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Anton Chekhov's 'The Princess': Diagnosis – Narcissistic Personality Disorder

In a letter to his publisher A. S. Suvorin, dated 15 November 1888, Chekhov stated he was writing a story in which he 'describe[d] a vile woman [*poganuiu babu*]'.¹ Three days later he informed the same addressee: 'I want to write protest stories this season – I must learn the knack, but it bores me because I'm not used to it'. Although critics such as W. H. Bruford² argue that social protest expressed by the doctor plays a dominant role in the story, its 'narrative centre' (*povestvovatel'nyi tseñtr*), as noted correctly by Aleksandr Chudakov,³ is the heroine and the revelation of her personality.

Although a considerable literature explores the relationship of Chekhov's art to medicine, and specific studies have examined his portrayal of physical illnesses and mental disorders,⁴ many of his excellent works on this subject have been

¹ A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh* (Moskva: Nauka, 1974–83), *Pis'ma*, Vol. 3, 71, 74. All quotes from 'The Princess' (*Kniaginia*) are from *Sochineniia* Vol. 7 (1985), 236–47, of this edition and will be indicated in the text by page numbers. Citations from Chekhov's letters are also from this edition and will be indicated by dates.

² W. H. Bruford, *Chekhov and His Russia: A Sociological Study* (Hamden, CT: Arkon Books, 1971), 89; Charles W. Meister, *Chekhov Criticism 1880 Through 1986* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland, 1988), 103, states: 'Probably because of his trip to the penal colony in 1890, Chekhov's stories show a definite social purpose during this period, and some of them embody social protest. For example, "The Princess" and "The Wife" are attacks upon the wealthy'. Actually, 'The Princess' was written before, not after the Sakhalin trip; Jack Coulehan (ed.), *Chekhov's Doctors: A Collection of Chekhov's Medical Tales* (Kent, The Kent State University Press, 2003), 189 says: "'The Princess" provides another example of class conflict'.

³ Aleksandr P. Chudakov, *Mir Chekhova* (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1986), 272.

⁴ Some of the more scholarly studies on the subject include: Rolf-Dieter Kluge, 'Otobrazhenie bolezni v rasskazakh "Palata No. 6" i "Chernyi monakh"', V. Ia. Lakshin et. al. (eds.), *Chekhoviana: Melikhovskie trudy i dni* (Moscow: Nauka, 1995), 52–59; Heinz Müller-Dietz, 'Medizinische Subjects bei A. P. Čechov' in Rolf-Dieter Kluge (ed.), *Anton Čechov – Werk und Wirkung, Teil I* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990), 464–475; Leonard A. Polakiewicz, 'Čexov's Tif: An Analysis', *Russian Language Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 116 (1979): 92–111; E. B. Meve, *Meditsina v tvorčestve i zhizni A. P. Čekhova* (Kiev: Gosmedizdat, 1961); I. M. Gèizer, *Chekhov i meditsina* (Moscow: Gosmedizdat, 1954); M. S. Rabinovich, *Chekhov i meditsina* (Omsk: Omskaia Pravda, 1946); and Henri-Bernard Duclos, *Antone Tchëkhov: Le médecin et l'écrivain* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1927).

virtually overlooked by critics. The story ‘The Princess’ is a case in point.⁵ The present analysis aims to show Chekhov’s success at portraying the princess artistically and, in the process, providing a scientifically exact symptomology of a personality disorder which, until the appearance of ‘The Princess’, had not yet been portrayed in Russian literature with such authority and in such detail. Chekhov’s aesthetics required that medical matters depicted in a work of art should be in full accord with scientific truth, a point which the author stressed in a letter of 11 October 1899 to G. I. Rossolimo and adhered to in creating *The Princess*.⁶ The present analysis will make it evident that Chekhov’s method of depicting the princess’s disorder is the result of a complex, artistic weaving of the subject of mental illness into its literary fibre and that his artistry is undiminished in the midst of the clinical accuracy of his description.

As is often the case with Chekhov’s portrayal of a character’s physical illness or psychological disorder, its accuracy can be verified by applying scientific knowledge. Thomas Winner calls the princess a ‘narcissist’⁷ without defining the disorder or examining the nature of her narcissism in psychiatric terms. An analysis of the princess’s inner monologues and behaviour, and the information about her revealed by the doctor, lead one to conclude that she suffers from a pathological form of narcissism – the narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).⁸

⁵ An exception in this regard is Peter Thiergen’s perceptive analysis of ‘The Princess’, ‘Zu Čechovs Personalunion von Dichter, Arzt und Psychologe (Am Beispiel von *Княгиня* 1889)’ in Rolf-Dieter Kluge, ed., *Anton P. Čechov: Werk und Wirkung, Teil I* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990), 273–278.

