

Temporality, Separation, and Psychic Integration Through the Lens of a Friendship: Do Narcissus and Goldmund Still Live Within Us?

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Abstract

Hermann Hesse's novel "Narcissus and Goldmund" represents a multilayered literary work that opens possibilities for the psychological exploration of interpersonal relationships and the search for psychological wholeness. The aim of this paper is to analyze selected psychodynamic motifs within the novel through two interconnected perspectives: the perspective of friendship as a developmental relationship and the perspective of integrating inner psychic polarities.

In the first part of the paper, the relationship between Narcissus and Goldmund is examined as a developmental relationship through the concepts of basic developmental competencies of personality within the OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Method. The development of capacities for love between friends is explored through seven basic developmental competencies: object wholeness, object constancy, neutralization and mentalization, frustration tolerance, ambivalence tolerance, will, and initiative.

In the second part of the paper, the characters of Narcissus and Goldmund are analyzed as symbolic representations of different psychic principles. Drawing on selected elements of Jung's theory, their relationship is understood as an interaction between the principles of Logos and Eros, whose integration represents an important aspect of psychological development.

Temporality is not viewed in this paper merely as a chronological sequence of events, but as a psychological space in which experiences acquire meaning, relationships become internalized, and different aspects of personality gradually become integrated into a whole.

The paper highlights the significance of literary works as a space for understanding developmental processes relevant to psychotherapeutic practice.

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Introduction

Although almost a century has passed since its publication, Hermann Hesse's work "Narcissus and Goldmund" remains a subject of literary and psychological reflection (Hese, 2023). This paper addresses selected psychodynamic motifs of the novel, without any pretension of encompassing them fully. The artistic value of this work lies precisely in its multilayered quality and its enduring resonance — in the union of literature and deep personal psychological insight, insights that were bound up with the author's own life experience and his processes of personal searching.

The novel can be read as a story about the friendship of two men that fosters the development of personality, but also as a portrayal of the inner relationship between opposing developmental tendencies present in every person. Narcissus and Goldmund are not presented as two sides that must struggle for dominance, but as different principles that, through their relationship, mutually shape and complement one another.

One of the central themes of this paper is the question of development through time. Temporality is understood here not merely as the external flow of life events, but as a psychological space in which experience acquires meaning. Through time, relationships are formed, losses are integrated, and the people who matter to us become part of our inner world. Psychic growth requires experience, and experience requires time in order to be shaped and integrated within the inner world.

In this sense, love is understood not primarily as an emotional state, but as a set of developmental capacities that make the endurance of a relationship possible. The ability to experience the other as a whole person, to retain them within oneself even when they are not physically present, and to bear difference, frustration, and ambivalence, is the result of a complex development that unfolds through relationships.

The aim of this paper is not to present the relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund as an idealized model of love. Their relationship contains differences, mistakes, ambivalence, misunderstandings, and divergent life choices. It is precisely this complexity that makes their relationship psychologically significant, for it shows that closeness does not arise in the absence of difference, but through the capacity to tolerate the otherness of the other over time.

The paper analyzes the novel through two interconnected perspectives. The first perspective concerns the friendship of Narcissus and Goldmund as a developmental relationship in which the basic developmental competencies of personality needed to sustain a relationship through time and separation are formed. In this part, selected concepts of the OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Method are used.

The second perspective concerns the symbolic dimension of their relationship, in which Narcissus and Goldmund represent different polarities of the psyche. Drawing on certain elements of Jung's theory, their bond is understood as a process of bringing together the principles of Logos and Eros — that is, thought and experience, structure and creativity, reflection and the immediate experience of life.

In this way, the novel becomes a meeting place of literature and psychotherapeutic theory. The analysis of the relationship between Narcissus and Goldmund allows us to consider questions that remain central to psychotherapeutic work: how the capacity for love arises, how a relationship is maintained despite separation, and in what way different parts of the psyche can be brought into a process of integration.

Methodological Approach

This paper represents a theoretical review and a hermeneutic analysis of Hermann Hesse's novel "Narcissus and Goldmund" from the perspective of psychodynamic theories. The object of analysis is the relationship of the main characters as a symbolic representation of developmental processes connected with the formation of identity, the capacity to maintain a relationship through separation, and the integration of different aspects of psychic life.

