

# Wild with Indignation: Narcissism and the Social Milieu in *The Wind in the Willows*

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## Abstract

The paper brings under scrutiny the issue of simplistic analysis of the complex character of Mr. Toad in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Classical psychoanalytic research on the classic uses the Freudian concepts of id, ego and super ego to understand the workings of the character of Mr. Toad. Contemporary research on the character disengages from a classical analysis and shows the underlying symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) in Toad. In response to these two approaches, this research underlines the limitations of the former and aims to problematize the simplistic views maintained by the latter by presenting a case of intricate pathological narcissism in the character of Mr. Toad that is sustained by the system of which he is a part. Sam Vaknin's concept of Pathological Narcissistic Space (PN space) will be used to discuss in detail the character's interactions with his social environment and interpersonal relations as potential narcissistic supplies, with an aim to re-evaluate his alleged transformation at the end.

**Keywords** : Children's literature; Mr. Toad; Narcissim; PN Space; Social Milieu.

## Introduction

A classical psychoanalytic account of Toad... doesn't do justice to his character. (Mattanah 90)

*The Wind in the Willows* is an outcome of series of bedtime stories told by Kenneth Grahame to his son Alastair, which were later compiled in a book and published in 1908, after his son's untimely death. Kenneth Grahame had continued the story in his letters to Alastair who was sent off to a boarding school following his misconduct. Speculation that the character

of Toad in the novel is framed after his mischievous son (Wadsworth 55) is made by many. The current research fabricates this information to present the issue of simplistic analysis of the complex character of Mr. Toad. Classical psychoanalytic research on the classic uses the Freudian concepts of id, ego and super ego to understand the workings of the characters in the novel, especially Mr. Toad. Contemporary research on the character disengages from a classical analysis to view Toad as suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) (Mattanah 90). In response to these two approaches, the current research underlines the limitations of the former and aims to problematize the simplistic views maintained by the latter by presenting a case of intricate pathological narcissism in the character of Mr. Toad that is sustained by the system of which he is a part.

The research builds up on the initial observation that Toad shows characteristics of narcissism to identify its subjective experience as an outcome of social interactions. Further, the famous alteration of Mr. Toad at the end of the novel is re-interrogated and the treatment of the character by the other animals that have supposedly led to this doubtful transformation is re-evaluated. The paper contends that Mr. Toad exploits the social milieu to feed his narcissistic needs, which further sustains and facilitates his pathological condition. The character uses the social environment and interpersonal interactions as narcissistic supplies in pursuit of an elevated social status and his social environment engenders an impossibility of his alleged transformation at the end.

The title of this paper, Wild with Indignation: Narcissism and the Social Milieu in *The Wind in the Willows* is a sort of abridgment of the arguments made by current research. The first half of the title is a direct quote from the text itself, consciously chosen as it clearly embodies one of the leading characteristics of narcissism. Narcissists show unstable emotions, often negative, and are quick to devalue and hate. Grandiose narcissism is characterised by entitlement, interpersonal exploitative, aggression and self-display (Lukowitsky and Pincus 263). Often regarding the undesired treatment as unfair, these patients engage in revengeful activities and ruthless treatment of others. A higher sense of narcissism is often a concoction of agentic and antagonistic features (Grapsas et al. 151). Along with the embodiment of the characteristics of pathological narcissism, it also hints at the phenomenon of social interaction of a narcissistic subject. Indignation of others and avenging the Self embodies a close connection between a narcissistic subjective experience with social interactions and environment. The latter half of the title is the exact presentation of what the paper entails: pathological narcissism in Mr. Toad both exploits and is

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sustained by his social milieu.

The research aims to answer three principal questions in particular: How does the character of Mr. Toad become an exemplar of a narcissist? In what way his social environment and interpersonal relations elevate and sustain his condition and fulfil his narcissistic needs: to acquire a higher social status and public admiration? How does the end of the novel reveal the alleged transformation in his character to be a hoax? The paper is structured into five parts following the research questions: Introduction, Toad kisses himself: a case of pathological narcissism, Sustaining narcissism: role of social environment and interpersonal relations, Transformation or deception, and Conclusion, that form subtitles in the paper; each of the parts are systematically tied with subsequent parts to maintain cogency, consequentially, leading to the central objective which is to complicate the simplistic view of the character ubiquitously held by prior research, to identify the role of social environment and interactions in the workings of a character, to arrive at a better understanding of the trajectory (if at all there is one) of the character and the text, and to countermand, in words of Mattanah, the unresolved debate regarding the end of the novel (88).