⁶ Chekhov began writing ‘The Princess’ the same month he completed ‘A Nervous Breakdown’. Regarding the latter he wrote to A. N. Pleshcheev (13 November 1888), stating: ‘It seems to me, as a medico, that I described the psychic pain correctly, according to all the rules of the science of psychiatry.’ Psychiatry was established as an independent discipline in the Medical Faculty of Moscow University in 1887. Chekhov acquired most of his knowledge of psychiatry not during his university studies, but from reading specialized literature afterwards. He purchased the first edition of S. S. Korsakov’s *Kurs psikiatrii* when it appeared in 1893. T. L. Shchepkina-Kupernik recalls Chekhov advising her that year: ‘If you want to become a genuine writer... study psychiatry – it is indispensable’ (Quoted in N. I. Gitovich, *Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva A. P. Chekhova* [Moscow: GIKHL, 1955], 353).

⁷ Thomas Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 69.

⁸ Chekhov portrayed a number of individuals in works written before and after ‘The Princess’ who, in varying degrees, possess the characteristics of a ‘narcissist’ e.g., Pyotr Dmitrich (‘Name-day Party’, 1888), Von Koren (‘Duel’, 1891), Ol’ga Ivanovna (‘The Grasshopper’, 1892), Ariadne (‘Ariadne’, 1895), Ol’ga Dmitrievna (‘His Wife’, 1895), Lida Volchaninova (‘House with a Mezzanine’, 1896),

Chekhov was most likely well acquainted with Ovid's version of the Narcissus myth.⁹ Michael Finke claims Chekhov's 'vanity and self-love were remarked by many who knew him and loved him'. The critic cites the author's alleged account of his youthful experience at a well in which, according to Finke, Chekhov 'in effect characterizes himself as an epigone of Narcissus'.¹⁰ Depicting the princess, Chekhov demonstrated his unique understanding of the symptoms of a narcissistic personality and his profound insight into the motives of human interaction. Although the phenomenon was well known when Chekhov was writing 'The Princess',¹¹ the disorder had not been fully examined, its symptoms not fully identified, and the term 'narcissism' not yet coined.¹² The first detailed definition of pathological narcissism was provided by Freud in 'On Narcissism'

Arkadina (*The Sea Gull*, 1896), Elena Andreeva, Prof. Serebriakov (*Uncle Vanya*, 1897), Natasha (*Three Sisters*, 1900–1901), and others.

⁹ A year before he began writing 'The Princess', Chekhov sent a copy of *In the Twilight* to his Latin teacher in Taganrog, with the following dedication: 'To Vladimir Dmitrievich Starov for Sallust, Ovid, Titus Livius, Cicero, Virgil and Horace, and for ut consecutum, antequam u priusquam ...' Cited in A. G. Alfer'eva et al, *Taganrog i Chekhovy: Materialy k biografii A. P. Chekhova* (Taganrog: Lukomor'e, 2003), 401. It is equally relevant that Chekhov possessed a copy of *Traduction en vers des Métamorphoses d'Ovide*. Tome second (Paris, 1800). See S. Balukhatyi, 'Biblioteka Chekhova', *Chekhov i ego sreda* (Leningrad: Academia, 1930), 270, item #245.

¹⁰ Michael C. Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 144–145.

¹¹ Neville Symington, *Narcissism: A New Theory* (London: Karnac Books, 1993), 1. Chekhov was familiar with the works of contemporary Russian psychiatrists such as I. P. Merzheevskii, S. S. Korsakov and A. Ia. Kozhevnikov, and acquaintances and correspondents such as V. I. Iakovenko and G. I. Rossolimo. In addition to Korsakov's *Kurs psikhiiatrii*, Moscow: Tipo-litografiia Vysochaishe utverzhen. Tovarishchestva I. N. Kushnerev i Ko, 1893 (an earlier edition based on his lectures appeared in 1891), we find works by these other psychiatrists in Chekhov's library. Korsakov's work does contain a section on 'Psychopathic constitutions' (*psikhopaticheskie konstitutsii*) which mentions some symptoms characteristic of narcissism. However, since none of these works were published prior to the appearance of 'The Princess', it remains unclear to what degree the theories presented in them may have informed Chekhov's depiction of the princess's mental disorder.

¹² According to Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, IV, 187, the term 'narcissism' was coined by Paul Adolf Näcke in 1899 (*Die Sexuellen Perversitäten*) and first used by him in a psychological sense. Ellis notes: 'I have alluded to the fable of Narcissus, whence Knacke has since devised the term Narcissism...' Robert J. Campbell, *Psychiatric Dictionary*, 7th edition (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 460, under the entry for 'narcissism' states: 'This term was first used by Näcke to indicate the form of autoerotism characterized by self-love, often without genitality as an object'.

published in 1914 which proved to be the central essay in the history of Freudian psychoanalysis.¹³

With regard to the etiology of narcissistic personality disorder, many factors may contribute to its development. Symptoms begin to emerge in childhood or adolescence. The negative consequences of such symptoms, however, may not show themselves until early adulthood.¹⁴ Chekhov's story provides no information regarding Princess Vera Gavrilovna's childhood. The negative consequences of her narcissistic personality disorder become known to us when we meet her as an adult. In addition to the description of her present behaviour and thoughts, the narrator's tongue-in-cheek remarks and the doctor's revelations regarding her behaviour during the previous five years when he was in her service, we are informed of the nature and consequences of their present encounter which convey her falsity, hypocrisy, and pettiness (*poshlost'*). Taken as a whole, this information paints a striking portrait of a classical narcissist.

