

Representation of Narcissism in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*

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Abstract

*The concept of narcissism, named after a mythological hero, Narcissus, began to be used in psychoanalysis at the end of the 1800s. This concept, which was used to express the mental state of people who admire their own body and love themselves very much, is a psychological state that is discussed in detail in psychoanalysis by being expanded within this framework. Freud used the concept of narcissism in the sense of homosexuality and expressed it as a situation that can be seen in every individual. Narcissism, which can be considered as a part of normal development as long as it does not disturb the individual and his environment, can also become pathological with the variables in the development of the individual. It is common for individuals with narcissistic characteristics to constantly see themselves as right and superior, and to underestimate and value others. In this study, the main characters of Tennessee Williams, one of the important names of American theater, in his play *Suddenly Last Summer* will be examined in terms of narcissism. Williams, who is a playwright who deeply feels the crises he has experienced in his own life, deals with a main theme that can be evaluated in terms of narcissism in *Suddenly Last Summer*. The most obvious manifestation of narcissism in the play is Mrs. Veneable's overconfidence in herself and her son, and that she has the right to humiliate and treat everyone else for herself.*

Keywords: Narcissism, Tennessee Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer*, Psychoanalysis

1.Introduction

Literally, narcissism means showing too much interest and admiration for one's own appearance and abilities (dictionarycambridge.org). The term comes from Greek mythology. According to the mythology, Narcissus is a very handsome figure whom everyone admires. However, he has another feature that is as famous as his beauty, which is arrogance. A nymph named Echo, on the other hand, is extremely fond of him, trying to approach him, but being rudely rejected by Narcissus. As a result, Echo, destroyed by her shame and grief, disappears, leaving her echoing voice behind. Other nymphs want to avenge Echo and convey this to the Gods. In line with this demand, the Gods decide to punish Narcissus by experiencing unrequited love. So much so that one day he falls in love with his own reflection, which he sees in a puddle. He cannot tear himself away from this image that looks at him in the water but never responds; and disappears every time he touches it for a hug. He eventually falls into the water and dies.

It is possible to clearly see the features related to narcissism in the story. Some of these are smugness, self-centeredness, indifference to other people and insensitivity to their feelings, vague body image, lack of relationship continuity, and an underdeveloped self (Gençtan, 2013, p.269).

In the diagnostic manual (DSM-IV) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) narcissism is associated with nine traits. These are:

1. grandiose self-importance and an exaggerated sense of talent and achievements;
2. fantasies of unlimited power and beauty;
3. belief in being superior, special and unique;
4. requirement of an excessive attention and admiration;
5. expectation of priority and privileged in the society;
6. lack of sensitivity to the needs of others and exploitation of others;
7. lack of empathy towards others;
8. being jealous of others and believing that others also jealous of them;

9. displaying snobbish and rude behaviours towards others. (APA, DSM-IV, 1994)

2.Narcissism as a Concept

Freud used the term narcissism for the first time in his article “*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*” published in 1910. In this section, which is added as a footnote, he states that although psychoanalysis does not yet provide a full explanation of the origin of homosexuality, it contributes by discovering the psychological mechanisms in its development. Freud attributes the first occurrence of narcissism to infancy. The negativities in the emotional interaction of the child, especially with the mother, lead to the development of pathological narcissism in the future (Grinberg, 2012, p.99). In addition, as far as he examined, he states that future homosexuals usually go through a very intense and short-term excessive attachment to their mother during early childhood, identifying themselves with a woman and choosing themselves as sexual objects. According to him, they are looking for a young man who is like them and who can love them as their mother does (Freud, 1977, p.56). It can be seen here that Freud used the concept of narcissism to mean homosexuality. According to him, when individuals suitable for the narcissistic type choose an object of sexual love for themselves, first of all, “... they choose what he himself is, what he himself was, what he himself would like to be, someone who was once a part of himself (Freud, 2012, p.20).

Freud analyzed narcissism in two stages, primary and secondary narcissism. In primary narcissism, the self is in the libidinal object and this is considered a natural part of development. This kind of narcissism can be found in anyone (Baranger, 2012, p.116). As the child grows, his awareness of the environment increases, the disappointment experienced in the outside world or the loss of the libidinal object causes the libido to turn towards the self again. This leads to secondary narcissism (Treurniet, 2012, p.79). While primary narcissism in the individual is considered normal, secondary narcissism is the state of exhibiting pathological behaviors in the individual.