Along the lines of the recent development in the narcissistic discourse in relation to the social structure that suggests that psychopathology (including personality disorders like NPD) develops and is maintained in social interactions (Gandino et al. 2), this research aims to apply the findings to the field of literature. Since, this interdisciplinary research attempts to arrive at a psychologically informed interpretation of the character of Toad and his bilateral interactions with the social environment in Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, psychoanalytic literary theory apropos to social orientations is the appropriate methodology used to understand narcissistic social behaviour and engagement with the social environment. The paper uses textual analysis to enrich the field of psychoanalytic criticism of the children's literature in general and Grahame's novel in particular. The paper draws on contemporary accounts on narcissism to delineate the character of Toad, biographical account of Grahame to understand the relatedness of Toad with Alastair, and narrative account of the novel to present concrete instances to strengthen the arguments proposed in the paper.

## **Discussion**

### **Toad Kisses Himself: A Case of Pathological Narcissism**

The first glimpse of the Toad can be rather misleading as he appears to be a self-conceited fool with extraordinarily high sense of self. Eventually, on a deeper interpretation, the dark corners of Toad's psyche reveal itself and he emerges out as an individual with a weak sense of self, a non-existent ego. Freud's three-part psyche model presents Ego as a mediator between Id and Superego; a controller of impulses that delays gratification. In a narcissist the ego component of the psyche is non-existent and is substituted by a false self, a fake or substitute ego (Vaknin, 277). A substitute ego fabricates a story of excellence and a narcissist drains himself to justify it. Mr. Toad's self-conceited songs are flooded with false fantasies and in them he surpasses the high held heroes of the world as "never a name to go down to fame Compared with that of Toad" (Grahame 146).

These self-centered fantasies and false memory of excellence constantly need validation. Toad hides his fragile original self by constructing a euphoric environment in which he constructs his grand image to convince people of his greatness. The Euphoria created is evident from the dream-like descriptions of his desires when he shows Mole and Ratty his new sport, the gipsy caravan- "Now I've discovered the real thing, the only genuine occupation for a lifetime... cried the Toad, straddling and expanding himself" (26). His new engagements exist to extract reactions from his surroundings. Hence, Toad makes self-draining efforts to acquire favourable inputs from others to continue with his false fantasies.

It is evident that Toad's narcissism springs up from his continuous withdrawal of energy from the external object toward his self. In this context, Toad's Narcissism is not primary which directs the libidinal energy upon objects (object-cathexes), instead it is the secondary type. Secondary narcissism, according to Freud, is "drawing in of object-cathexes... superimposed upon a primary narcissism that is obscured by a number of different influences" (Freud 3). Toad's libidinal energies are directed inwards as he is absorbed in self-love. The changing interests, from sailing, punting, house-boating, wager-boating, driving a caravan, and finally to his interest in motor-cars, reveal Toad's capricious behaviour as "whatever he takes up; he gets tired of it, and starts on something afresh." (Grahame 18). Toad's narcissism allows him to switch the objects of his desire as his larger aim is to establish self-importance and relish the attention received as a result of his adventures. His libido is not directed towards these objects of interest, but like a narcissistic lover, his aim is more on what he acquires as a result of his experiences. Toad lopsidedly relates to the external objects to gain narcissistic supplies in the form of praise and admiration. It should be noted that the character's aim is not to learn to drive a motor car but

to become a subject of approbation by doing the same. His obsession with things reveals his fundamental obsession with self, as he does everything that would make him the talk of the town, in which he succeeds but not without having to pay a heavy price. Toad does not show the 'anaclitic' type of object-choice, instead his is a narcissistic one compelling him to seek itself as a love-object later in life. Toad's risk-taking behaviour, his unfaithfulness and untrusting attitude represent his pathological narcissism.

