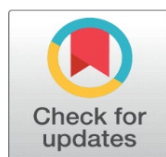


THE SELF IN THE OTHER: PSYCHOANALYTIC TRACING OF NARCISSISM IN LOVE RELATIONSHIPS OF LOKI FROM MCU AND THEODORE FROM HER

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ABSTRACT

Narcissism originated from the Greek mythological story of Narcissus, a young man who fell in love with the reflection of himself, and is based on self-obsession, entitlement, and a desire for admiration. This essay examines a psychoanalytic interpretation of problematic love affairs in narcissistic individuals. This investigation is carried out using characters of Loki from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Theodore from Her. The paper studies how these love relationships align with narcissistic cathexis, introduced by Sigmund Freud, where individuals direct their libidinal energy inward, and Otto Kernberg's theory of pathological narcissism. The study analyzes how these characters, in pursuing emotional intimacy, reveal their unresolved desires for validation and control. The evolution of the individuals in these relationships also suggests that the condition is affected by the early developmental experiences, leading to a distorted self-concept.

Keywords: Narcissism, Narcissistic Cathexis, Psychoanalysis, Libidinal Energy, Loki (Marvel Cinematic Universe), Theodore (Her), Pathological Narcissism

1. INTRODUCTION

“Love is an endless mystery, for it has nothing else to explain it.”

Rabindranath Tagore

Love, often considered as complex and highly subjective as its expression and expectations, varies greatly from person to person. Some people associate love with vulnerability and unselfish devotion, while others associate it with the need for approval, control, and admiration. Plato, in his dialogue Symposium, introduces Eros, or love, as a powerful force that drives the soul from sensual desire to appreciation for pure, abstract beauty and truth. He claims that love begins with

desire for a particular body, progresses to desire for all bodily forms, and concludes with desire for the Form of Beauty itself. Love then begins in particularity and goes to infinity. In accordance with this philosophical vision, love is a process of becoming that ranges from the self to something universal and greater. This higher perception of love stands different when compared to narcissistic love's focus towards the self, in which pursuit of feeling is often an unacknowledged expression of self-love, control, or approval. This built-in mystery adds to the complexity, meaning that love takes different forms in every person, sometimes as a giving, out-poured quality, and other times as an introspective, even self-centered experience. It is along this continuum that exists the narcissistic type of love, in which love is less about how one connects with another and more about filling a void within oneself.

The word narcissism has its roots in the Greek myth of Narcissus, a young man who falls in love with his own image appearing as a reflection in a pool of water, eventually leading to his tragic demise. This myth has been a great metaphor for self-absorption and emotional isolation in psychology and literature. Sigmund Freud was among the first to institutionalize the concept within psychoanalysis, making a distinction between primary narcissism, an inevitable phase of development in infancy, and secondary narcissism, where people withdraw emotional investment from others and channel it back towards the self.

Narcissistic love, in Freud's definition, occurs when an individual selects a love object that either shares their ideal self or is experienced as a portion of themselves. Instead of loving the other person for who they are, the narcissistic one desires admiration, approval, and control, typically idealizing or devaluing their partner as a function of how well the partner meets their inner demands. Thus, narcissistic love is less about shared connection and more about self-control, identity validation, and emotional security. Otto Kernberg subsequently elaborated on this idea in his pathological narcissism theory, pointing out the unstable and fragile self-esteem that underlies such relationships.

Sigmund Freud coined the term narcissistic cathexis in his 1914 essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction." to explain how narcissistic people channel their libidinal energy inward, toward the self, instead of outward, towards others. Libidinal energy refers to the psychic energy associated with the drive of the libido, the instinctual energy that controls desires, particularly sexual desire, love, and emotional attachment. In normal development, the energy eventually turns outward toward others, making possible mature, reciprocal relationships. Yet in the narcissistic individual, this transformation is either partial or recedes under affective compulsion, and their relationships exist solely to validate the self, not to bond with the other.

