

Relocation of Greek Myth in Salvador Dali's Painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*¹

Prakash Sharma & Toya Nath Upadhya

Abstract

Critical observation of the surrealist painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1939) by Salvador Dali unfolds his act of relocating the Greek myth of Narcissus in a unique way, which captures the multiple moments in a single painting. The painting beautifully captures Narcissus first in a crouched naked position and then in a transformed form holding an egg symbolizing the source of Narcissus' germination. At this backdrop, this research paper reveals how Dali has used the paranoiac-critical method, for which he is best known, to expose the transformative quality of Narcissus. It also reveals the multi-layered structure of the painting encompassing multiple moments in a single painting by consequently setting a new trend in the history of painting. Based on the qualitative research design, this paper tries to explore the painting by using both primary and secondary data to justify the main claim. Critical ideas related to the paranoiac-critical method developed by Dali himself and ideas related to the timeless value of mythology are crucial for the analytic purpose of the painting. Indeed, the relocation of myth in the painting offers it a prime value exposing its potentiality to tell the complete mythical story in a single painting. Finally, the paper concludes that the painting is successful to relocate the Narcissus myth in it to reveal the universality of myth with its transformative quality. This research can be beneficial to those who are doing research on mythology, art and their unique potentialities.

Keywords: Myth, paranoiac-critical method, painting, relocation, transformation

¹ Cite this article as: Sharma, P. & Upadhya, T. N. (2024). *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 7 (2); DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/craiaj.v7i2.72168>

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Article history: Received on August 27, 2024; Accepted on Nov. 10, 2024; Published on Nov. 28, 2024

Peer reviewed under the authority of CRAIAJ, academic journal of Ghodaghodi Multiple Campus, Kailali, Nepal, with ISSN 2717-4611 (Print) and ISSN 2717-462X (Online).

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Introduction

Deep observation of the history of painting and literature gives an idea that there is the reciprocal relationship between them. Sometimes literature represents paintings and vice versa. The surrealistic painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) by Salvador Dali, which is located in the permanent collection at the Tate Gallery in London, is the depiction of the Greek myth of Narcissus relocating it in painting departing from the traditional way of direct representation. Rather than depicting a single moment, Dali's painting highlights the process of transformation. Moreover, he has depicted Narcissus basically in two modes. On the left, Narcissus is naked in a crouched position: his knee, as seen at his reflection in the water, supports his head. On the right, Narcissus is transformed into an ossified hand holding an egg, out of which a narcissus flower emerges. For depicting the whole myth in a single painting and highlighting the process of metamorphosis, the painter has used the paranoiac-critical method. It is particularly effective when creating an optical illusion, of one image hidden within another. Similarly, the painter uses this method to represent the classical myth of Narcissus associating it with life, death and transformation.

Dali's painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* is based on the narrative of the Narcissus myth in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. The painting shows the transformative potentiality of myths. In Greek mythology Narcissus was renowned for his beauty that could attract anyone who saw him. Though both men and women were attracted toward him, he did not show his interest to anyone else as he was swallowed by the pride of his beauty. Among his admirers, Echo was so obsessed toward his beauty; she followed him in spite of his rejection. Rather she decided to waste herself until her voice remained. Echo, the mountain nymph, who wanted to take revenge with Narcissus, took her pathetic situation seriously. With the purpose of taking revenge, Narcissus was convinced to gaze on her own image on the pool. Indeed, the beauty of his own image attracted him and he fell in love with his own image. He was so mad upon his reflection that he was unable to come out of it. At the same time, he failed to embrace his own reflection on the water that made him insane. Like Echo Narcissus himself was wasted away. In his place there grew a beautiful flower called Narcissus.