The paper applies a psychodynamic interpretive approach, in which selected motifs of the novel are considered through the concepts of basic developmental competencies within the OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Method and Jung's concept of psychic integration. The aim of the analysis is not the psychological diagnosis of literary characters, but an examination of the ways in which a literary text can constitute a space for understanding developmental processes relevant to psychotherapeutic theory and practice.

The analysis is directed at two interconnected levels: the relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund as a developmental relationship in which the capacity for love is shaped, and the symbolic level at which the characters represent different psychic principles whose integration contributes to greater wholeness of personality.

The Friendship of Narcissus and Goldmund Through the Lens of Object Relations

Narcissus and Goldmund meet at the monastery of Mariabronn as two young men of exceptional inner potential. Narcissus is several years older, a teacher and a thinker, oriented toward order, spiritual discipline, and a rational understanding of the world. Goldmund is intuitive, emotionally sensitive, and open to experience, embodiment, and creativity. Their difference does not represent an obstacle to their relationship; on the contrary, it becomes one of its most important developmental drivers.

Their relationship does not rest on a need to change the other or to adapt them to one's own needs. On the contrary, their closeness arises through the recognition and toleration of difference. Narcissus recognizes in Goldmund a potential that Goldmund himself is not yet able to fully understand, while Goldmund recognizes in Narcissus a stability and inner organization that he himself lacks.

In a psychodynamic sense, their relationship can be understood as a developmental relationship in which, through the encounter with the other, the inner representations of self and object are transformed and reshaped. The person with whom the relationship is built ceases to be merely a source of need-satisfaction and instead becomes a space for encountering one's own unexplored parts. Through his relationship with Narcissus, Goldmund draws closer to understanding his own nature, while through his relationship with Goldmund, Narcissus comes into contact with aspects of experience that, in keeping with his own life choices, had remained less developed or repressed.

Their friendship therefore does not represent merely the emotional bond between two people — although this too is an important connective element of the relationship — but a process of mutual development. Each of them brings into the relationship what he possesses, and the aim of their relationship is not mutual merging. On the contrary, development requires the preservation of difference and the possibility of learning precisely through the encounter with it.

Dialogue: Coming to Know the Inner World of the Other

One of the key aspects of their relationship is the constant effort to understand each other's inner world through deep conversation. Their dialogues become a space in which the other person is seen as an individual with his own wishes, needs, and conflicts.

In this sense, their bond bears a certain resemblance to the psychotherapeutic relationship. Closeness does not arise from a complete understanding of the other person, but from a readiness to come to know the other continually. Love for another requires tolerance of the fact that the other always retains a part of their own individuality that we cannot fully grasp — but toward which we can remain curious.

This aspect of the relationship can be connected with the concept of mentalization — the capacity to understand oneself and others as beings with inner psychic states. Narcissus demonstrates the capacity and the willingness to perceive Goldmund's inner nature even when it is still unclear to Goldmund himself. Narcissus sees Goldmund beyond his current manifest behavior and strives to recognize the zone of his next development, which emerges from his conflicts.

At the same time, through his relationship with Narcissus, Goldmund develops the capacity for reflection. His experiences gradually acquire meaning through an inner dialogue with the friend who is no longer physically present.

A special place in the process of coming to know one another is held by the word. Both religious and psychoanalytic traditions attribute particular significance to language as a means of connecting inner worlds. To love another entails an attempt to reach their inner world, and the word is one of the most important paths of that encounter.

Freud pointed to the special power of the word in the psychic life of the human being (Frojd, 2016). In the psychotherapeutic process, it is precisely through symbolization and verbalization that affects, memories, and inner conflicts — which would otherwise remain insufficiently integrated — become accessible.

The relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund reminds us that closeness is built not only by presence, but also by the capacity to preserve the inner world of the other through communication, meaning, and memory.

Basic Developmental Competencies of Personality and the Development of Love Over Time

Within the OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Method, basic developmental competencies represent developmental capacities that make possible a more stable relationship toward oneself and others (Jovanović et al., 2013; Jovanović, 2025). In the relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund, seven basic developmental competencies whose development is necessary to support a close relationship through time and separation were examined.

It is important to emphasize that these competencies are not presented as completed achievements, nor does their friendship represent an idealized example of a fully mature relationship. On the contrary, their relationship can be understood as a space in which these capacities develop through experience, loss, integration, conflict, and inner processing.