Lacan, who reviewed many things in psychoanalysis by rereading Freud’s psychoanalytic work, brought a new perspective to psychoanalysis. At the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis held in Zurich in 1949, he presented a paper titled “*The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function*”, in which his evaluations on narcissism had a great impact in the field of psychoanalysis. According to Lacan, the pre-oedipal stage, in which 16-18-

month-old children identify with their mother, is the “mirror stage”. This stage is considered the narcissistic stage and has taken psychoanalysts’ views on narcissism one step further. According to Lacan, the child in this stage recognizes himself as an ideal being by identifying with his own image or the holistic image of his mother. At this stage, the concept of the “other” emerges, which is very important. The child tries to complete his own integrity with the image reflected from the “other”. This is an indication of the child’s narcissistic tendency (pp.93-100).

Otto F. Kernberg, who has similar thoughts with Freud on narcissism, states that narcissism is a pathological condition that occurs in the early stages of development and prevents normal development. Like Freud, he accepts that normal narcissism is a libidinal investment by the individual in himself. However, while Freud explained the relationship between the object and the self in this libidinal investment with an inverse proportion, Kernberg established a direct proportion between them, stating that an increase in one causes an increase in the other. The same is true for vice versa. In other words, a decrease in the investment made by the person in the objects leads to a decrease in the investment in the self (Kernberg, 2004, pp.271-272). According to him, the influence of parents is also important in the emergence of narcissistic tendencies. Most narcissists have a history of a cold parent figure, often veiled but with severe aggression (Kernberg, 2004, pp.234-235).

It was the work of Heinz Kohut that greatly changed the psychoanalysis view of narcissism. Kohut considers narcissism to be a part of normal development, found in every human being, rather than a negative trait. According to him, pathological narcissism is a pause in the normal developmental process. Kohut approaches narcissistic development along two main lines, which he calls the grandiose self and the idealized parent. If there is a problem in either of these two parallel lines, the healthy one can heal the other. However, if both parents have defects, then the probability of the child’s narcissism at the pathological level is quite high (Kohut, 1983, p.27).

Narcissistic traits may differ between individuals in terms of the causes and consequences of their emergence. To make a general assessment within the framework of the views of psychoanalysts, negative parental behaviors and disappointments of the individual push him to use narcissism as a defense mechanism.

3.Narcissism in Suddenly Last Summer

Tennessee Williams, one of the most important playwrights of the American theater, included mostly female or female-sensitive male protagonists in his plays. When the works of the playwright are considered together with his social life, it is seen that he expresses his art with his own inner and outer reality (Ezici, 1995, p.5). It is possible to see autobiographical features in *Suddenly Last Summer*. His family approves of prefrontal lobotomy for his sister's recovery because his sister Rose, whom he loves and inspires, has a mental breakdown; however, the surgery fails and Rose spends the rest of her life mentally handicapped. For this reason, Williams never forgives his family and his alcohol addiction can be attributed to this reason.

Suddenly Last Summer is a play influenced by the mood of the playwright in these depressed times. The play opens with Mrs. Veneable's adoring and praising depictions of her son, Sebastian, who died last summer. Mrs. Veneable, who set the limits in their relationship throughout their life, wanted to keep Sebastian under control so that he would always stay within the boundaries she had drawn, and she succeeded until last summer. However, the fact that Sebastian prefers to go to his last summer vacation with his cousin Catharine instead of his mother means that Mrs. Veneable has lost her control over her son. This is a situation that a mother with a narcissistic personality cannot accept.

There is arrogance and grandiosity in Mrs. Veneable's relations with people. This is due to her fear of losing her respect in society. She describes herself as a whole with Sebastian. Therefore, as she has some concerns about what Catharine said about Sebastian, she tries to prevent Catharine's negative evaluations of her son by identifying her first. For this reason she emphasized Catharine's negative traits while talking about her. Mrs. Veneable, who has boundless trust in herself and her son, and who is constantly humiliating to her deceased husband's relatives, especially Catharine, needs confirmation of what she says. The superiority psychology observed in her is a kind of expression of the self-admiration of the narcissistic personality. On the one hand, she shows herself and her son extremely valuable, on the other hand, she has an attitude that humiliates and devalues Catharine and her family. While talking to the doctor, she does not hesitate to emphasize that she and her son are superior in every way, and that Catharine and even the doctor himself lack these qualities.

It's not enough to be perfect just for Mrs. Veneable to keep her grandiose self alive. She expects Sebastian to be an individual who sticks to her word, lives a life in the direction she draws, in short, serves her own narcissistic tendencies. For this reason, she does not respect her son's personal boundaries, and even finds herself the right to interfere in his private life. She never wants him to go on vacation with Catharine. In Kernberg's words, this can be explained by the fact that "narcissists are extremely offended when one of their slaves wants to be freed" (Kernberg, 2004, p.236). So Mrs. Veneable does not want to lose Sebastian, who is the mirror of her grandiose self.

