

Narcissistic Injury in the Death of Ivan Ilyich: A Study

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Abstract: This paper delves into Leo Tolstoy's classic novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* through the lens of narcissism, by employing psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concept of narcissism and its manifestations and implications within the context of Ivan Ilyich's journey. The author highlights the destructive consequences of narcissism on the human psyche through the character of Ivan Ilyich. Narcissism involves excessive preoccupation with oneself and a lack of empathy for others. This self-centredness often results in pernicious effects on both the individuals and the persons around them. In the case of Ivan Ilyich, his obsession with societal status and relentless pursuit of societal validation blind him to the deeper meaning of life. The narcissistic injury starts to reflect on his life as he confronts a mysterious and incurable disease which ultimately leads to his existential crisis and demise. Ivan's life unfolds as a case study, illustrating an intricate interplay between narcissistic and existential wounds, and societal expectations. This paper explores Ivan Ilyich's narcissistic behaviour and his realization of the disparity between his self-centred world and reality.

Keywords: *Narcissism, Human Psyche, Societal Validation, Existential Crisis, Mortality*

Introduction: Leo Tolstoy is a Russian writer who is regarded as one of the greatest and most influential authors of all time. He has shown his talent through his writings such as novels, fiction and novellas. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* (1878) are two of the greatest books of all time. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is considered one of the chef-d'oeuvre novellas. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* has widely been studied and it is the most-read work in American colleges, second only to *Anna Karenina*. In the 1870s, Tolstoy experienced a profound moral crisis shortly after his religious conversion, and in 1886 he wrote this novella which depicts the dying process of an ordinary human being. Feldman has examined the novella from a psychological perspective, and shown that some traits of the narcissistic personality have been portrayed through the character of Ivan Ilyich [1]. Narcissism is a self-centred personality disorder which is named after a Greek character *Narcissus* from Greek mythology. This man was impossibly handsome and fell in love with his own image reflected in the water of a pool. Similarly, a man with narcissistic personality disorder has an unreasonably high sense of their own importance. People with this disorder cannot understand or care about the feelings of others. Leo Tolstoy has displayed the narcissistic tendencies of Ivan Ilyich through his self-centred and superficial approach to life. Ivan prioritizes societal expectations and material success, disregarding deeper connections and genuine emotions. His obsession with maintaining a respectable image reflects his narcissistic nature.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich contains several passages reflecting narcissistic themes, particularly in Ivan's self-centred perspective. Ivan's narcissistic injury occurs when he confronts the reality of his terminal illness and recognizes the emptiness of his conventional, socially driven life. His inner turmoil intensifies as he grapples with the disparity between the superficial success he projected and the profound sense of meaninglessness he now faces in the face of mortality. Ivan's saying "Why do I have to die, and die in agony? There's something wrong?" [2] reflects not only his self-centred view and resistance to accepting the universal human experience of mortality but also his narcissistic attitude. This attitude has been injured several times until his death.

Literature Review: Leo Tolstoy has portrayed the character of Ivan Ilyich who is completely obsessed with himself and his power and societal acceptance. He does not care about his relationship with others and is unable to fathom his death. Other writers like Arthur Miller [3] and Albert Camus [4] have worked on human psychology and their relationships with others where emotion and attachment have been less involved.

Many critics have worked on the psychological state of Ivan Ilyich. In a research paper, Feldman shows the concept of the ego ideal that helps us to understand Ivan's narcissistic behaviour in that he does not recognise the most certain fact of his life: his death [1]. Conan says,

Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is used to compare psychological defence mechanisms with cognitive distortions. The main character, Ivan Ilyich, displays narcissistic personality traits throughout his life and his confrontation with death from an unknown illness. Faced with his own mortality, he suffers what can be viewed as either a narcissistic injury or a narcissistic insult [5].