According to Sam Vaknin, the popular belief that narcissists are in love with themselves is a fallacy.¹⁵ We recall that Narcissus was in love not with himself but with his reflection. There is a major difference between one's True Self and reflected or False Self. Loving the former is healthy while loving the latter is unhealthy. Vaknin notes that, 'the narcissist is preoccupied with projecting a loveable image' (Vaknin 32). This is precisely what characterizes the princess's relationships with everyone. The narcissist directs his love to other people's impressions of him, and to him, 'love is interchangeable with other emotions, such as awe, respect, admiration, attention, or even being feared (collectively known as Narcissistic Supply)'. Thus, to a narcissist, 'a projected image, which provokes these reactions in others, is both "loveable and loved" ... The narcissist is compulsive in his pursuit of Narcissistic Supply. The more successful this projected image ... is in generating Narcissistic Supply – the more the narcissist

¹³ S. Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914), Standard Edition, 14:117–140 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957). Other major contributors to the study of narcissism are: A. Eisnitz, J. G. Gunderson, K. Horney, O. Kernberg, M. Klein, H. Kohut, T. Millon, and A. Rothstein.

¹⁴ *AllPsych ONLINE The Virtual Psychology Classroom*, 'Psychiatric Disorders: Narcissistic Personality Disorder'. <http://allpsych.com/disorders/personality/narcissism.html>.

¹⁵ Sam Vaknin, *Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited* (Prague, Skopje: Narcissus Publication, 2005), 36, 38. Citations from this source will be identified in the text by 'Vaknin' and page numbers in parentheses. Citations from Vaknin's Internet publications will be identified in the footnotes by specific Web site.

becomes divorced from his True Self and married to the reflected or False Self'. In fact, the narcissist 'prefers his reflected self to his True Self' (Vaknin 32–34). Karl Kramer maintains that the Princess is 'so thoroughly enmeshed in her public role that she has completely lost her private identity'.¹⁶ Actually, she does have a private identity, her True Self, which she suppresses in favor of the public identity or her narcissistic False Self.

A. M. Benis maintains that narcissism is determined by genetics. 'It is a natural, heritable character trait'.¹⁷ The 'healthy' variety of narcissism is generally regarded to be an adaptive strategy. Pathological narcissism is the art of deception. The narcissist projects a False Self and manages all his social interactions through a concocted fictional construct ... There is a qualitative difference between having narcissistic traits and the Narcissistic Personality Disorder'.¹⁸

The American Psychiatric Association specifies the following diagnostic criteria in its definition of NPD:

1. the individual has a grandiose sense of self-importance;
2. the individual is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success;
3. the individual believes he/she is special and unique;
4. the individual requires excessive admiration;
5. the individual has a sense of entitlement;
6. the individual is interpersonally exploitative;
7. the individual lacks empathy;
8. the individual is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her; and
9. the individual shows arrogant, haughty behaviours or attitudes.¹⁹

¹⁶ Karl D. Kramer, *The Chameleon and the Dream: The Image of Reality in Čexov's Stories* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1970), 105.

¹⁷ A. M. Benis, *Narcissism: A Genetic Trait: NPA Theory of Personality Types Based on Mendelian Genetics*, 2004, <http://narcissism.homestead.com/>.

¹⁸ Sam Vaknin, 'Telling Them Apart', <http://samvak.tripod.com/journal63.html>.

¹⁹ NPD was first listed in 1980 by the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual as a new mental health category. American Psychiatric Association, 'Diagnostic criteria for 301.81 Narcissistic Personality

For NPD to be diagnosed, five (or more) of these criteria must be met. Princess Vera's personality appears to meet all nine criteria, which identifies her as an extreme case of narcissistic personality disorder. Moreover, in terms of Theodore Millon's classification, the princess is a 'compensatory' narcissist who covers up in her haughty behaviour for a deep-seated deficit in self-esteem.²⁰ Princess Vera is less a 'cerebral' narcissist who derives her Narcissistic Supply from her intelligence, than a 'somatic' type who derives her Narcissistic Supply from her real or imagined physical attractiveness including her inviting smile, benignant gaze, soft voice, small well-formed figure and attempt to 'resemble a little bird'.

The princess's sense of entitlement (**criterion 5**) and grandiose sense of self-importance (**criterion 2**) become evident as she arrives at the monastery with great fanfare. Monks and lay brothers assemble in anticipation of the arrival of, in Vera's words, '*their princess*'. As the doctor informs her subsequently, 'you imagine the monastery regards it as a tremendous honour to have you here'. He adds: 'Two days ago a messenger on horseback arrived from your estate to spread the news of your coming. All day yesterday they were getting the hostel ready for you, and waiting upon your arrival' (244–245). As is typical of one suffering from NPD, when the Princess's demands for attention are not met, she becomes vindictive. In the words of Sandy Hotchkiss: 'Hell has no fury like the Narcissist denied'.²¹ The doctor points out: 'All day the monks have been on the lookout – there would be trouble if you were not met with proper ceremony! ... Already one monastery has suffered as a result of your visits' (245).