The above-mentioned mythical story is represented in Dali's painting in new and original way. Dali has refused the traditional way of direct representation and followed the method of capturing multiple moments in a single painting. He has used the

paranoiac-critical method in his depiction of the mythical narrative. The main objective of this study is to reveal the uniqueness of the painting showing its multilayered representation of outwardly clashing ideas and objects. Moreover, the study opens the great potentiality of painting as an art form. In addition, the universality and transformative quality of myth is revealed through the analysis of this genius way of representing myth in painting. With all these critical activities, this study proves beneficial for those who want to do research in the field of myth and art.

Literature review

From the beginning of its public appearance, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* has attracted the attention of the art critics immensely. Different critics have interpreted the painting from multiple perspectives. Before going to the review of the particular painting, it is worth seeing how the idea of narcissism is defined. Salome (1962) defines narcissism as "a part of our self-love which accompanies all phases" (p. 3). Moreover, Salome points to the main feature of narcissism as self-love that is found in all phases of human life. Though found in the life of everyone in all phases, the extreme form is destructive like that of mythical Narcissus.

Discussing about the painting linking it with the biography of Dali, his biographer Secret (1986) notes: "[Salvador Dali] desperately needed to explain himself to himself, and his explanation ... was entwined with the idealized self he was deliberately constructing to replace the intolerable sensation of not knowing who he was" (p. 6). Dali's purpose of presenting Narcissus in such transformed form is related to his own autobiographical matter. He himself was in need of better understanding of himself. That was the reason for using the Narcissus myth in the painting. Mallen (2015) points out the issue of the reflection of the painter's own self in the painting. He reveals, "Salvador Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) reflects the artist's view of his role as a creator of new realities and his acknowledgement of the developing nature of his own self: out of the confrontation with his image emerges a new creation, a manifestation of his persona" (p. 1). Similarly, Mallen highlights the issue of the role of artists in the process of creation. The role of the artist as presented in the painting is not just the reflection of the physical world or the narrative. However, Mallen points to the ideas of confrontation, recreation and reflection of the painter's own self.

Brunel (1992) interprets the painting as, "*Metamorphosis* is nothing but the means to overcome death. It is a hypothesis about time before birth and after death

uniting matter and mind" (p. 32). According to Brunel, the painting combines two contrastive aspects: change and permanence. The issue is to identify what is changeable and what is static. Furthermore, Brunel emphasizes on the reality of the painting, associating the painter's personal situation with the need to escape from death. Heyd (1984) finds the depiction of the interrelation between nature and man in mutual reflection in the painting. Besides, she points, "The egg in *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* exemplifies this link between the individual and the world, between the personal and the cosmic" (p. 125). Through the presentation of the egg and other components, Dali exposes in symbolic way the link between the individual and nature. This is the universality of the painting.

Explaining the painting's association and departure with the classical source Germ (2012) argues that in the surface observation it seems that the painting has nothing to do with the myth of Narcissus. At this backdrop, he writes:

Salvador Dalí focuses on the issue of the relationship between Dalí's treatment of the theme and the myth of Narcissus as depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Although at first glance, the revolutionary surrealist painting owes little to the story of the beautiful Boeotian youth as presented by Ovid, the iconographical analysis nevertheless reveals Dalí's profound interest in *Metamorphoses*. Using the paranoiac-critical method Dalí creates an original visual interpretation of metamorphosis based on Ovid's description of Narcissus' death with details that are lacking in other classical (or later) sources. (p. 133)

However, the deeper or iconographical analysis of the painting reveals that the painting has strong association with the Greek myth of Narcissus. The use of a paranoiac-critical method in the creation of the painting has given it the originality and uniqueness.

Critic Kalnicka (2016) interprets the painting from a gender point of view. So he tries to analyze the painting in such way, "In terms of associating Narcissus not merely with seeing and mirroring but also with touching and metamorphosis, emphasizing gender decision in his visionary leap toward androgyny" (p. 51). This interpretation unfolds the gender issue the painting raises through the presentation of Narcissus and the transformation he passes through. The transformative movement of Narcissus in the painting is taken as the journey toward androgyny, the merging of gender disparity.

