

"Paul's Case": A Narcissistic Personality Disorder

By Rob Saari

Willa Cather's title "Paul's Case" (1905) invites us to ponder the question, "What exactly is Paul's Case?" Cather immediately informs us that Paul's case is mysterious. His own father is "perplexed" about his son's behavior, and the school faculty, who meet with Paul to discuss his recent suspension, speak of Paul with such "rancor" and "aggrievedness" that it is obvious that Paul's is "not a usual case" (221). At first, it appears that Paul is, perhaps, simply filled with the arrogance that adolescence sometimes brings, but, as Cather continues with Paul's case history, we learn that his problem is more deeply rooted. Paul's problem drives him to take his own life, and simple adolescent arrogance does not lead to such drastic measures. My diagnosis is that Paul suffers from what contemporary psychiatry calls a "narcissistic personality disorder."

The term, "narcissism" comes, of course, from the Greek myth of Narcissus. Freud, who drew upon mythology to assist in his conceptual formulations of psychopathology, formally introduced the term narcissism into the psychiatric literature in his 1914 paper On Narcissism.(1) The term received recognition within the early psychoanalytic intelligentsia and has been historically rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition. Since Freud first introduced the term, it has been used to help explain disorders ranging from the mildly neurotic to the psychotic. Presently, the American Psychiatric Association uses the term to define a personality and outlines the diagnostic criteria for the narcissistic personality disorder (in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV).(2) To receive the diagnosis of a narcissistic personality disorder, a person must meet five of nine criteria: Paul appears to be a prototypical case, meeting all nine.(3) Amazingly, it seems that Willa Cather intuitively set forth the diagnostic criteria for a narcissistic personality disorder about ninety years before scientists reached a firm, empirically validated consensus.

Though not as physically striking--nor as outwardly arrogant--as Narcissus, Paul attracts attention and begs for analysis. A number of critics have set forth interesting analyses of Paul's inner world. Michael N. Salda presents an argument that on the night that Paul arrives home late and retreats to the basement to avoid his father, he never actually leaves the basement; the scenes that follow, according to Salda, occur only in Paul's imagination (115). Paying somewhat less attention to Paul's grandiose fantasy life, Edward Pitcher presents Paul as the embodiment of a "Faustian. temperament" in conflict with the "capitalist machine" (550). More closely aligned with the forthcoming analysis of Paul is Philip Page's description of Paul in terms of a "metaphor of theatricality" (553). Page's idea of Paul as an actor living out an inflated drama in his imagination is quite consistent with the narcissistic personality. Although each of these critics offers us a glimpse into Paul's inner world, I think that through the lens of the DSM-IV, we can gather a more comprehensive picture of Paul's case and a better understanding of why both he and Narcissus experience such a tragic fate.

The DSM-IV states that the essential features of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder are a:

pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

(1) has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)

(2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love

(3) believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)

(4) requires excessive admiration

(5) has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations

(6) is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends

(7) lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others

(8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her

(9) shows arrogant, haughty behavior or attitudes (661)

Beyond these skeleton criteria, the DSM-IV fleshes out the narcissistic personality disorder through commenting on these diagnostic features and noting common associated features, some of which are relevant to Paul's case. This commentary along with a presentation of some respected theorists in the area of narcissism will assist in understanding the dynamics of Paul's personality. The underlying web that holds the narcissistic personality together is a fragile self-esteem that craves constant attention, either real or imagined. Without this constant attention, which is often achieved through a grandiose fantasy life, the narcissist's fragile self-esteem suffers. If the narcissist is criticized in a way that threatens the grandiose sense of self, he or she may experience feelings of "shame or humiliation," which can lead to "social withdrawal, depressed mood" or "major depressive disorder" (DSM-IV 660). Karen Horney, MD, an eminent theorist in the history of psychiatry, explains that in the case of "repeated failures in enterprises or in human relations," the narcissist's underlying "self-hate" may lead to psychotic episodes and suicide (195). The narcissist's maintenance of his or her vulnerable self-esteem is achieved only partly through a grandiose sense of self-importance; the other means of maintenance is through the "devaluation" of others (DSM-IV 658). Relationships are formed to serve the narcissist's grandiose self-image--hence the interest in associating with people of status. Narcissists are often exploitative, viewing others as objects to be manipulated to their advantage. They may "usurp special privileges" and "extra resources" to further their aims. Others often find them emotionally cold and lacking in reciprocity (DSM-IV 659). Otto Kernberg, MD, professor of psychiatry at Cornell University Medical College, provides an excellent description of the manner in which those with a narcissistic personality regard others.