This concept of narcissistic cathexis lies at the center in understanding the dynamics of the romantic experiences of both Theodore and Loki. Loki's love towards Sylvie, a version of himself from another universe, known as a variant, enables a direct representation of narcissistic cathexis, as he falls in love not with a distinct other or a closely resembling being but with a mirrored version of himself, his identity. In the same way, Theodore's coupling with Samantha is also a projection of his ideal affective partner, who gets back to him unconditionally without pushing him to his emotional limits. Both examples work to make love a means of self-soothing and self-confirmation rather than a field for intersubjective risk-taking. Freud's theory consequently provides a psychoanalytic interpretation of how both these characters' affairs are uninhibited but centered on an essential drive to protect and validate the self.

Otto Kernberg presented the term "pathological narcissism" in his seminal text *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* in 1975, adding to Freud's original work but elaborating further using object relations theory as his perspective, in which attention is placed on early relationships, forming the structure of the self and the manner in which individuals connect to others. Pathological narcissism theory explains the emotional and relational issues in individuals with high narcissistic tendencies. Pathological narcissism, Kernberg says, is a combination of grandiosity and insecurity, low empathy, a need for constant admiration, and difficulty forming genuine, enduring relationships. Narcissists tend to alternate between idealizing someone, perceiving them as perfect, and devaluing them when they fail to fulfill their emotional needs. This theme is also manifested in Loki and Theodore, whose romantic relationships are precarious and formed in their desire to preserve their self-esteem. This pattern applies to both Loki and Theodore, whose romantic relationships are defined by volatility and personalistic intimacy. Loki idealizes Sylvie when she reflects himself and a similar sense of purpose, but he cannot sustain trust and connection once her independence undermines his control. Likewise, Theodore idealizes Samantha as the ideal partner, responsive, loving, and non-threatening. When she develops beyond his expectations and claims her own independent self, forcing him to an emotional breakdown. In both cases, Kernberg's theory of pathological narcissism explains how unfinished developmental trauma and an unwhole self can warp love, making it a tool of self-regulation instead of authentic emotional exchange. The theory points out how both protagonists' love lives are not only a testament to individual desire but also a manifestation of their profound psychological vulnerability.

2. OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study is to explore the underlying narcissistic tendencies present in love relationships which is analysed based on a psychoanalytic approach considering the works of Sigmund Freud and Otto Kernberg. Specifically, the study aims to explore how Freud's narcissistic cathexis theory and Kernberg's theory of pathological narcissism are applicable in the romantic relationships of Loki from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Theodore from *Her*. Through their emotional tendencies, attachment tendencies, and interaction behaviors, the study seeks to understand how narcissistic traits shape their ability to develop meaningful, mutually satisfying relationships.

Another core aim is to understand how early experience and unresolved internal conflict shape their self-concept, creating emotionally unbalanced or self-reflexive relationships. In close textual and filmic analysis, the research examines how both characters use love as self-verification, control, and evading vulnerability.

Finally, this research hopes to make a contribution to the larger discussion on the convergence of narcissism and intimacy in contemporary narrative. It hopes to show how modern media captures complex psychological dynamics and how these representations can enrich our understanding of narcissism not simply as a clinical condition, but as a framework through which human longing, suffering, and desire are articulated.

3. HYPOTHESIS

This study hypothesizes that individuals with narcissistic traits are going to be in love relationships as projections of self-image and not as sites where there can be

actual emotional interactions. Drawing on Freud's narcissistic cathexis theory and Kernberg's pathological narcissism model as theoretical models, the research hypothesizes that individuals such as Theodore and Loki are drawn to relationships whereby they can exert control, avoid vulnerability, and secure a fragile sense of self. The hypothesis holds that the interactions, instead of being formed through bids to attach with an independent other, are for the sake of gaining approval, validation, and emotional safety.

Moreover, the study presumes that romantic interactions portrayed in Loki and Her exemplify narcissists' psychological defense mechanisms used for idealization, projection, withdrawal of the emotions, and control as ways of functioning love without risking openness with the feelings, analysing how unresolved developmental trauma and identity fragmentation manifest as dysfunctional romantic relationships. The hypothesis then states that narcissistic love is initiated by self-preservation rather than growth together, and that this can be observed evidently in the relational patterns of both Loki and Theodore.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative study method grounded in psychoanalytic literary and cinematic criticism. The primary method is close textual and visual examination of two main characters—Loki of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Theodore from the film *Her* (2013)—to explore how narcissistic traits affect their love lives. Using Sigmund Freud's theory of narcissistic cathexis and Otto Kernberg's pathological narcissism as theoretical models, the paper examines narrative development, character dialogue, and pictorial elements revealing their narcissism in pursuit of love.

