely different external object relationships. Here is the solution:

He attracts females (Nymphs) by his histrionic behaviors, and when he is sure of his being lovable, good, and worthy because of their love, one essential need is fulfilled for a while. Then the deeper and more essential need (to be alone) arises and he rejects the love object (the Nymph) that is endangering his solitude by trying to establish a constant love relationship with him, not knowing about his fear of close relationships. As a result of this process, he is both loved and lonely, and both the basic needs are satisfied for a period of time. However, after a period of solitude, the need for approval and being loved arises again and Narcissus will attract other Nymphs. So, I dare say that Narcissus is a schizoid-histrionic person rather than a narcissistic one! His main conflict is that there are two essential needs in him that are in contrast; he cannot fulfill both at the same time, and he needs to set up a balance between these two internal affects.

Now we continue the story of Narcissus: after rejecting several love proposals from the Nymphs, Narcissus was condemned by the gods to fall in love with his image in the water, which was not a real object. Since the gods were supernatural powers, out of reach and control of people, I suppose them to be unconscious forces that are out of reach and knowledge of the consciousness. I also suppose their task (at least in part) to be unconscious defense mechanisms and solutions (or in a transactional view, games). In this view, the so-called punishment that was instructed by the gods was an unconscious solution to the simultaneous need for object love relationship and solitude. Since Narcissus could not set up a close object love relationship despite his need for unconditional love and approval, he managed to fall in love with a mental ideal image that was out of reach and could not endanger his solitude. Finally, his grief and cry for an untouchable love object were a defense (a game, in a transactional view) to protect his solitude despite his need for being loved. However, the time would come when he could not continue the repeated attraction–rejection game with the Nymphs, and because of the social and interpersonal consequences of all these challenges, he could not take the repetition of attraction–rejection and grief would be needed.

I conclude that Narcissus is the symbol of a schizoid person who is not sure of his or her value and goodness and needs to be approved of and loved by others: a schizoid-histrionic person, a combination of two opposite personality types/disorders.

Why did Narcissus need attention and solitude simultaneously? An objective example of Narcissus follows.

If I had to guess the childhood life history of Narcissus, I would imagine him in a chaotic family with much quarreling between the parents, which caused the child to separate himself from the quarrels of his environment; then he chose this as a permanent pattern of behavior (one of the mechanisms of formation of schizoid personality type/disorders). On the other hand, he was never loved by his parents unconditionally (the parents could be of the obsessive-compulsive personality type) and was approved of (I refuse to say loved) only if he was perfect and adjusted to their rules, and was also encouraged to be attractive to the eyes of other people by his parents. This made him try to attract others' attention and, besides, to seek the unconditional love that he never received from his parents.

Altogether, he set his bases on the two needs, solitude (for security) and attraction of attention (for seeking unconditional maternal love and approval and the feeling of being good), as a model of behavior and life. At an adult age, he repeated the unconscious game of attraction-rejection while he would consciously think that every love object relationship that he encountered differed from his mental image of a perfect mate (an un-touchable image). After several trials of this kind of relationship, he was tired of this process and its social and interpersonal consequences and crises at the times of rejections. His terminal unconscious solution (the gods' punishment) was a grief for an unreachable internal love object image that would keep his solitude protected and unreachable by other people. A person such as this would come to the therapist with the complaint that several people have fallen in love with him or her but none of them is the woman or man of his or her dreams!

WHAT IS THE IDENTITY OF THE FOUNTAIN

The fountain could be understood as the mirror for the picture of Narcissus, as its container, as a copy of the Narcissus through which Narcissus could see himself. The fountain had no internal identity and its main defect was lack of existence, lack of having a sense of the self, and it was severely vulnerable to the projection of the identity of Narcissus onto it. When Narcissus, with his all attractions, faced the fountain, it vacuumed his identity and idealized him. As noted in the myth, Nymphs used to see the face of Narcissus and fall in love with it, but they did not help him, by this love, to see his beauty. He just received their love, and no reflection of his identity. Only in the fountain was he able to see his own face and know his beauty, to feel his identity, and to have a face! (While he had not seen his own image before, he did not know his face, he was not conscious of it. One can say he had no face!)

The fountain also had no face before facing Narcissus; it was empty and had no identity. Only after facing Narcissus did it find an identity and introject the image of Narcissus. In other words, Narcissus shared his beauty with the fountain in a bonding in which both Narcissus and the fountain earned an identity, a shared one. They diffused their boundaries of ego, being, and identity and set up a new one that was not real, a delusional mutual self (Lachkar, 1984, 1993).