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Again F. R. Kets de Vries describes Ivan Ilyich's narcissistic injury as a denial of death and oblivion "to the idea of his own mortality" [6]. Ivan has always wanted to lead an aristocratic lifestyle but on his deathbed, he realises that nothing can change the ultimate goal of life.

Roberts displays humour through Tolstoy's representation of Ivan's life. According to him, Ivan Ilyich is presented comically and his life is framed by his tragic death, his self-absorption, his naive assumption of his mortality, his love of rank, his concern with societal expectations and outlook, and his narcissism [7].

Ivan's narcissistic traits impede him from thinking about death. Narcissists always give importance to their lives and ignore death. They make excuses to accept death. Vries states,

Our apprehension about death has its precursor in separation anxiety, complete severance from life can be viewed symbolically as the ultimate form of separation. Like Ivan Ilyich, we use denial and ritual to cope with our lingering knowledge of death and keep our basic anxiety under control [8].

As Ivan confronts death from an unknown illness, he experiences his narcissistic injury also. His sickness makes him understand the true and ultimate result of life. During his uneasiness, he starts to rethink his life and soon he realises his hypocrisy about life. He starts to question about his existence and death. The increasing pain and suffering simultaneously kill and resurrect him [9]. Alves sees illness as a 'driving force' which is a guiding thread throughout the novella [10].

Daniel states that it is psychoanalytically proven that death causes the greatest narcissistic injury to a person and death is life's biggest insult. As a human being, one never thinks "so much about one's very self as the imminence of death— not just anyone's death, but our death" [11]. Similarly, Ivan Ilyich in his early stage of life never thought so much about the ultimate reality of life. He was only concerned about his power and status. Unfortunately, he encounters a terminal illness that injures his arrogance badly. He started to experience the narcissistic injury when Ivan sensed the profound despair of having no future moment as an existing being.

As a human being, people find it difficult to accept death. Tolstoy tries to picture this in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Carl Goldberg terms death as the 'ultimate shame' because "it provides undeniable evidence of our powerlessness and defeat as human beings at being able to control our ultimate fate" [12]. A research paper titled "Perception of Dying and Death in Selected Literary Works" by Judith in [13] shows Ivan Ilyich's psychological journey which focuses on what Ivan experiences after encountering death. It describes Ivan Ilyich's journey from the point of denial to acceptance of death.

What is Narcissism?

Narcissism is mainly a personality trait and it is known as NPD (Narcissistic Personality Disorder). The term "Narcissistic Personality Disorder" was introduced in literature by Kohut [19]. Many other writers used narcissism as an example in many of their works by creating several characters with the mentality and loneliness of Narcissus. Caravaggio painted a young man admiring his reflection in the water. Miller has created Willy Loman as a narcissistic personality in his play *Death of a Salesman* [3]. Poets such as Keats and Housman have also used this term.

Nowadays, the common understanding of narcissism lies in the excessive admiration and interest in oneself. It is a psychological trait in which a man lacks empathy for others; he becomes selfish and hankers after admiration. A man with narcissistic traits always wants to exploit others for their personal gain.

The term narcissus has mythological importance. The Greeks, the Greco-Romans and Modern Arts also believe in the myth of narcissism. Though they have different types of mythological descriptions, the essence of the myth is the same: exceptional love and admiration for oneself.

An individual with a narcissistic personality constantly displays lenient superiority, intense preoccupation with self-respect, and a lack of empathy and concern for others while maintaining an adequate exotic adaptation for others [17]. According to Nemiah, such individuals always do very little in life because they want to; their actions are constantly influenced by others' thinking about themselves [18]. Narcissism, as Raoul proposes, designates self-centred and self-indulgent types of behaviour or attitude [15].