Toad's desperate attempt to restore his grandiose self-image once the sunny and bright view of his self is hampered reveals his narcissistic personality. In moments when his narcissistic supplies are all exploited and empty, he immediately feels weak and resentful. "Toad's periodic bouts with depression clearly follow this pattern. He tries to think of himself as an admired figure but when this image is threatened, he becomes despondent" (West and Rollin 47). His rapid shifts in mood trace the two extreme sides of his personality: a persona of a pseudo-intelligent creature who gets his way, and the hidden low self-esteem which is only revealed when he fails at establishing his importance. Grahame incorporates multiple instances where the Toad's eccentric behavioural pattern is evident, especially the incident where he is jailed for theft. Toad shows a grandiose narcissism, as he masks his fragile self by presenting before others an artificial grandiose self which acts as a coping mechanism for their original failures and problems, which can be feeling of loneliness or inferiority.

### **Sustaining Narcissism: Role of Social Environment and Interpersonal Relations**

Toad's pathological narcissism thus established in the above subsections of the paper can't be studied in isolation. The role of the social milieu and the interpersonal relations with people (friends and others) become operative in sustaining his pathological condition. Two notable concepts will be referred to understand the preceding statement: Narcissistic Supply and Narcissistic Space. Fundamentally, Narcissistic Supply is a reaction exhorted by the narcissist that is triggered by confrontation with his fabricated persona (False Self) (Vaknin, "Narcissistic Disorders" 2) which then validates this False Self. Pathological Narcissistic Space (PN space) is described as an "imaginary environment, a comfort zone, invented by the narcissist... There (in PN space), he seeks admiration, adoration, approval, applause, or, as a minimum, attention" (Vaknin, "Narcissist: Drama Queen" 00:03:06- 00:03:36). It is a yielding space brimming with sources of narcissistic supply: people and objects, and "the narcissist strives to

maximise the amount of Narcissistic Supply that he derives from people within the PNS" (00:03:19- 00:03:26). Hence, the PN space is significant in sustaining narcissism as it provides the narcissist with survival drugs in the form of admiration, adoration and attention.

It is significant to establish the river system as a potential Pathological Narcissistic Space (PN Space) at the outset to understand the function of such a space in sustaining narcissism. Vaknin identifies a PN Space as a space invented by the narcissist that has clearly defined geographical boundaries like a home, a neighbourhood, a city and a country (*Malignant Self Love* 265). The River Bank has well defined frontiers with the Wild Woods on one side of the River, separating the river life from the inconsequential Wild World, and the green meadows lining the stream. Moreover, the River Bank is home to a close-knit society where every animal is aware of each other's nature, social standing and reputation. The first chapter is a sort of an orientation programme for both the Mole and the readers to introduce them to the River Bank as a well mapped space, the culture and river life, and all the animals that inhabit the place- "The squirrels are all right. And the rabbits... are a mixed lot. And then there's Badger.... Weasels- and stoats- and foxes- and so on" (Grahame 14). Such a cliquish society harbours ample possibilities of rumour circulation and tittle-tattling, engendering a productive space for a narcissist to thrive in. A contrasting opinion is presented by Adam Gluck in his study about ego-centric communication in a networked society suggesting that narcissism is enabled in a networked society as individuals have a greater control over their self-image that was suppressed by gossip of the small towns (82). It is evident from this argument that gossip oppresses narcissism. Contrastingly, I argue that the gossip about Toad in the close-knit animal society sustains his narcissism as he doesn't care for what reason he becomes the talk of the town or a topic of discussion as long as he becomes one.

Gossip is a form of criticism through which society forms and measures reputation. Even though Haller (2015) suggests that a narcissist bewitches people and creates a favourable environment by blocking all disapproval and criticism, I believe that a narcissist welcomes all sorts of attention whether positive (fame, admiration) or negative (notoriety, disfavour). Narcissists have fragile sense of self-esteem; therefore, they seek validation from people, constantly searching for narcissistic supplies. Despite the fact that any criticism can make them insecure, resentful and vindictive, a narcissist would prefer negative attention over absolute disregard. A narcissist is extremely vigilant toward people's perception of them and work