Mrs. Veneable is a very devoted mother to her son. In his book *On Narcissism and the Schreber Case*, Freud describes this love of parents, who show excessive love for their children, as the rebirth of their own narcissism, which they have abandoned long ago, even though it has turned into object love. It is understood from the sentences that Mrs. Veneable told the doctor about Sebastian and that she described him as extremely noble, knowledgeable and talented, that she attributed all kinds of perfection to her son and is in an effort to hide and forget all his faults. This strengthens the claim that Mrs. Veneable has narcissistic tendencies, because, according to Freud, overvaluation is considered a narcissistic symptom (Freud, 2012, p.18).

This extreme attitude of Mrs. Veneable towards her son is considered as a kind of defense mechanism stemming from her past narcissistic traumas. According to Kohut, the child, who has an inadequate relationship with the mother, creates a grandiose identity image for himself and transfers this to an idealized self-object that he admires. The child sees this object as an extension of himself (Kohut, 1983, pp.23-31). In this case, it is concluded that Mrs. Veneable also has an inadequate and unhealthy relationship with her own mother. It is clear from her conversations that she admires her son and has made him an object with which she identifies with herself. She is in such a unity with her son that she has made an effort to make sense of her own life through her experiences with him. For this reason, the narcissism embodied by Mrs. Veneable undergoes a kind of transformation. She also established the inadequate and unhealthy relationship, which is thought she had with her own mother, with her own son. As it can be understood from her attitudes and speeches while telling Dr. Cukrowicz about the nobelty of her son, his poetry and the relationship between them, it is seen that both of them have a great influence on each other. She unwittingly, or voluntarily, served her son's

narcissistic tendencies, just as Sebastian served the narcissistic tendencies of Mrs. Veneable. Furthermore, the audience learns this directly from Catharine:

I was PROCURING for him!

...She used to do it, too.

Not consciously! She didn't know that she was pro-curing for him in the smart, the fashionable places.

They used to got to before lasat summer! Sebastian was shy with people. She wasn't. Neither was I. We both did the same thing for him, made contacts for him, but she did it in nice places and in decent wavs and I hadto do it the way that I just told you!— Sebastian was lonely. Doctor, and the empty Blue Jay notebook got bigger and bigger, so big it was big and empty as taht big empty blue sea and sky.... I knew what I was doing. I came out in the French Quarter years before I came out in the Garden District....

According to Freud, if the individual cannot achieve his narcissistic satisfaction, he creates a sexual ideal to replace it. In other words, due to the narcissistic personality traits it contains, the individual tends towards an object that has features that are not in himself. He explains this situation as “he falls in love with the person who has the perfection that the ego lacks in order to create an ideal” (Freud, 2012, p.31). From her statements such as “yes, even with me. Without me, impossible, Doctor! He wrote no poem last summer”, “...without me he died last summer, that was his last summer's poem” it is understood how much Mrs. Veneable cares about herself. The predominant situation on her is the satisfaction of the object libido. Mrs. Veneable has been satisfied by her son, whom she invested in the object, and she is aware of this situation. This spoiled her ego.

Although Mrs. Veneable claims that her relationship with her son is unique and extremely strong, after a while the audience become aware of Sebastian's orientation towards Catharine. However, Mrs. Veneable is so confident in her son and in herself that her conversations overshadow the thought of Sebastian and Catharine being in a relationship. In fact, the reason why she behaved this way is because Mrs. Veneable cannot dare to face this reality. Because Sebastian's interest in someone other than his mother will destroy the thought that she has a special place in his heart.

The only truth for narcissists is only themselves, their thoughts and everything about them. Everyone and everything that is not related to them, except themselves, is worthless (Fromm, 1973, p.201). With her narcissistic personality, Mrs. Veneable chooses to neutralize Catharine, whom she thought would damage the nobility of her family. She ruthlessly excludes Catharine and her family, whom she perceives as a threat because of the fear that they will destroy the integrity of the image she thinks she has, even though they are relatives of her deceased husband, and sees them as worthless. With this negative characteristics that she internalizes, she constantly tends to see herself as right and superior. In fact, she has already determined to sacrifice Catharine for this cause. She is extremely insistent on requesting that her brain be processed through a prefrontal lobotomy. She does not care that the surgery is dangerous and extremely risky for Catharine. The important thing for her is to clear Sebastian's name and to show everyone that she is right.