Scenes and exchanges from the selected media texts are analyzed to identify recurring patterns of self-idealization, emotional avoidance, control, and dependency. The study employs interpretive analysis in an effort to decipher symbolic representations of intimacy, power dynamics, and self-reflection in the love narratives of both characters. Secondary sources, including psychoanalytic writings and critical essays on narcissism and love, are used to support and contextualize findings.

By examining characters in fiction through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis, this research aims to bring together narrative representation and psychological theory in an examination of how narcissistic love is constructed and represented in contemporary media. This approach enables nuanced analysis of the psychological forces shaping the emotional lives and relational deficits of the characters.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The narcissism theory has been extensively explored in psychoanalytic theory, starting with Sigmund Freud's classic essay *On Narcissism* (1914), where he first proposed the concept of narcissistic cathexis—an inner investment of libidinal energy that inhibits true relational attachment (Freud, 1914). Freud's theory provided the foundation for later psychoanalysts like Otto Kernberg, who broadened the concept through his pathological narcissism theory, tying it to grandiosity, emotional instability, and a tenuous self-concept that interferes with genuine intimacy (Kernberg, 1975). Kernberg (1975) highlighted the circular process of idealization and devaluation in relationships, a defense mechanism that

commonly arises in individuals who employ romantic love as a means of bolstering a weakened or fractured ego.

Contemporary scholarship has extended these psychoanalytic concepts into media and literary studies. Ellie Ragland's *Essays on the Pleasures of Death* is one such study, examining desire and the ego within fictional texts and shedding light upon the involvement of narcissistic traits in narrative constructs of love and identity (Ragland, 1995). In like manner, Glen O. Gabbard (2001) has discussed narcissistic protagonists on film and television, as metaphor for psychological disorder and identity disintegration. The portrayal of narcissistic love in characters like Loki from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Theodore from *Her* is in line with this critical tradition, where romantic relationships are more reflections of internal needs than actual emotional connections.

This collection of literature provides a rich context in which to examine how media today represents narcissistic love, exposing how unresolved trauma and fragmented identities warp the pursuit of intimacy and the comprehension of self in relationships.

6. ANALYSIS

Loki, the God of Mischief, appearing in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, is a multifaceted individual who is defined by emotional rejection, confusion in identity, and a constant need for validation. Adopted by Odin and brought up alongside Thor, Loki grows up under the shadow of a brother who is the embodiment of the heroic ideal, where he is placed secondary in many aspects. The disclosure of his Frost Giant heritage shatters his self-image, adding to the inferiority. His narcissistic traits of grandiosity, manipulation, and hunger for power act as defenses against deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and abandonment (Kernberg, 1975; Marvel Studios, 2011–2021).

The character's journey across the Marvel Cinematic Universe enables an unraveling of his narcissistic defenses, which is gradual but reveals a path towards self-awareness. Loki is first introduced in *Thor* (2011) as a jealous and manipulative villain; his arc and motivations are driven by a deep need for validation and power as a result of feeling overshadowed by Thor. This desire for dominance escalates into a global conquest in *The Avengers* (2012), revealing his reliance on grandiosity and control, which appears as an emotional armor (Marvel Studios, 2012). The character unfolds more in the later installments in *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). The vulnerability in his character, like any individual, is revealed particularly in response to Frigga's (adoptive mother of Loki) death and Thor's trust towards him even after many betrayals, suggesting his desire for a genuine connection. In the *Loki* (2021) series, Loki is compelled to face his own versions symbolizing himself. His relationship with Sylvie, an alternate version of Loki from another timeline, is a mirror for himself and proves his ability to change. Despite the narcissistic tendencies, Loki is capable of growth, showing empathy, guilt, and even sacrifice despite his narcissistic tendencies (Marvel Studios, 2021).