The critic Secrest points to the painting's autobiographical tone whereas Mallen links the painting with the idea of the creator. Brunel asserts the role of painting as a

means to overcome the painter's death wish and Heyd links the painting as an attempt to show the link between mind and matter. Germ points to the departure of the painting from the myth and Kalnicka interprets the painting from the gender perspective. However, these critics have not analyzed the issue of the relocation of the Narcissus myth in Dali's painting. This is the research gap identified and aimed to be fulfilled by this research.

Methods and materials

This study is basically emphasizes on the qualitative research, which is based on the library study and it also uses data from both primary and secondary sources. Salvador Dali's painting, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, is the primary data under scrutiny. The painting has been analyzed in the lens of paranoiac-critical method proposed by Salvador Dali himself that valorizes the value and the transformative qualities of myth. Such insights are the theoretical parameters to examine, analyze and interpret the painting in association with the ideas of myth.

Theoretical modality

In the early 1930s Dali developed the paranoiac-critical method which is the advance form of surrealist technique. This technique is used by Dali for creating paintings and different other creative works where he uses optical illusions and multiple images. It involves the artists deliberately putting themselves in a paranoid state, where they feel like they are being manipulated or controlled. This state helps them break down the usual concept of identity, making the artist's personal feelings and thoughts the main focus of the artwork. Dali was fascinated by how paranoia allows the brain to see connections between unrelated things. He described the method as a "spontaneous way of gaining irrational knowledge based on objectively analyzing and interpreting crazy ideas" (p. 1). Using this method, the artists actively imagine different images and include them in their works. The result is often a double or multiple images that can be seen in different ways.

Dali's idea was to move surrealism into a new phase. Instead of just revealing the unconscious mind through automatic writing and similar techniques, this new phase would consciously use the strange connections made by the unconscious. In simple terms, the paranoid critical method is about using paranoid delusions to tap into deeper creativity and insight. By challenging normal perceptions and embracing irrationality, artists aim to uncover hidden truths and create thought-provoking art and ideas.

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Another essential aspect to interpret the painting is the ideas of mythology. Mythologies have great potentiality of transformation and are the sources of the energy of the physical world. Campbell (2004) highlights the value of myth as source of numerous activities on the Earth in *The hero with a thousand faces*. He points, “It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (p. 3). Similarly, Campbell regards myth as the source of the different cultures. It is the source of different cultural practices of all cultures. This broad definition of myth is reflected in the surrealist painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. The painting is based on the Greek myth and shows the timeless value of myth. These theoretical ideas of paranoiac critical method and universality of myths, and the ideas related to the analysis of painting are used as analytical tools for the critical analysis of the painting.

Results and discussion

The painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* that relocates the mythical story in a single painting is a part of the complete work of Salvador Dali entitled *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. This book consists of three items that are regarded as parts of a complex surrealist work. The first part of the book consists of the theoretical ideas about the paranoiac-critical method and the second part consists of the painting and a poem, which are the artistic creations related to the mythical story of Narcissus. Discussing about these three aspects of the book, Kalnicka (2016) writes:

Although *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* is mainly known as a painting, in fact it is a book consisting of three parts: a short theoretical account of his own artistic paranoiac-critical method; a poem; and the painting. Dalí claimed that this ensemble of three parts mentioned above was the first complex surrealist work ever and the first poem and the first painting obtained entirely through the integral application of the paranoiac-critical method. (p. 63)

Therefore, the ideas related to the paranoiac-critical method, the painting and the poem in proper harmony create an exemplary work of surrealism. Dali is best known for using his own critical perspective in the creation of his artwork. The painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* is the best known example in which his paranoiac-critical method is applied in excellent way.