hard to get admiration from people, or at the least attention. Criticism is a threat, nonetheless it is invited wherever there is a greater threat of obsolescence and obliteration. Atlas and Them (2008) studied the connection between narcissism and sensitivity to criticism and concluded that the relation is volatile and depends on the type of narcissism. Further, overt narcissists are not sensitive to criticism as they are self-confident, pertaining to the common view of narcissism, they inferred (73). The commonly held view that narcissists despise criticism (and gossip about them) isn't true when the criticism feeds their narcissistic sentiments. Gossip becomes a marketing tool for a narcissist to sell his self-image. Mole is introduced to Toad when he hears the gossiping Otter telling Ratty about Toad's recent obsession with his wicker-boat. Even though Otter and Ratty mockingly discuss Toad, it worked in his favour as a smitten Mole is seen demanding to meet Toad in the following chapter- "I've heard so much about him, and I do so want to make his acquaintance" (Grahame 24). Further, the rumours about Toad's incarceration and the criticism offered by the Wild-wooders won him attention. Hence, the close-knit animal community of the novel with its gossip and quick dissemination of information about its members become a PN space for Toad where he constantly seeks narcissistic supply to sustain and nourish his false image of grandiosity.

Toad's interpersonal relationships also sustain his narcissism to a great extent. Even though the nagging cold Badger and the almost motherly warm Ratty might at first seem all the guidance Toad needs to change, a deeper reading suggests the opposite. Badger and Ratty in their nagging, worrying and trusting sustain Toad's narcissism. They undertake the role of caretakers: instructing, ordering and striving to instil good values and social etiquettes in Toad, consequentially feeding his narcissistic esteem by caring too much. Assuming the role of a caretaker gives way to a hope for change, however the narcissist is incapable of change, consequentially making it a cyclic process of chaos- hope, despair, hope, so on. "...the Caretaker task of trying to "teach" the BP/NP (Borderline Personality/ Narcissistic Personality) to think logically... you hang onto the delusional belief that if you could just find the "right way" to explain things, then the BP/NP would see things clearly..." (Fjelstad 57).

Toad's friends hope for his change; their desperation to transform Toad into a sensible animal makes them gullible. The Water Rat on pulling Toad out of danger in chapter XI of the novel, nags him for his uncontrollable self-centred behaviour, however, when Toad promises that he will "be humble and submissive, and will take no action without your (Ratty's) kind advice and full approval" (Grahame 158) he is immediately

“appeased”. The old sagacious Badger too has been a victim of narcissistic manipulation several times in the novel. When Toad was asked to write invitations on a fair morning by Badger, he agreed without much resistance that made Badger suspicious, however “Toad’s frank, open countenance made it difficult to suggest any unworthy motive in this change of attitude”. Badger in trusting toad misjudged his incapability of transformation; by letting him write the invitations all by himself he gave him a space to bolster his grandiose image by manipulating his surroundings, distorting facts in his favour, and telling everyone about his “career of triumph”.

Further, Toad’s friends in their protectiveness unwittingly treat Toad as a child. Their constant attempt to protect Toad from other animal’s criticism ironically becomes unintentional cover-ups and excuses for his bad behaviour. As the animals take sides after Toad’s incarceration, Badger and Mole take to Toad’s defence against the adversaries, the Wild Wood animals. Thus, in mending his reputation they go out of their way to protect Toad as much as they would protect their child; they took bashings and suffered scorn, nonetheless, they “have been camping out in the open, in every sort of weather, living very rough by day... watching over your (Toad’s) house, patrolling your boundaries... scheming and planning and contriving how to get your property back for you” (160). Their acts of “scheming”, “planning”, and “contriving” render them as sources that feed Toad’s narcissism. Carter and Sokol, in scrutinizing relationship with a narcissist and devising a method of successfully dealing with narcissistic partners, specify that people who love a narcissist often become accomplices in “reinforce(ing) their most toxic qualities” (199). Consequentially, his friends enhance his self-esteem by acting like caretakers and in defending Toad’s property and reputation by arguing that Toad will be acquitted because of his “cheek and plausibility... with the power of a long purse” (Grahame 156), they inadvertently become his admirers. Admiration and support from his friends serve as narcissistic supplies for Toad. Consequentially, their presence elevates Toad’s pathological condition.