When evaluated from Sebastian's point of view, the absence of a good mother figure in his life can be considered as an indicator of his narcissistic damage. Because not having a normal relationship with his mother causes problems in his mental development. According to Lacan, the child's interests, which are first purely for himself, then shift to the primary object. At this stage, the child thinks that he is in control of everything and does not see the mother as an object separate from himself. This is called a "mirror stage". When the child looks at his mother, he actually sees his own reflection. The state of the child in the omnipotence stage integrating with the mother and making her an object of desire is the basis of his narcissistic tendencies. Based on this, it can be argued that Sebastian, who lives with his mother, is not at a normal stage in his spiritual development. Therefore, it is thought that he cannot direct his narcissistic tendencies in a healthy way. This shows that Sebastian is in search of a self and has not been able to achieve self integrity.

It can be claimed that Sebastian wants to explore his own self. He realizes that his life and experiences, until he decides to go on vacation with Catharine, were imposed on him by his mother, not by him. According to Kernberg, individuals who were exposed to wrong parenting attitudes in childhood cannot manage their narcissistic tendencies in a healthy way. For this reason, they display an attitude that is constantly in search of perfection that they could not achieve on time (Kernberg, 2004, pp.315-347). Sebastian is a character who could not manage his narcissistic tendencies because of his mother's wrong attitude. For this reason, he tends to create another self-image and sacrifices his own life for this cause.

Exploitation, one of the dimensions of narcissism, is one of the characteristics expected to be seen in narcissistic people. Exploitation can be viewed in three different ways. In the first, the exploiter can coerce the exploited or use him by deception. In the second, the exploited person may consent to these actions. In the last one, the purpose of the exploited person is to benefit himself, to gain profit (Ashmawy, 2016, p.25). In the play, it is understood that Sebastian took Catharine on vacation not because he loved her, but to use her, to benefit from her:

He bought me a swim-suit I didn't want to wear. It was a one-piece suit made of white lisle, the water made it transparent! I didn't want to swim in it, but he'd grab my hand and drag me into the water, all the way in, and I'd come out looking naked!..... And before long, when the weather got warmer and the beach so crowded, he didn't need me any more for that purpose..... So now he let me wear a decent dark suit.

It is an indication that Sebastian is in a narcissistic nature, forcing her to swim with a transparent swimsuit and thus allowing Catharine to wear a normal swimsuit after the young boys gathered around him.

Kernberg also states that narcissists' relationships with other people are based on exploitation. Their attitudes towards others are either condescending or fearful. After they get what they want, they no longer need them and those others are worthless. Or others try to exploit the narcissist or even have the perception that they can attack him (Kernberg, 2004, p.233). Sebastian's first use of Catharine to attract their attention, then having the young people beaten by the waiters and his hateful and humiliating words while talking about them are the most obvious examples of this situation:

"Don't look at those little monsters. Beggars are a social disease in this country. If you look at them, you get sick of the country, it spoils the whole country for you.

It is at the forefront that Mrs. Veneable and Sebastian devalue and take advantage of other people with the unique identities they believe they have. As a result, they have polarized themselves as "us" and "others". They are in an egocentric psychology that sees themselves as almost indispensable and privileged compared to other people. The contemptuous, superior and devaluing attitudes they have towards other people, especially Catharine and her family, are primarily due to the extreme importance they attribute to themselves. Being a wealthy

family and being so related to each other resulted in them perceiving themselves as different from other people. This caused them to act with the feeling of “claiming rights”, one of the DSM-IV criteria specified for the diagnosis of narcissism. Rapier (2005) states that narcissists who act with this feeling have unreasonable expectations that those around them will also consent to their every kind of request (p.21). The most obvious example of this in the play is that Mrs. Veneable waits for the doctor’s approval for the operation to be performed on Catharine, without considering the outcome, and even reminds him of the donations she made to the place where he works, and compels him to do so.

4. Conclusion

In this study, by focusing on the studies of theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut on the concept of narcissism, the characters of Mrs. Veneable and Sebastian, who show narcissistic personality disorder in Tennessee Williams’ play *Suddenly Last Summer*, were examined. The reasons for narcissistic behaviors such as the feeling of emptiness, grandiosity and using others, and despising them in the examined characters were analyzed within the framework of the studies of these theorists. In this direction, it has been determined that the characters “selves” are damaged. The reason for this is the traumas caused by parental behaviors in childhood. While it is directly observed in the play that Mrs. Veneable cannot adequately meet his need for mirroring in Sebastian, he cannot overcome his arrogant self and cannot adapt to the social structure, it is indirectly seen that the same situation was once valid for Mrs. Veneable. The destruction that the characters, who are thought to be pathologically narcissistic, cause as individuals, on each other and their environment, shows itself in almost every dialogue in the play.

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