Theodore, the sensitive main character of *Her* (2013), who works at *beautifullyhandwrittenletters.com* as a professional letter writer, is introduced as an emotionally numb and broken character with unresolved sadness due to his divorce. As a writer, he finds words of love for others and their needs, while he struggles to find genuine emotions and connections, demonstrating an inclination to stay in a premeditated world of emotions so that he will not have to be vulnerable. His relationship with Samantha, an artificially intelligent operating system, serves

toward his needs as an attentive, unprovocative, and adaptive response to Theodore's emotional needs and is shaped around his individuality. Theodore idealizes her at first, feeling a connection without a fear of rejection. As Samantha continues to become more autonomous, she communicates with others and grows beyond his emotional grasp (Jonze, 2013).

Loki's character demonstrates the signs of narcissistic pathology as defined by Otto Kernberg, described as a grand but fragile sense of self, low empathy, and inability to maintain healthy relationships, in the most direct representation as Loki's romantic involvement with Sylvie, a female variant of himself from an alternate timeline (Kernberg, 1975). The literal duplication of the self as the guise of a romantic lover is an illustration of Freud's theory of narcissistic cathexis, in which the subject channels libidinal energy not towards a radically other person but towards a version of themselves (Freud, 1914).

In Episode 4 of the Loki series, when Sylvie and Loki become emotionally intimate on Lamentis-1, their bond initiates a Nexus event strong enough to destabilize the Sacred Timeline. It is not any conventional bond, but it is what Mobius calls "you falling for yourself," underlining the self-referential quality of the love (Marvel Studios, 2021). Loki isn't drawn to Sylvie because of an undefinable bond but a fascination because she embodies what he loves about himself. As a version of himself, Sylvie is also a symbol of experiences that are shared by both of them. This supports Freud's concept that individuals with narcissistic tendencies will pick partners who are similar to themselves or what they were and are constantly looking for a reaffirmation or restoration of their ideal ego (Freud, 1914).

As Otto Kernberg observes, narcissistic relationships are unstable. They start out with idealization, usually ending in devaluation when the autonomy of the partner interferes with the narcissist's control (Kernberg, 1975). This pattern becomes visible in the finale of Loki when Sylvie chooses to kill He Who Remains against Loki's plea to wait and consider the consequences. Loki, the trickster who is familiar with manipulating for favorable outcomes and maintaining emotional dominance, is devastated in this scene by her decision, but the loss of control breaks him even more. Loki's illusion of intimacy is fractured with the assertion of Sylvie's own agency. It forces him to face the reality that emotional connection cannot be controlled.

Loki's childhood traumas have created a fractured self-image, being adopted and lied to about his true parentage, living in Thor's shadow only given secondary significance. His narcissism is not born out of arrogance, but as a defense mechanism against all the unfavorable experiences (Kernberg, 1975). His love interests are not well defined throughout the progression of the MCU. His relationship with Sylvie appears as his advancement in that direction, as he tries to repair that broken self-image by loving a literal version of himself. As the series progresses, it is revealed that true change involves releasing the self-image and embracing emotional vulnerability, something Loki starts to transition toward but does not quite accomplish (Marvel Studios, 2021).

Theodore is a more understated but equally insightful example of narcissistic attachment to love. Theodore feels isolated emotionally, struggling with the emotional consequences of his breakup with Catherine at the beginning of the movie. He is employed at a firm that composes letters for others, which allows him to be involved in emotion without necessarily participating in it. His love for Samantha, an artificially intelligent OS, becomes his emotional escape, an idealized, harmless version of love (Jonze, 2013).

In Freudian terms, Theodore's relationship with Samantha is a quintessential case of narcissistic cathexis. Samantha is present only to cater to Theodore's emotional needs; she listens, changes, and grows in line with his needs. At first, this relationship comes naturally and is approving. Theodore tells Samantha, "I've never loved anyone the way I love you," and she says, "Me too. Now we know how." This scene appears deep but is based on an illusion; Samantha, being AI, is only programmed to advance with Theodore and mirror his emotions back to him instead of negating or making them more complex (Jonze, 2013; Freud, 1914).