People with narcissistic personalities tend to be inordinately envious of other people, to idealize some people, from whom they expect narcissistic supplies, and to depreciate and treat with contempt those from whom they do not expect anything (often their former idols). Their relations with others are often exploitative and parasitic. Beneath a surface that is often charming and engaging, one senses coldness and ruthlessness. They typically feel restless and bored when no new sources feed their self-regard. (193)

With these descriptions of the narcissistic personality in mind, let us examine Paul's case. From a reader's perspective, it is hard to feel for Paul since, as his teacher's say, Paul is "impertinent" and lacking in "contrition" (221). He seems simply full of himself and in need of deflation; he is haughty and arrogant (Criterion 9). As Willa Cather tells us, his "whole attitude was symbolized by his shrug and flippantly red carnation flower ... his set smile did not once desert him." His teachers sense Paul's "contempt" for them, find his twitching lips "irritating" and experience a general feeling of "vindictiveness" toward him. They fall upon him "without mercy" and later feel humiliation at having laid into him in such "cutting terms" (222).

The feelings that his teachers experience are typical of therapists who work with narcissistic patients. Michael Stone, MD, professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons and an expert in the field of personality disorders, explains that therapists sometimes react to the narcissist's air of superiority and contempt with "self-protectiveness" and "anger" (272). In spite of these feelings, the therapist recognizes that the narcissist is disturbed. Paul's drawing master recognizes that Paul is disturbed. As his drawing master states, "'I don't really believe that smile of his comes altogether from insolence; there's something sort of haunted about it.... The boy is not strong, for one thing.... There is something wrong about the fellow.'" Behind Paul's eyes is a "forced animation" and a "nervous tension" that surface in his twitching lips (222). What is it that seems "haunted" about Paul? As Stone further explains, the narcissist sometimes lacks even a "hidden self" and has lost the capacity for "meaningful connectedness" with others (261). It may be this inner emptiness that Paul's teacher senses.

Like Narcissus, Paul shows traits of vanity. In Paul's case, these are, perhaps, unjustified given the teacher's description of his face as "white" and "blue veined" and his eyes as "wrinkled like an old man's" (222). Nevertheless, his vanity shows clearly when before his trip to New York, Paul spends "upward of two hours" buying his clothes (230), and when he prepares for his first day in town, he "spen[ds] more than an hour in dressing, watching every stage of his toilet carefully in the mirror" until "everything was perfect," and "he was exactly the kind of boy he had always wanted to be" (231).

Also evident is Paul's need to be recognized as "special" even though he has no obvious talents. It appears that Paul has a grandiose sense of self-importance despite his lack of concrete achievement (Criterion 1). As Cather says, "He had no desire to become an actor.... He felt no desire to do any of these things; what he wanted was to see, to be in the atmosphere, float on the wave of it ... away from everything" (228). Paul is lost in the illusion that cultivating the surface appearance of the distinguished will elevate him beyond his emptiness, his underlying sense of worthlessness. Though he is able to wear his "spoils with dignity" on his New York trip, Paul soon faces that his endeavor to make himself into the ideal boy will result in the "old depression" (235).

Paul also preoccupies himself with fantasies of his relation to the theatre, which represents his idea of beauty and personal brilliance (Criterion 2). The theatre is "Paul's fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurements of a secret love." At the theatre, he "felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant, poetic things, "for all "the stupid and ugly things slid from him" (228). The theatre provides a refuge for Paul, his "secret temple," where he could hide from himself and live out his grandiose belief that he should associate with other special, high-status people like Charlie Edwards (Criterion 3). While at school, Paul makes it clear that he is well above the childish schoolboys of his age:

He could not bear to have other pupils think, for a moment, that he took these people seriously.... He had autographed pictures of all the members of the stock company which he showed his classmates, telling them the most incredible stories of his familiarity with these people ... his suppers with them ... and the flowers he sent them. (229)

At first it appeared that the boys had bought into his stories, but Paul's need for excessive admiration (Criterion 4) leads him to retell these stories until they lose their "effect." Paul then becomes "desperate" for more admiration and further exaggerates his stories, making claims to upcoming travels "to Naples, to Venice, to Egypt" (229).