Although the abbot is seventy years old and very busy, the twenty-nine-year-old princess insists that he drop everything and come to her rooms. In fact, she informs the monks that she is 'burning with impatience to see him' (236; the narcissist is typically very impatient). The irony of the expression '*their princess*'

Disorder', *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 717. All quotes from 'Diagnostic criteria for 301.81 Narcissistic Personality Disorder', 714–717, are from this edition and will be noted in the text by 'DSMMD' and page number in parenthesis.

²⁰ Theodore Millon and Roger D. Davis, *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV and Beyond*, Second edition (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 411–412. Millon is professor of psychiatry and psychology and a leading authority on personality disorders.

²¹ Sandy Hotchkiss, *Why Is It Always About You? The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 20.

becomes evident as she presumptuously and arrogantly (**critterion 9**) says to the monks 'I suppose you have missed *your princess*' and 'Behold *your princess*', and to the abbot 'No doubt you forgot *your princess*' (italics mine) – even though she stayed at the monastery only a month earlier. As is typical of a narcissist, the princess speaks of herself in the third person. The monks and the abbot serve as her Narcissistic Supply Source. They provide her attention and adulation (even though they appear compelled to do so) which she uses to regulate her labile sense of self-worth. Because she is a princess, she feels entitled to impose herself upon the monks whenever it pleases her. Her needs are paramount and the monks satisfy her capricious, self-centered personality. She has 'an unreasonable expectation of especially favorable treatment' (DSMMD 715), and custom-tailored arrangements. In addition to the 'special rooms' provided for her stay, the monks 'knew she liked pickled sturgeon, little mushrooms, and simple gingerbread cakes which left a taste of cypress in her mouth, and each time she came they served the things she liked' (246).

This sense of entitlement (**critterion 5**) combined with a lack of sensitivity to the wants or needs of others (**critterion 7**) results in the conscious or unwitting exploitation of others (**critterion 6**; DSMMD 715). Her consciousness of her self-importance is underscored as she informs the doctor: 'I'm not a countess any more, but a princess' (239). She repeatedly questions whether people have not forgotten her – clear evidence that, due to her lack of self-confidence, she needs constant re-affirmation of people's awareness of her existence, of her importance and relevance to everyone with whom she interacts.

A. M. Benis points out that the wish to be distinct or special in its most primitive sense is universal. The difference between healthy and pathological narcissism is in measure, not substance. The princess firmly believes she is special and unique (**critterion 3**) and expects others to recognize her as such. According to Benis, the female narcissist may be described as 'angelic' and 'dreamy'.²² Princess Vera does in fact fantasize that she is an 'angel' sent to the monks to serve 'as the vehicle of consolations from the outside world'. She is convinced that 'everyone looking at her must think: "God has sent us an angel." And feeling that everyone must inevitably think this way, she smiled still more invitingly and

²² A. M. Benis, *Toward Self and Sanity: On the Genetic Origins of the Human Character*, 5 (New York: Psychological Dimensions Publishers, 2004), 51–52, 96–101.

tried to look like a bird' (237). She appears to be very successful at projecting an angelic image as evidenced by the doctor's reference (albeit ironic) to her 'angelic meekness'. Moreover, she imagines being a 'ray of light' or 'a singing bird' which causes the contemplative monk, 'overcome by the burden ... of his sins, to smile and experience a joy which is entirely without sin' (237). In effect, the princess considers herself superior (**criterion 1**) to the monk whom she assumes to be 'sinful' and to whom she imagines she brings joy 'without sin'. She obviously overdoes it, thinking of herself as being special. The narcissist adopts a physical posture which implies and exudes an air of superiority (**criterion 9**). We are informed that the princess's 'gay inviting smile, her benignant gaze, her voice, her jokes – in fact everything about her, even her small well-formed figure in a simple black dress, was meant to arouse in simple austere people a feeling of joy and tenderness' (237).

Narcissists 'may feel they can only be understood by, and should only associate with, other people who are special or of high status and may attribute "unique", "perfect", or "gifted" qualities to those with whom they associate ... Their own self-esteem is enhanced [i.e., "mirrored"] by the idealized value that they assign to those with whom they associate' (DSMMD 714). Such is precisely the princess's association with the abbot. She tells the monks '[The abbot] is such a wonderful, wonderful old man! You should be proud to have such an abbot!' (236). Next we are told she imagined she 'resembled the abbot' and hypocritically thought that 'like him, she was not created for the enjoyment of wealth or of love or of earthly splendours, but for the sake of a tranquil [and] secluded life' (237). Her thoughts betray envy (**criterion 8**) of the abbot and his way of life. In an attempt to project an image of humility and piety she goes up to the abbot to receive his blessing. Yet her humility and piety prove to be a façade. When he attempts to bless her, she asserts her will and prevails saying 'No, no! Let me kiss your hand!' In an excessive display of humility, she 'seizes his hand and greedily kisses it three times' (236). She is a consummate hypocrite. During vespers she does not join the monks in prayer. Instead, she goes for a walk. The doctor tells her: 'You don't believe in the God of the monks, you have your own God – a God who popped into your brain when you were attending spiritualist séances' (244). Ironically, although her name is Vera, meaning 'faith', it is clear she cares for and believes more in herself than in God. Instead of going to services in the morning this sybarite sleeps until midday. The doctor rightfully asks her, 'Why