Object Wholeness

Object wholeness entails the capacity to experience the other as a whole that includes different, even opposing, parts. The person we love is not merely a bearer of positive characteristics, nor does the relationship survive only when mutual similarity exists.

In the relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund, this capacity is visible in their acceptance of each other's differences. Narcissus recognizes Goldmund's artistic nature, his need for experience, and his inner conflicts, even when Goldmund does not yet have sufficient clarity about his own path. Goldmund, for his part, accepts Narcissus's rationality, discipline, and devotion to the spiritual life, without any need to steer him toward his own life choices.

Their bond survives because they do not reduce the other to a single aspect of his personality, nor only to the aspect that pleases them. They accept the other as a person who is at once close and different.

Object Constancy

One of the central motifs of the novel is separation. After Goldmund's departure from the monastery, their relationship is no longer based on daily presence, but on an inner connection. It is precisely here that temporality acquires a special psychological significance. Time can distance two people, but it can also serve as a stimulus for the development of the capacity for a stable image of oneself and the other.

Object constancy makes it possible for a person who matters to us to remain present in psychic space, even when they are not physically available. This capacity represents an important developmental task, for it enables the maintenance of a relationship through time, absence, and change.

Throughout his life's journey, Goldmund relies on Narcissus's words and on the memory of their bond. Narcissus, too, retains an inner connection with the friend he does not see in his physical world for years. By using the capacity to carry the other within our inner world, separation does not become the end of the relationship, but a space in which the relationship is transformed from an external into an inner connection.

Neutralization and Mentalization

With the aid of the inner representation of the other — that is, of a developed object constancy — Narcissus and Goldmund become more capable of mentalizing and neutralizing their experiences. This entails the possibility of viewing one's own emotions and inner conflicts with greater distance, and of accepting the differences between them without any need to change or reject the other.

In challenging moments, Goldmund often returns to the inner representation of Narcissus, which enables him to calm and reorganize his own experiences. It may be assumed that Narcissus, too, through their later meetings and conversations, used his relationship with Goldmund as a space for understanding and integrating his own experiences.

Frustration Tolerance

Frustration tolerance entails the capacity to preserve a bond even when the immediate satisfaction of a wish is not possible. In a psychodynamic sense, the ability to delay immediate satisfaction constitutes the foundation for developing more complex forms of relationship, in which the other can be experienced as a separate and whole person, and not merely as a source of emotional fulfillment.

In the relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund, it is precisely temporal distance that becomes the space in which this capacity develops, for the absence of the other does not necessarily lead to the loss of the bond, but can contribute to its inner strengthening. Love that endures through time is not based solely on the intensity of encounters, but on the capacity for the relationship to exist even during periods of absence.

Ambivalence Tolerance

In addition to frustration tolerance, ambivalence tolerance also plays an important role. A more mature relationship requires the capacity for different feelings toward the same person to coexist simultaneously: love and disappointment, closeness and the need for separation, admiration and lack of understanding.

Narcissus and Goldmund do not share the same view of the world, nor do they choose the same life path. Their different natures evoke ambivalent feelings in them. Closeness deepens ambivalence rather than resolving it, because ambivalence is inherent to human nature.

Their friendship shows that the maturity of a relationship does not entail the absence of conflict and difference, but the capacity to keep difference within the relationship without any need for destruction — that is, that ambivalence within closeness must be tolerated.

Will and Initiative

Will and initiative are capacities that make possible the conceiving, initiating, and investing of effort over time, regardless of the period of separation. In his artistic creation, Goldmund shapes the figure of the Apostle John after the inner image of Narcissus. In this way, the friend becomes part of his creative world. Narcissus, although not personally an animal lover, takes over the care of Goldmund's horse, Zvezdan. Later, he intervenes in order to free Goldmund from prison.

These acts show that a relationship survives through investment. Love is not merely a feeling that exists independently of behavior, but entails choice, responsibility, and action.

Friendly Love as a Developmental Relationship

In the psychological literature, particular attention has traditionally been devoted to parental and partner relationships, while friendship often remains less explored as a developmental space. However, the relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund shows that a friendly bond can have a powerful transformative potential.