Any interpretation of a known artwork is risky as it has the potentiality of multiple interpretations and various critics have already analyzed it. In case of the analysis of any

artwork like painting, it needs closer observation. One should put on minute eyes on the location, presentation and color combination of the painting in an aesthetic way, then only association with the theme becomes contextual. In a close observation of the painting, four main places where the painting has been split can be noticed. The first scene of the painting is situated at the bottom left corner. It presents a man in big size having his head rest on his knee. However, the fire burning behind the man stands for the passion that Narcissus has for his own reflection on water. In the painting the fire is keeping him there as it is behind him. Symbolically his attachment with his own image is keeping him there. Ultimately same passion for his own image kills him. At the same time, the dark wall behind him stands for the isolation and loneliness in the life of Narcissus. His negligence of his own surrounding has compelled him to be in isolation. In association to this situation, Secrest (1986) points that Dali himself associates paranoia technique with his exaltation of the self and his success of saving from annihilation: "Only through paranoia, that is the prideful exaltation of self, did I succeed in saving myself from annihilation of systematic self-doubt" (4). Moreover, elaborating the association of the painting with his personal situation Dali (1976) writes, "I first conquered death with pride and narcissism." (p. 28). It is empty around Narcissus as he neglects all his friends and rejects whoever proposes him. This self-love and hatred of others is the cause of the darkness around. The color pattern of Narcissus is warm yellow, but dark reds and black surround it. This color combination conveys the idea that Narcissus still has passion but this passion is not for the world outside but for himself. That is why; the world around him is lonely and sad. This dark desolate surrounding is the outcome of the pride that has engulfed Narcissus.

The next scene is at the bottom right of the first. In the center, there is another figure resembling a man, but this one takes the form of a stone hand holding an egg. The egg is cracked, and a white flower is growing out of it. Analyzing this scene of the painting Mallen (2015) denotes, "The egg the hand carries clearly derives from the world of alchemy where it denotes the philosopher's stone" (p. 1). The egg, as a symbol represents a microcosm where everything is contained. Therefore, it indicates the beginning of life as a seed and as empty shell it signals the end of life. From its core, all creation emerges, making it the foundation of all interconnected processes. Mallen adds, "By reconciling contrasting properties, the egg symbolizes the principle of continuity, which is the nucleus of all transformations" (p. 3). Mallen puts high value on the egg as it

reconciles the contrasting properties and symbolizes continuity. This egg is the microcosm of all the transformations. In the painting, there is a fire gone out behind the hand. That is why there is smoking fire pit. The color of the scene is blues and grays that indicates very cold situation. This cold scene symbolizes the loss of passion within Narcissus. Echo's hand is holding the egg, the one who wasted herself for the rejection of Narcissus. Even after the death of Echo, there is the sense of passion in her toward Narcissus.

In *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, the fingertip of Echo is in warm yellow color that indicates the remaining passion in him. Similarly, the flower blooming from the egg is in the shadow and in white blue color. Indeed, it shows that the flower is alive but lacks passions and emotions, as it is cold. Representing different forms of destructions, the crawling ants and the dog are there in the painting. The dog eating bloody piece of meat stands for the activity of the waste of Narcissus body ultimately transforming into a blooming flower. Another form of decomposer are ants, they convey that the beauty does not last long. Its transitoriness is reflected here. The fire behind the hand has gone out, just as the passion has died in Narcissus. The smoking ashes are Dali's way of showing the end of the passion in Narcissus' body. Similarly, it also symbolizes the end of the pride he shows.

The last two scenes behind the two figures are difficult to notice right away by viewers. In Wikipedia, there is the indication of this part of the painting as: "In the mid-ground of the painting stands a group of Narcissus's rejected suitors. Among the mountains in the background rests a third Narcissus figure". The suitors rejected by Narcissus occupy the middle part of the painting. The rejected suitors are naked and weeping, some others are dancing. They come in the life of Narcissus in different times, fall in love but are rejected. This scene is painted with warmer yellow and reds that indicates the joyous moment. However, the rejected suitors are in pain individually but being in-group, they are in the joyous moment. Their attachment to each other in the group is the source of their happiness.