do you come here?’ Instead of seeking spiritual sustenance at the monastery, she uses it as an escape from ‘her dissolute and ungrateful husband, the prince ... the creditors ... and her misfortunes’ (238).²³ We wonder whether her narcissistic personality was a factor leading to her husband’s infidelity. Finally, although the monastery incurs expenses related to her visits, in the words of the doctor ‘all this time the monks have not received a hundred rubles from you!’ (245). The princess is hypocritical to God and man.

An attendant characteristic of the princess’s sense of grandiose self-importance (**criterion 1**) is her assumption ‘others attribute the same value to her ‘philanthropic’ works and her surprise when the praise she expects and feels she deserves is not forthcoming’ (DSMMD 714). Doctor Mikhail Ivanovich, her former employee, offers a remarkable unmasking of the princess’s motives and reveals the devastating consequences of her ‘philanthropy’. In a sense, he gives us her spiritual anatomy to examine, as he dissects her personality and behaviour.²⁴

Princess Vera is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, particularly, her philanthropic success (**criterion 2**). The doctor labels her philanthropy as hypocritical. He notes that her entire way of living has been characterized by ‘lack of love’ (**criterion 7**) and ‘loathing for people’ (240), treating them ‘as though they were the lowest kind of rogues’ (244; **criterion 9**), which also determined the prevailing spirit on all of her estates (240). The doctor’s revelations of how the princess treats everyone suggests the extreme control she has of people’s lives and

²³ Coulehan, 189, maintains that the princess visits the monastery ‘to confess her sins to the abbot’. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that she does not come to pray or confess her sins but rather mainly to rest and satisfy her sybaritic whims. Only one mention is made of her praying in her rooms. There is something Gogolian about her *poshlost* – she arrives in a ‘carriage drawn by four plump, beautiful horses’; she is more preoccupied with food, stretching a long time in bed and sleeping late, than with spiritual matters. The seriousness of her thoughts is undermined effectively by the thrice-repeated word ‘thinking’ followed by an ellipsis. She thought of sitting motionlessly and ‘thinking, thinking, thinking...’ (238). The scene reminds one of Manilov’s empty meditations. Even the description of her departure when ‘it seemed to [her] that her body was swaying not on the cushions in the carriage but on clouds, and she herself was like a light transparent little cloud...’ (247), suggests an image of vacuity similar to Chichikov’s.

²⁴ The princess is one of a number of unmasked philanthropists who people Chekhov’s world. In ‘Van’ka’ (1887), we find a brief sketch of the philanthropist Ol’ga Ignat’evna and in ‘The House with the Mezzanine’ (1896), a well-developed portrait of the villainess philanthropist Lida Volchaninovna.

that everything is being done solely to satisfy her whims. The wants and needs of others are completely immaterial to her (**criterion 7**).

The princess's exploitative treatment (**criterion 6**) of others is substantiated aptly by the doctor's remark: 'You have the Napoleonic way of regarding mankind – men are just cannon fodder. At least Napoleon had some ideas. You have nothing except your loathing!' (241). An individual with NPD 'may expect great dedication from others and may overwork them without regard for the impact on their lives' (**criterion 7**; DSMMD). As the doctor notes, three of her former cooks who went blind in her kitchens now live by begging for alms. She is totally devoid of empathy (**criterion 7**). The doctor adds: 'You ... regarded [everyone] as ... [mere] decoration ... There was only your desire to amuse yourself with living puppets, nothing more!' (241, 243; **criterion 6**).

An individual with NPD is 'easily hurt and insulted (narcissistic injury). Even the most innocuous remarks or acts are interpreted by [the narcissist] as belittling and intruding'.²⁵ Robert C. Schwartz notes: 'The narcissist's reactions may range from surprise and shock, to emotional deflation and depression'.²⁶ Princess Vera, who claims to 'love hearing the truth', insists on hearing it from the doctor about her 'mistakes'. Her claim is totally disproved only several paragraphs later as the doctor indeed does not spare her the truth. When he enumerates what he calls 'facts', she is shocked, frightened and insulted by his tone of voice, because 'no one had ever spoken to her in that tone' (241). Indeed, no one had ever dared, knowing what wrath she would visit upon him. Moreover, her mistakes 'were of such intimate character that she thought she alone could think about them, or speak of them' (239–240). She appears to live in a hermetically sealed bubble. In a soft and imploring voice (indicative of 'emotional deflation and depression'), she denies the truthfulness of the doctor's accusations, maintaining 'I've done a lot of good things for people' (241), which magnifies the enormous gulf between reality and her grandiose fantasy of success (**criterion 2**). Her grandiosity isolates her from the pain of facing reality and allows her to inhabit the fantasyland of ideal perfection. 'Vulnerability in self-esteem makes individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder very sensitive to "injury" from criticism' (DSMMD 715).