### **Transformation or Deception?**

The alteration of Mr. Toad is the most debated topic among critics of Grahame. Even though at the end the character seems to mature and take responsibility for his actions, the sheer habit of snapping back to the initial state of narcissism presents an impossibility of change. Mattanah believes that Toad is altered at the end of the novel as his narcissistic tendencies are eliminated due to Ratty, Badger and Mole’s efforts (100). Contrarily, West and Rollin suggest that the final alteration of Toad at the end of the

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novel is rather unconvincing (49). This paper attempts to throw light on the unclear subject of Toad's alteration and establish it as a hoax.

As proved in the preceding section, the social interactions with his friends and others sustain Toad's narcissism, hence, the alleged alteration of Toad cannot be brought about by his friend's counsels. Criticism is a threat to a narcissist as they do not have a developed sense of self. A narcissist is incapable of self-reflection; hence he is incapable of alteration. The moment his narcissistic supplies empty, he contrives and manoeuvres to protect his False Self. Putting on a pretence to gain acceptance and admiration is one way of manoeuvring adopted by a narcissist. Even though a narcissist is slow to accept and adapt to change, he is essentially a drama queen and can fake adaption to get approval. Toad makes multiple efforts to be agreeable to others throughout the novel in one way or the other. It seems as if he has a back-up ready every time his plan fails. When Badger and Ratty confront Toad about the mischief he is planning in the party, Toad feels busted. However, he dramatically accepts defeat and leaves his friends feeling like brutes. Even though his idea of a self-appreciatory speech is shattered, he finds another way of gaining applause by pretending to transform into a sensible Toad. He confers on Mole all the praises he meant for himself and indirectly becomes a subject of appreciation of others who praise his benevolence. Moreover, one should not expect to change the narcissist by reasoning with them (Vaknin 374). Ratty's exploring counsels and Badger's wise remarks will have no effect on Toad's personality as he is able to turn criticism into business.

Another reason for Toad's transformation to be a hoax is his consistent inconsistency. Toad is quick to apologise for his mistakes and make lofty promises of change throughout the novel. However, he always rebounds to his stubbornness, and grandiosity. Since his ego is non-existent, he lacks self-realisation. Lack of realisation makes his promises shallow. Towards the end, Toad is seen addressing an imaginary audience and delivering a speech of self-appreciation. Even though Toad promises to avoid all self-conceited songs and speeches, he does deliver them to an imagined audience. This eccentricity marks the impossibility of change in Toad's personality. He manages his behaviour and shapes himself according to his friend's wishes, however, his narcissistic tendencies aren't extinct. He revels in the conceited song he wrote for himself when he is alone. Further, the feigned alteration wins him narcissistic supplies in the form of public admiration and he is hailed as "the great Toad" by the river bankers.

## Conclusion

The narcissistic tendencies of Toad are evident throughout the novel. He is in a constant state of rage and repressed aggression that is cathected in an external object. The wild ride on the motor cars, quick shifting moods, seething jealousy and violent behaviour depict his aggressiveness and hatred towards others. His mercenary indulgence and social interactions reveal his attachment to potential sources of narcissistic supplies. Toad maintains his false self by retrieving the invested energy from the object to the substitute ego (secondary narcissism). His social milieu becomes a rich narcissistic space flooded with sources of narcissistic supplies that sustain his false ego. The river bank becomes a PN space that facilitates emotional bonds that are substitutes to his narcissistic needs. The social relationships of Toad are no real emotional bonds, instead they are sources of admiration, appreciation, and popularity that feed his grandiose self. Badger and Ratty seem to criticize Toad's behaviour and force discipline but in doing that they become his caretakers and thus a source to feed his narcissism. The river bank is a close-knit society which harbours ample opportunities for Toad to gain admiration. Consequentially, the social milieu of the character sustains his narcissism in feeding his grandiosity. Toad's transformation is a hoax as throughout the novel he has shown inconsistency in his behaviour. He is full of empty promises that never get actualized since his ego is non-existent. Further, he doesn't engage in self-reflection till the end. The transformation in the character is not a result of self-realization, instead it is a manipulation to extract narcissistic supply. Towards the end of the novel, Toad connivingly usurps the position of respect given to Badger and is hailed as the great Toad.

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