The scene behind the stone hand is the last scene in our analysis. The statue in the middle of the chessboard stands for Narcissus. His loneliness is indicated by this lonely figure. Moreover, this presentation notes the vanity in Narcissus' life. It has red and yellow color remarking the passion he has for his own image. The statue is peering up into the mountains in the top right corner in more blues and grays color. The lonely statue

stands for Narcissus himself who needs others to be complete but has disregarded the value of others in his life being guided by the pride of his beauty. Additionally, the viewers can experience that the feeling of the image is snobby. This snobby nature of Narcissus is the main weakness that ultimately swallows him. By pointing the proud nature of Narcissus on his beauty and the ultimate destruction that invites in his life, the painter imparts the message of the vanity of such pride.

One important aspect of the painting is to reflect a dual image. The painting presents a dual image: on one side, we see the figure of Narcissus, who is absorbed in gazing at his own reflection. On the other, a hand appears holding an egg from which a flower grows. This duality symbolizes the transformation of Narcissus into a flower, reflecting both the myth and the psychological idea of the self-obsessed with its own image. The repetition of forms, with the hand mirroring Narcissus's body, emphasizes the concept of metamorphosis. However, the image of Narcissus gazing on the water being infatuated by his own image is the pivotal aspect of the mythical narrative. In this presentation, the painter is more based on the mythical ideas and the audiences are pre-informed about that. The second image of a hand holding egg is a more creative presentation of the painter. Through it, Dali presents the ideas related to life and death, emotion and emotionlessness; and energy and passivity.

This observation of the painting gives us the idea that the event of the death of Narcissus is given more value in the painting than other traditional narratives. The painter has used his artistic creativity employing paranoia critical method. He has avoided the traditional direct representation and intermingled diverse elements in unique way in multiple layers. This new and unique way of representation is taken as his great contribution to the iconography of Narcissus in European art. Though different in some sense, it has not gone far from the classical tradition. The painting is based on the mythical narrative of Ovid. However, it has certain features that expose its originality. Moreover, the multilayered presentation of the painting that uniquely unfolds the mythical narrative including the transformation of Narcissus is the key feature of the painting including other themes associated with the writer's autobiography. The painting has certain autobiographical elements mixed with the mythical narrative. The event of the death of Dali's brother created the situation where only narcissism could save him. His pessimism with life could be countered by the concept of self-love.

The paranoiac-critical method is the key technique and theoretical base of the painting. Therefore, we encounter so many paradoxical components joined together ignoring the logical interpretation. Both red and black indicating passion and passivity are combined in the painting. Egg indicates germination but cold stone hand indicates death. These contradictory ideas get merged in the painting. Its key originality and utilization of the paranoiac-critical method is in its presentation of the whole myth in a painting representing staticity, mobility and transformation. In other words, life, death and rebirth are the key elements of Narcissus myth and all three are artistically represented in the painting, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*.

Conclusion

The discussion above has clarified that the great value of Salvador Dali's surrealist painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* lies in its relocation of the Greek myth of Narcissus in the painting. The myth of Narcissus is one of the most famous Greek myths that have reappeared in different forms of art. Indeed, Dali has rightly used the technique of paranoiac-critical method for depicting the process of transformation by combining explicit images with concealed ones. The whole myth of Narcissus with its transformative quality has been reflected in the painting. The mythical story of life, death and reappearance as beautiful flowers are intermingled in the painting in a harmonious way. In addition, this painting has relocated the whole myth in a single sketch even including the process of change with the help of the technique called paranoiac-critical method. Thematically, this painting gives the true picture of life in its harmonious combination of motion and staticity, passion and passivity and life and death. Moreover, the whole painting shows the true value of myth that is to be transformative and timelessly valuable. The value of the painting also resides in its success to challenge traditional painting style of direct representation and depicting a single moment. It has successfully depicted multiple moments and dynamism in the painting. Therefore, it is an epoch-making painting and poses a challenge to the painters of all times. Finally, this paper can be helpful for those who are doing research on mythology and its present validity, as well as for those who want to learn about the capability of painting to represent multiple scenes and movement in a single canvas.

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