²⁵ Sam Vaknin, 'Telling Them Apart', 'Seriousness and sense of intrusion and coercion', 4.

²⁶ Robert C. Schwartz, 'Psychotherapeutic Assessment and Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorder', Article #3004, Annals July/August 2002, http://www.americanpsychotherapy.com/online_magazine_article_3004.php.

Individuals experiencing such 'injury' can get emotional and tearful. The doctor's verbal attack leads the princess to tears: 'She hid her face in her hands and wept in a thin childish voice' (245). An immature, infantile response is a typical form of escapism and isolation for the narcissist when faced by an unpleasant experience – a typical adaptive strategy which isolates the princess from the pain of facing reality. Vaknin notes that the narcissist often feels sad when he listens to music. His 'sadness is tinged with the decomposing sweetness of his childhood'.²⁷ As the princess returns to the hostel, she hears singing in the church and reflects: 'How sweet to weep and suffer to the sound of their singing' (246). Although the vespers are still going on, she does not go to pray and seek forgiveness for her sins, rather she goes to her rooms. The narcissist's 'self esteem is almost invariably very fragile' (DSMMD 714), and it appears the doctor has upset the princess's mental house of cards. What follows, however, particularly the ending, proves this is about show or frustration, rather than sorrow and devastation. Significantly, when she enters her room, the princess looks in the mirror in which she sees the tear-stained reflection of her False Self (the reflection in the pool motif) which prompted the doctor to apologize to her, powders her face, i.e. restores the homeostasis of her narcissistic personality, and sits down to supper.

Narcissists very often feel misunderstood and employ 'alloplastic defenses – they blame others for their troubles'.²⁸ They complain that life and people are unfair to them and that they are the sacrificial lambs.²⁹ The doctor's criticism inflicts upon the princess narcissistic injury which leads her to experience exaggerated and most unattractive self-pity. She even imagines that all of nature is sympathetic to her hurt: 'It seemed to her that the trees and the stars and the bats, were all pitying her, and she thought the musical chiming of the clock was an expression of sympathy for her' (245; **criterion 1**). Criticism often leads the narcissist to social withdrawal and the appearance of humility that may mask and protect grandiosity. The princess imagines spending the rest of her life in a monastery where 'she would wander alone, insulted, injured, misunderstood by people, and only God and the starry heavens would observe her tears of suffering' (245–246). Her self-pity leads to persecutory delusions which reach paranoiac proportions as

²⁷ Sam Vaknin, 'The Music of My Emotions', <http://samvak.tripod.com/journal7.html>.

²⁸ Sam Vaknin, 'Narcissist, the Machine', <http://samvak.tripod.com/journal4.html>.

²⁹ Sam Vankin, 'The Misanthropic Altruist', <http://samvak.tripod.com/journal81.html>.

she imagines people ‘would betray her and say coarse things about her, and how *everyone all over the world* would attack her and speak evil of her and jeer at her’ (246; italics mine). As is typical of an individual with a narcissistic personality disorder, the princess ‘attributes to others her own motives and psychodynamics’ (Vaknin 102). At the same time, her thoughts serve as yet another indicator of her obsessive grandiosity – she obviously thinks of herself as the centre and the axis of her universe and that all things and happenstances revolve around her (**criterion 1**). But she ‘would pray for her enemies, and then they would suddenly come to understand her, and seek her forgiveness, but by then it would be too late...’ (246). Narcissists are very slow to forgive others. They hang on to resentment (Vaknin 35). The ellipsis terminating the princess’s fantasy of her attained ideal perfection suggests that forgiveness will not be forthcoming.

Doctor Mikhail Ivanovich is one of those honest, hard-working physicians who often appear in Chekhov’s works as targets of abuse by persons less sensitive, particularly those whose station in life is higher than theirs. However, Dr. Mikhail Ivanovich is not immune to narcissism himself. He boasts of having ‘always served [the princess] honestly, never taking a holiday or leave of absence and of being loved and respected for miles around’ (244). His dismissal from the princess’s service five years earlier was a blow to his dignity and pride. It has caused him serious and long-lasting ‘narcissistic injury’. As he informs her: ‘To tell you the truth, I have been waiting for a long time for the opportunity to say all of these things to you...’ (240).