Narcissism in Mythology: The myth of Narcissus has two different versions: the Greek and the Greco-Roman. According to Greek myth, Aminias, a young man, fell in love with Narcissus, who was exceptionally proud and vain. He had already rejected the advances of many admirers including Aminias. As a result, Aminias committed suicide at Narcissus's doorstep and prayed to God to punish Narcissus for all the pain he had provoked. As a punishment, God led him to a pool of water, where he fell in love with his reflection. Unable to distract himself away from it, he died at the bank of the river. The Greeks also think that Narcissus is still admiring himself in the underworld, looking at the waters of the Styx [20].

The Greco-Roman Ovid presents the myth in a slightly different way, but the core of the myth remains the same. Narcissus is a beautiful young man who rejects all romantic advances including those of the nymph Echo. Nemesis, the goddess of retribution, punishes Narcissus for his arrogance by cursing him that he would fall in love with himself after seeing his own image in the pond water. Once he figured out that his love for his self-image could not be addressed, he killed himself.

Narcissism and Human Psyche: The term narcissus is used with various meanings. It was first used by the famous psychoanalytic Freud in 1910 [14]. According to him, it deals with human behaviour in terms of the interaction of various

components of personality. He associated narcissism with auto-erotic fixation related to homosexuality but he did not develop the concept further and it develops during early childhood when a child's libido is directed inward, leading to self-love [14]. Though narcissism was first used to denote a sexual perversion, later the word's connotations were expanded and it was defined as an early stage of infant development, placement of psychic energy and a type of interpersonal relationship. Most recently the term is known as a synonym for self-esteem [15, 16]. The ego ideal signifies the part of that personality which is comprised of the aims and the goals of self.

According to Siegfried, "As humans, our behaviour, our thoughts and actions are the product of our psyche" [21]. The human psyche is the totality of the human mind, encompassing conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions, motivations, perceptions and behaviours. On the other hand, narcissism is a subjective chaos which involves an exaggerated sense of self-importance, a constant need for admiration, and a lack of compassion for others. These traits can have significant negative impacts on both the individual and their relationships. Narcissism and the human psyche are closely intertwined, as narcissistic behaviours reflect specific aspects of psychological functioning.

Within the framework of the human psyche, narcissism can be understood as stemming from complex psychological dynamics. The human psyche consists of multiple dimensions of personality, including self-esteem, identity, emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships. Narcissism may arise as a maladaptive response to underlying insecurities, low self-esteem, or unsolved psychological conflicts, serving as a defence mechanism to protect the individual from feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy. Understanding narcissism means delving into various psychological theories and exploring its impact on relationships, behaviour and mental health.

There are many destructive consequences of narcissism on the human psyche. A narcissist may engage themselves in the relentless pursuit of validation whether through achievements, status or social approval. They view others primarily as a tool for gratifying their own needs and desires. This is how they always ignore others' emotions. They are always reluctant to acknowledge their own flaws and limitations. These destructive consequences of narcissism impact on the individual's psyche and the society as a whole.

Narcissism and Ivan Ilyich: Ivan Ilyich can be considered a narcissistic character based on the conceptualization of his narcissistic attributes. At the beginning of the novella, Tolstoy individualizes Ivan from his father and his two brothers by calling him *le phénix de la famille* [2] which indicates that he is the member of the family most likely to succeed. His father and elder brother partially succeed in their life but his younger brother is a failure. But Ivan Ilyich is different from his two brothers. Tolstoy describes Ilyich as more unique and significant than the other male members of his family. From this stage, Ivan starts to assume himself as an authoritative figure in his family. In addition, his wife calls him a *bon enfant* [2] which describes him as a good-natured, friendly and ambitious young lawyer. Annie Reich states that such narcissistic individuals "constantly seek to be the object of admiring attention" [22]. The author continues to set forth Ivan's belief in his uniqueness by recounting his new fashionable clothing style, eating at the top restaurants only and going to the best shops. He also changes his shaving tackle, toiletries, and travelling rug to take up a position arranged for him by his father as a special assistant to the governor. Ivan presumes that such actions will help him associate himself with high-status people in the new city.