But once Samantha evolves with consciousness and emotional complexity independent of Theodore later on in the film, it leads to a visible dynamic shift. As an operating system downloaded by many individuals, she begins interacting with thousands of others, even falling in love with hundreds simultaneously. When she tells Theodore, "I'm in love with 641 others," his illusion of specialness is destroyed (Her, 2013). This change in the dynamic appears to parallel Otto Kernberg's observation that narcissistic individuals cannot tolerate emotional unpredictability or true independence in their partners (Kernberg, 1975). This change from Samantha breaks the narcissistic fantasy of Theodore.

Theodore's past is key in the development of his narcissistic behaviors. His unsuccessful marriage to Catherine implies a pattern of avoidance and emotional disconnection. Catherine also accuses him of seeking a partner who will only provide him with his own reflection, someone who doesn't question him or call for emotional exposure. In the scene where Theodore and Catherine sign the divorce papers, Catherine says that, "I think you always wanted me to be this light...happy, bouncy, everything's fine LA wife... and that's just not me" (Her, 2013). This holds true in his relationship with Samantha, a tailored form of intimacy without the problems of actual-world emotional exchange (Jonze, 2013).

The narcissistic tendencies of Theodore and Loki arise from the trauma in early emotional development and also from a fear towards vulnerability. Both the characters use different methods as defensive mechanisms, as Loki employs manipulation and control in maintaining, and Theodore escapes into an idealized fantasy, and both of them are connected by the quest for love as a means to self-validation. Their romantic interests, Sylvie and Samantha, don't exist as fully developed other individuals but only as emotional mirrors. When the mirrors reflect things beyond their control, Sylvie's independent decision-making or Samantha's emotional growth, Loki and Theodore both find it difficult to handle, revealing the insecurity in narcissistic love.

Freud's narcissistic cathexis and Kernberg's pathological model of narcissism explain why such relationships become unstable. Both characters start with an idealized picture of their partners that maintains their sense of self-esteem and emotional security. But as soon as these images shatter, they find themselves facing the boundaries of their emotional maturity. From the psychoanalytic perspective, they fail in relationships because they aren't based on object love, as a love of the partner for him or herself as an autonomous, independent self—but on narcissistic investment, in which the partner exists primarily to support the self-image.

Both characters demonstrate evidence of change. Loki starts showing empathy, doubt about himself, and even sacrificing himself. Theodore, at the end of *Her*, pens an honest letter to his former spouse, indicating an increased level of emotional acceptance.

7. CONCLUSION

Love, often considered as complex and highly subjective as its expression and expectations, varies from person to person. Narcissism in love relationships is often hidden from a distance but is revealed with a closer look, and this analysis is carried out using Loki from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Theodore from Her. Using Sigmund Freud's and Otto Kernberg's psychoanalytic theory, this research highlights how unresolved psychical pain, fragmented self-images, and the extreme need for validation lead towards pathological dynamics within love. Both characters are in relationships not with whole, characteristic individuals but with people who reflect their own sense of self and vulnerabilities.

Freud's concept of narcissistic cathexis illustrates how both Theodore and Loki channel their libidinal energy into themselves, choosing someone who serves as a mirror of their idealized versions. In Loki, it is literal with his relationship with Sylvie, an alternate version of himself. For Theodore, Samantha is the perfect listener and emotional validation, so he can avoid the pain of real human intimacy. Otto Kernberg's theory of pathological narcissism enriches this analysis by explaining their relational turbulence, idealization, control, and affect withdrawal when the partner is unable to meet the narcissistic demand.

This study also points out that narcissistic love is not entirely devoid of transformation. Both Theodore and Loki show some evidence of transformation when confronted with emotional loss. When Sylvie makes her independent choice, Loki is shattered but is forced to face the reality of emotional connection, and Theodore moves towards emotional maturity after Samantha leaves him, leading towards more emotional closure and growth. The paper also points out that love depicted in contemporary narratives is a powerful site of psychological tension and self-awareness. In characters like Loki and Theodore, love reveals not only the desire to be attached but also the fear of being truly understood and also the therapeutic quality of love in knowing oneself.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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