Chekhov believed that ‘The salt of life is to be found in dignified protest’.³⁰ He embodied this thought in a number of characters, among them Doctor Mikhail Ivanovich, who may be called protesters.³¹ Invariably their protest falls short of Chekhov’s standard that it be of a dignified nature. The protester type is marked by an urgent desire to protest, to tell someone off. Karl Kramer calls this dramatic device aptly ‘the telling-off complex’, but claims incorrectly that Chekhov had used this device for the first time in ‘The Princess’.³² That the

³⁰ Letter to Alexander P. Chekhov, dated 20 February 1883, *PSSP, Pis'ma*, Vol. 1, 56.

³¹ See my article: ‘The Theme of Protest and the Protesting Hero in Chekhov’s Writings’, *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, Sectio FF Philologiae, Z pogranicza języków i literatur słowiańskich*, Vol. 14/15 (Lublin: Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1966/1967), 495–511.

³² This device is utilized in ‘The Enemies’ (1887), ‘The Doctor’ (1887), ‘An Unpleasantness’ (1888) and *Ivanov* (1887–89), all written prior to ‘The Princess’.

doctor's narcissistic rage originates from his own narcissistic injury subjects the veracity of his accusations to doubt.

Once he begins his attack, he attacks relentlessly, seemingly unable to stem the torrent of his words and worrying lest he should leave out anything unpleasant and vindictive. Unfortunately, the doctor is also 'play-acting' as he hides behind a façade of politeness. He intermittently alternates his sallies with remarks such as 'Excuse me if I speak at random' (241), or 'if you'll pardon the expression' (243), and even, 'permit me to ask' (244). As he launches his vituperative analysis of her wrongs, of her life of total self-centredness, of her *poshlost'*, the doctor appears to mock her trademark, her 'inviting smile', with a smile of his own. In truth, both of them start the 'conversation' from less than sincere motives: she lays false claim to being a lover of truth; he is equally false in his statement 'I am not judging you, princess' (240), inasmuch as his entire cataloguing of her wrongs is a continuous indictment.

The doctor regrets that he is 'not a man with a clever tongue and that people do not always understand [him]' (240), yet he soon proves himself capable in brow-beating his adversary with biting and sarcastic words. He accuses the princess of a 'lack of love', yet this advocate of 'love' is casting stones as he proves to be less than a Christian himself. On several occasions the narrator himself speaks quite disapprovingly of the doctor's sentiments and the manner in which he expresses them. One should consider the following passage:

The doctor chuckled in a deep voice and waved his hand about as though indicating that he was overcome with laughter that he could not utter another word. He laughed heavily, harshly, his teeth powerfully locked together – you find evilly disposed people laughing like that – and from his voice, his face, his glittering, rather impertinent eyes, it was evident that he had a profound contempt for the princess ... There was nothing in the least charming or amusing in those coarse, brutal descriptions of his, but he kept laughing with great joy and satisfaction (243).

These are clearly words laden with negative value and are but a link in the chain of negative impressions the reader acquires of the doctor's protest. We discern in his lines the voice of an aging, embittered, spiteful man. His tone of voice tells us as much about him as his words tell us about his adversary. Andrei Stepanov argues that often 'the addresser of information in Chekhov's

works is incapable of communicating properly, because he is unable to manage his irritation'.³³ Stepanov includes Dr. Mikhail Ivanovich in this category of Chekhov's heroes. Actually, the doctor (the encoder) communicates his feelings and views very skillfully and successfully. He clearly elicits a response from the princess (the decoder). He proves to be imaginative and adept at expressing his views as he modulates his voice to fit the degree of his anger. The range begins with a 'cold, dry tone' and is modified successively by 'speaking hotly', with 'angry voice', then 'shouted', followed by 'with a thin voice', and ends in a 'dull voice' as he utters his first apology. The change of voice is accompanied by an equally varied form of laughter. A seemingly harmless smile goes through the following metamorphoses: 'laughed', 'laughed maliciously', 'went off into peals of laughter', 'chuckled in a deep voice ... overcome with laughter that he could not utter another word', 'laughed heavily, harshly', 'laughed with great joy and satisfaction', and 'breathing heavily from laughter'; it finally gives way to silence.

The doctor accuses the princess of loathing people, yet he himself is so consumed by hatred that he is unable to forgive her. He even cannot forgive his dead wife for the ignominy of her appeal to the princess to have him reinstated. He is prone to using hyperbolic expressions such as the Gogolian 'thirty-five thousand messengers', which makes suspect some of his comments about the princess. The doctor's wounded pride in regard to the princess, his claims that she made his life unbearable, the narrator's critical epithets concerning the doctor's protesting manner all further undermine the veracity of his words.

We wonder why, as a doctor, a gentleman, and an educated man, he did not speak out against the princess's abuses while he was still in her service; why he abdicated his moral obligation to improve the lot of the people living on her estates by remaining silent.

Finally, the surprising degree of correspondence between the princess and the doctor is evidenced by the same negative details which serve to characterize each of them. Her 'inviting smile' is matched by his insincere smile and eventually 'malicious laughter'. Each claims falsely to lack the necessary eloquence. We have seen this to be true in the doctor's case. As for the princess, she claims

³³ A. D. Stepanov, *Problemy kommunikatsii u Chekhova* (Moscow: Iazyk slavianskoi kul'tury, 2005), 16.

she 'cannot put into words' what she feels in her heart about the monastery's charm. She has a false image of herself in thinking that she is loved by all, especially by the monks who, in her mind, regard her as an 'angel sent by God'. Similarly, the doctor's claim he was loved and respected for miles around is not totally convincing precisely because it is a self-estimate rather than the narrator's or someone else's.