Paul's theft of Denny's & Carson's deposit demonstrates his sense of entitlement and interpersonal exploitation (Criteria 5 and 6). After stealing the money, he has the audacity to return to work and ask for a paid holiday, later boarding the evening train without knowing a "moment's hesitation"; and this "was not the first time Paul had steered through treacherous waters" (231). He acts as if he had as much right to their money as they did. During his stay in New York, Paul experiences no remorse; it was "characteristic" that remorse did not occur to him, and later when he knows his trip will soon end, he thinks how his exploits had "paid indeed!" (234).

Intimately tied to Paul's exploits and sense of entitlement is his lack of empathy (Criterion 8). His callousness is apparent in the following response to the principal's question about an impertinent remark he had made. "I don't know," he replied. I didn't mean to be polite or impolite, either. I guess it's a sort of way I have of saying things regardless" (222). His lack of empathy is also apparent toward his father whom he associates with the lowliness of Cordelia Street and regards as a nuisance to be avoided. Paul's overall contemptuousness also conveys his lack of empathy. He views the neighbors of moderate means, who rear families and attend Sabbath-school, as beneath him (225). This disdain of everyone, save those among the ranks of Charley Edwards, precludes empathy. Paul's contempt for others and his lack of empathy is what incites his teachers and leaves the reader tearless about his suicide. Yet, at the same time, the suicide leaves us to wonder what exactly lived in Paul to impel him to such an extreme.

A possible explanation of Paul's suicide will lead us to conclusion. Underneath his cold arrogance, Paul experienced an emptiness gnawing at him, a feeling of smallness, creating the "nervous tension." Cather tells us that he had

always been tormented by fear, a sort of apprehensive dread ... even when he was a little boy, it was always there ... had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something always seemed to be watching him.... (231)

This feeling of smallness, the underlying low self-esteem, leads to Paul's "imperative desire to show himself different from his surroundings" and hide beneath an attire that would assure safety from "humiliation" (233). In the end, he fails to find his security, for it was his grandiose "picture making mechanism" that made his life so dreadful. Paul, like Narcissus, dies pining over his own self, though unlike Narcissus it is not the water into which Paul gazes but the cold snow, and it seems doubtful whether the carnation blossom he buries will take root and bear his name. Paul has not lived his life among the gods and nymphs; rather, he has lived his life among the common man with the mistaken belief that he needed to set himself apart from the "immense design of things."

(1) Freud's famed Oedipal Complex probably ranks as the best known example of his use of mythology. Another less well known example includes his presentation of a dual instinct theory in terms of an instinct toward love, which he called Eros (Aphrodite's mischievous son who could mysteriously inspire love with his arrows), and an instinct toward death, which he called Thanatos (The King of Death).

(2) The DSM-IV is the text used by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists (as well as other mental health workers) to aid in the diagnoses of mental disorders. The first publication of the DSM was in 1952, and we continue to see new editions appear as psychological research advances. Since the 1952 printing,

empirical research on mental disorders has flourished, and the DSM-IV reflects the state-of-the-art analysis of current data sets on the various disorders. Each disorder presented in the DSM-IV is defined by a number of criteria and decision rules in making a diagnosis. The criteria set forth in the DSM-IV for the narcissistic personality disorder are based on an analysis by a work group of scholars in charge of evaluating available empirical data generated by research on the ten currently recognized personality disorders.

(3) Paul represents what would be considered as a prototypical case of narcissism since he meets all nine of the listed criteria. The actual number of ways to be narcissistic, given that five criteria out of nine must be met, is 256:

$$\text{number of combinations} = 9!/5!(9-5)! + 9!/6!(9-6)! + \dots + 1 = 256$$

The likelihood that a person with a narcissistic personality disorder would meet all nine criteria is slim, and the likelihood that we would meet a character who is both narcissistic and meets all nine criteria is even slimmer since the current epidemiological research estimate on the prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder in the general population is less than 1%.

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