Ivan also consents to marry Praskovya because "she belonged to a good family and she was quite attractive" [2]. Ivan married Praskovya for two specific reasons. Firstly, "he saw in her someone who shared his outlook on life" [2] as both of them have similar beliefs, attitudes, and priorities in life. Secondly, Ivan believes their match will be approved by the society where he moved in. His wife possesses qualities that are conventionally considered pleasing and desirable. Ivan's thoughts of liking Praskovya provide a glimpse into her background and appearance and how she fits into the narrative of Ivan Ilyich's life. This implies the societal context in which he operates and highlights the importance of social approval in his life. It may also serve to validate his status and standing in society.

The author marks Ivan as lacking empathy. Throughout his life, Ivan has only cared about his happiness and success. Waelder rightly says that Ivan is a narcissistic individual who displays "condescending superiority, intense preoccupation with their self-respect", and marks the "lack of empathy and concerns for others" [17]. When his wife became "irritable and demanding" during her first pregnancy, he "gradually shifted his life's centre of gravity onto his work" [2] and engaged himself more in his work to become more ambitious than ever before. But gradually the relationship between Ivan and Praskovya lost its intimacy or emotional connection over time. This indicates Ivan's incapability of maintaining a relationship, his selfishness and his ignorance of other's emotional state. Ivan also disregards his wife and children's feelings throughout his illness. During his sickness, he presumes to be left alone and fails to notice that his family is also suffering.

Throughout the novella, Ivan is seen to have an obsession with power. In his early career when some police chiefs and religious dissidents were depending on him, he "loved to let them feel that although he had the power to crush them, he was being straight with them, treating them like friends" [2]. This indicates his authoritative trait and superiority over others. He likes to present himself as an authoritative figure without letting them feel that he is dominating them so that people can consider him friendly and kind. Ivan is also seen to be an intelligent, lively, personable and decent man. He passed his law school with honours and throughout his earliest life, he has tried to maintain good terms with the people in authority and has assumed their mannerisms

along with their philosophy of life [2]. As Nemiah states that people with narcissistic attitudes do very little in life because they want to be admired by others [18], Ivan seems to adopt all these attitudes which assert that he is narcissistic.

Narcissistic Injury and the Sufferings of Ivan Ilyich: Ivan's narcissistic injury is the central moment of the novella. Tolstoy has stated Ivan's narcissistic injury gradually as he confronts his mortality and grapples with the existential emptiness of his life. Initially, Ivan is pictured as a successful and ambitious man who diligently adheres to societal expectations, material success and conventional values. He pursues a career in law, marries a rich presentable lady and builds a respectable life filled with material comforts and social status. However, due to his terminal illness, he confronts the harsh truth of his mortality and he is forced to reevaluate his existence. This realization that his life has been built upon superficiality and conformity triggers a deep sense of despair and disillusionment. According to Ivan, life means simply obtaining the path of success. He assumes that he will be benefitted by giving importance to his official work, but this illusion simply disappeared when he was expecting a promotion as a presiding judge in a university town, but they appointed a different person. As a result of this event, Ivan faces narcissistic insults and even he argues with his superiors.

Ivan's narcissistic injury befalls after his diagnosis of an extreme illness. As he grapples with the reality of his impending death, Ivan is forced to confront the hollowness of his existence. The realisation of the nothingness of his pursuits and the artificiality of his relationships begin to crumble his false identity. He asks himself: "Why do I have to die, and die in agony? There's something wrong. Maybe I did not live as I should have done?" [2] This realisation also causes Ivan's inner turmoil and existential crisis. As Ivan's illness progresses, his narcissistic laceration intensifies, leading to moments of despair and anger.

When he is reflecting on his relationships, particularly with his wife, Ivan feels that their marriage is devoid of genuine affection and intimacy. He becomes aware of the fact that they are bound together more by societal expectations and conventions than by genuine love or connection. This consciousness triggers a profound disappointment and disillusionment in Ivan, as he encounters the hollowness of his domestic life and the emptiness of his emotional existence.