The falsity of each is also suggested in the two scenes in which he kisses her hand and she kisses the abbot's hand. The princess, we recall, seizes the abbot's hand 'greedily kissing it three times' as her 'cheeks reddened' (*pokrasneli shcheki*). In the closing part of the story, as the doctor apologizes to the princess for the second time, the narrator notes: 'The princess smiled graciously and held out her hand to his lips. He kissed it and his face reddened' (*pokrasnel*; 247). The insincerity of each is underscored by the telling detail of the reddened cheeks. The confrontation with Dr. Mikhail Ivanovich is the 'event' in the princess's life, but as is usually the case in Chekhov's world events do not produce any meaningful change.

As the princess resorts to her usual strategy of crying when anyone 'misunderstood or offended her', the doctor apologizes, saying: 'Forgive me, princess ... I gave way to malice and forgot myself' (245). After this about-face, the doctor departs awkwardly. The absence of any change or self-realization in the princess is conveyed structurally. When she meets the doctor, she is happy and he is stern. During the doctor's monologue, however, the situation is reversed. The princess becomes troubled, while the doctor begins to smile and then to laugh. At the end of the story, however, they both return to their proper positions within everyday existence: he apologizes while she regains her former air of charm. The circle, though interrupted, is not broken. Everyday life goes on.

The doctor apologizes not once but twice and each apology tells us something of his character.³⁴ The first apology comes immediately after he finishes his tirade. It is a brief, spontaneous apology which may be deemed admirable. However, he takes the trouble to return the following day to apologize again. He does this even though he is no longer dependent upon her. By this second apology, he degrades himself and proves to be a groveller. This is no longer

³⁴ The doctor's apologies remind us of the apologies of Dr. Tsvetkov in 'The Doctor' and foreshadow Uncle Vania's memorable apology to Prof. Serebriakov.

a spontaneous apology but a premeditated one. He indicates thereby that he is the same subservient individual as in the days of old. And she immediately acknowledges this relationship by not shaking hands with him, but holding out her hand – which he kisses sheepishly. His awareness of the magnitude of this humiliating experience explains his ‘reddened face’. It is no wonder that the princess rides off into the rising sun murmuring ‘How happy I am! ... How happy I am!’ (247). She is happy because her dream of seeing people at her feet comes true (**critterion 9**). It is a most pleasant victory for her, since no one had ever spoken to her so frankly till now and yet that enemy apologized to her.

When they first meet, the princess feels pleased that the doctor remembers her and adds unwittingly: ‘People only remember their enemies, and forget their friends’ (239). The narrator accomplishes here a twofold effect: on the one hand it is an indirect statement about the doctor’s feelings toward the princess; on the other hand, it establishes her as his enemy, a relationship which she apparently desires, as evidenced by her thoughts at the end of the story: ‘She was thinking there was no greater delight than ... to forgive wrongs, and to smile kindly at her enemies’ (247) – the epitome of hypocritical magnanimity (**critterion 9**).

The doctor’s addressing the princess’s ‘mistakes’ does not lead her to any insight or assimilation of the truths revealed to her. She continues to inhabit the fantasyland of ideal perfection (**critterion 2**). In fact her fantasy reaches its zenith as we read: ‘It seemed to the princess that her body was swaying not on the cushions in the carriage but on clouds, and she herself was like a light transparent little cloud....’ (247; **critterion 2**). Her unchanged state at the end of the story substantiates psychoanalysts’ claims that narcissists almost never change – that therapy (in this case rudely offered by the doctor) has little chance of helping them (Vaknin 250). The story ends as it began: the princess arrives with great fanfare and leaves equally if not more triumphantly in a euphoric and victorious frame of mind.

‘The Princess’ anticipates Freudian analysis, but it is more than a clinical study of narcissistic personality disorder. It is also a very impressive work of art, the result of a complex, artistic weaving of the subject of mental illness into its literary fibre. The story is an excellent example of what Leonid Grossman calls

'scientific precision in poetic creation'.³⁵ That Chekhov eschews medical terminology in depicting the princess' narcissistic personality disorder is also in accord with his aesthetics. By virtue of its vividness of portrayal, compositional quality, rich imagery, subtle nature descriptions, mood, handling of light and shade, narrative devices, style, syncretism, artistic motivation in presenting subjects related to medicine, and display of expert understanding by a physician/writer of the psyche of one who suffers from narcissistic personality disorder, *The Princess* belongs to Chekhov's more accomplished works in the short story genre.

³⁵ Leonid Grossman, 'The Naturalism of Chekhov', trans. by Robert Louis Jackson, in Robert Louis Jackson (ed.), *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 32–33.