If we try to match the characteristics of the fountain with reality, they will all be found in borderline personality disorder. A borderline is a person whose main defect is lack of a sense of self, lack of identity, and, in the extreme, lack of feeling of existence (Grotstein, 1987; Kernberg, 1975; Sadock & Sadock, 2003, p. 809). Such a person, when facing someone with the characteristics of Narcissus (a person who can be idealized because of his qualities and values), will diffuse her own borders of ego with Narcissus, idealize him, and approve and appraise all his values and abilities (Klein, 1957; Lachkar, 2004). This process helps Narcissus to see all his values and ideals in the eyes of the borderline, to see himself! And if all the Nymphs fall in love with such a beautiful face, why should not Narcissus himself get trapped in a supernarcissistic satisfaction? On the other hand, the borderline cannot detach herself (if, in our example, we assume Narcissus to be male) from the new identity she earns from sharing the mask of Narcissus, sharing his face. She is placed between the two situations of nothingness and wholeness and can never tolerate a setback and regression to the previous empty state, the black hole (Grotstein, 1987). However, since the borderline takes her life from the identity of Narcissus (as the lifeless fountain was revived through a beautiful image of Narcissus), she will praise and approve the idealized identity in a fantastic and dreamy way which is the strongest heroine for Narcissus, making him see his beauty in a multiplied version!

This pathological bonding can be seen in love relationships in which two people swing between love and hate, intimacy and distance. Whenever Narcissus sees his beauty in the eyes of the borderline, he cannot manage himself and avoid this delusional unreal fantasy, and the borderline feels dead without having the newly earned face and identity. Since the reflection of Narcissus in the fountain is not a real one, whenever he gets close to the borderline and tries to catch the image, it disappears. However, Narcissus cannot escape from this go-ever-round dance and cannot find his real internal value because he tries uselessly to find himself in another person and depends forever on the approval and praise from the borderline, whose identity is also false, a borrowed one!

REFERENCES

- Aversa, G. L., Baldieri, V., & Marozza, M. I. (2004). The mythic function of narcissism. *Jour. Anal. Psychology*. 49(4), 553–568.
- Freud, A. (1966). *The ego and the mechanisms of defense*, rev. ed, New York: International Universities Press.
- Freud, S. (1953). *Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (p. 966), London: Hogarth Press.
- Gabbard, G. O. (1999). Psychoanalysis. In B. J. Sadock & V. A. Sadock (Eds.), *Kaplan and Sadock's comprehensive textbook of psychiatry*, 7th ed. (p. 579). Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Philadelphia, PA, USA.
- Grotstein, J. (1987). Meaning, meaningless, and the black hole. Self and interactional regulation as a new paradigm for psychoanalysis and neuroscience: an introduction. Unpublished manuscript.
- Jalic, L. C. (2002). Echo and Narcissus, mythology guide. http://www.online-mythology.com/echo_narcissus.
- Javanbakht, A. (2004). Case report: Icarus versus King David. *Spirituality and Healthcare International*. 5(4), 224–226.
- Kernberg, O. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*, New York: Aronson.
- Kingfisher, (2001). *The Kingfisher book of mythology* (p. 91), 1st ed. London: Kingfisher .
- Klein, M. (1957). *Envy and gratitude*, New York: Basic Books.
- Lachkar, J. (1984). Narcissistic/borderline couples: A psychoanalytic perspective to family therapy. *Int. Jour. Family Psychiatry*. 5(2), 169–189.
- Lachkar, J. (1993). Paradox of peace: Folie a deux in marital and political relationships. *Jour. Psychohistory*. 20(3), 275–287.
- Lachkar, J. (2004). *The narcissistic/borderline couple*, 2nd ed. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Ovid, (2000). *Metamorphosis*. A. S. Kline (Trans.). PDF electronic version. *Book III-438*, 157–160.
- Palmowski, B. (1989). Freud's narcissism concept. *Z. Psychosom. Med. Psychoanal*. 35(2), 101–116.
- Sadock, B. J., & Sadock, V. A. (Eds.) (2003). *Kaplan and Sadock's synopsis of psychiatry*, 9th ed. (pp. 809, 811–812). Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Philadelphia, PA, USA.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.