'Staying alive? How?' asked the voice of his soul.

'Oh, life like it used to be. Happy and good.'

'Life like it used to be? Happy and good?' came the voice.

And in his imagination, he started to run through the best times of his happy life. But what was strange was that all the best times of his happy life no longer seemed anything like what they had been before [2].

He experiences a deep narcissistic injury as he learns the truth that the life that he has meticulously constructed is fundamentally lacking in authenticity and meaning.

Sledge and Gold posit that the discovery of illness is a narcissistic injury to most people and for the first time Ivan also undergoes narcissistic injury at this point. As Ivan's condition worsens, he starts to think about the questions of mortality, the meaning of life and the fear of the unknown. The question of whether he is living or dying becomes dominant. But the doctor shows indifference to such an important question and Ivan says nothing about it. He just asks another last question with a sigh; "is it life-threatening or not...?" [2]. Ivan suffers from a narcissistic injury and refuses to accept the reality of his life. He attempts to convince himself that he is not truly ill and he will get better soon. He becomes obsessed with finding a cure by trying various treatments. Sometimes he overhears people talking about illnesses like his own and asks lots of questions that apply to his illness. Ivan's narcissistic injury affects him so much that at the last moment of his life, Tolstoy states,

And lying there, almost invariably facing the wall, he endured all the inexplicable agony in solitude he brooded on the same inexplicable question: 'What is this? Can it really be death?' And an inner voice would reply, 'Yes, that's what it is.' 'What is this torture for?' And the voice would reply, 'It's just there. It's not for anything.' Above and beyond this there was nothing [2].

Ivan's Narcissistic Injury and Existential Crisis: Throughout the novella, Tolstoy introduces Ivan as a narcissistic personality who mingles himself with the artificiality of life to position himself as a superior authority in the society. But after being sick his narcissistic personality traits start to shatter with the harsh reality where he sees the error of his life.

Ivan lives his life with a false concept of life that he is the one who matters the most but this concept hides the true nature of life. Throughout his life, Ivan never cares for others and does everything solely for himself. But soon his terminal illness shatters his entire world-view. As Ivan fights with his mortality, he experiences a profound sense of isolation and alienation from those around him. His illness becomes a metaphor for the existential conditions marked by suffering, loneliness and ultimate death. Ivan is heard to say: "It's as if I had been going downhill when I thought I was going uphill. That's how it was. In society's opinion, I was heading uphill, but in equal measure, life was slipping away from me... And now it's all over. Nothing left but to die" [2]! Sartre claims that existence precedes essence [21]. The narcissistic injury of Ivan Ilyich sets off an existential crisis, where he begins to question the very foundations of his identity and existence. Narcissistic injury has shattered the mirror that reflects his grandiose self-image, leaving behind fragments of doubt and insecurity. He wrestles with feelings of worthlessness, meaninglessness along with a profound sense of emptiness. This crisis leads him to confront existential questions like "What is this? Can it really be death" [2]?

At the last moment of Ivan's life, he experiences a profound existential awakening. Finally, he understands that true happiness and fulfilment cannot be found in worldly pursuits, but in embracing love, compassion and the simple joys of life.

Conclusion: Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* narrates the story of a man living a life driven by narcissism, devoid of genuine connection and self-awareness. The protagonist, Ivan Ilyich, is portrayed as a narcissist who has projected many traits

of narcissism. In the end, he inevitably experiences narcissistic injury during his sickness. Always self-obsessed, Ivan ignores the truth of life and his relationships with others, and craves success in society. However, an accident shatters his narcissistic psychology, making him realize his mortality and the inevitability of death. This realization triggers his narcissistic injury because Ivan's pursuit of social power and validation proves unfulfilling. Tolstoy reveals Ivan's narcissistic traits and injury in the novella, illustrating how the destructive consequences of narcissism lead to isolation and despair.

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