Their relationship is not based on possession, symbiosis, or the abolition of differences. On the contrary, its strength arises from the capacity for the other to be seen and supported as a separate person. Narcissus helps Goldmund to leave a life that does not suit his nature, even though in doing so he accepts the loss of daily closeness.

Goldmund, for his part, accepts that Narcissus belongs to a different world and does not try to lead him along a path that is not his own.

This form of love approaches the conception of love emphasized by Erich Fromm, according to which love includes knowledge, care, responsibility, and respect for the other (Fromm, 2006). In the relationship of Narcissus and Goldmund, these dimensions are not presented as perfectly realized, but as a developmental process.

Their friendship shows that a relationship can be significant precisely because it makes development possible. The other person is not merely someone who accompanies us on our life's path, but someone through whom we come to know ourselves and develop capacities we could not develop on our own.

From the perspective of object relations, the relationship with the other becomes part of the inner world. What was once an external relationship gradually becomes an inner capacity: the capacity to love, to bear absence, to understand the other, and to remain connected despite differences.

In this way, the friendship of Narcissus and Goldmund represents an example of how love and development mutually shape one another. Love is not only the consequence of psychic maturity, but also one of the paths of its emergence.

Narcissus and Goldmund as Polarities of the Psyche: A Path Toward Integration

In addition to the analysis of their relationship through the perspective of object relations, the novel "Narcissus and Goldmund" can also be viewed on a symbolic level, where the two main protagonists represent different aspects of the psyche. Such a reading does not entail reducing the characters to simple symbols, but opens the possibility of understanding their relationship as a portrayal of the inner tensions that exist within the human psyche.

From a Jungian perspective, psychic development unfolds through the process of individuation (Jung, 2015), which enables a person to gradually come to know and accept the different parts of their inner world. This process entails becoming conscious of feelings, traits, and other psychic contents that were previously neglected, repressed, or insufficiently developed. The aim of individuation is not the elimination of inner opposites, but their integration into a whole and balanced personality.

In this sense, Narcissus and Goldmund can be understood as bearers of different principles that exist in every person. Their relationship represents a dialogue between the need for structure and the need for experience, between reflection and spontaneity, between thinking and feeling.

Logos and Eros: Two Principles of Psychic Development

Narcissus is closer to the principle of Logos — the principle of order, organization, structure, and reflective thought. His inner world is shaped by devotion, intellectual contemplation, and spirituality. He strives for understanding, inner orderliness, and the search for meaning. In a developmental sense, these very aspects of his personality represent at once his strengths and his limits. Namely, a pronounced orientation toward spirituality and the world of ideas can distance him from immediate contact with life.

By contrast, Goldmund is closer to the principle of Eros — the principle of feeling, embodiment, creativity, and immediate experience. His personality develops through relationships with people, through losses, wanderings across the world, and artistic

creation. Goldmund comes to know the world through immediate experience rather than through its subsequent intellectual contemplation.

Nevertheless, neither of these two principles is in itself sufficient for attaining psychic wholeness. Experience needs reflection, for without it experience may remain unconnected and insufficiently meaningful. On the other hand, reflection without experience loses the fullness of immediate contact with life.

Narcissus needs the experience that Goldmund brings into their relationship, while Goldmund needs the inner organization, form, and meaning that Narcissus symbolizes within that relationship. For precisely this reason, their relationship can be understood as a symbolic portrayal of the process of integration — the joining of Logos and Eros in the direction of psychic wholeness.

The Search for a Lost Part of the Self

One of the important themes of Goldmund's development is his search for his mother and the experience of an inner lack that sets him on his life's journey. This search can be understood as a symbolic quest for lost or insufficiently developed parts of the self.

In Jungian theory, the Anima represents the inner feminine principle within the male psyche (Jung, 2020) — that is, an archetypal function that enables a relationship to the unconscious aspects of the personality and to the inner world. Within this interpretive framework, the women whom Goldmund encounters throughout his life can be understood as figures onto whom different inner contents are projected, enabling him gradually to come to know and accept his own psychic aspects.

Development does not unfold through the discovery of a single external object that would resolve his sense of inner emptiness, but through the very process of searching and the experience that arises from it. Goldmund gradually integrates the parts of himself that had previously been inaccessible to him, passing through various relationships, losses, encounters, and experiences of the world in which he moves.

What he initially seeks outside himself, he begins over time to recognize as part of his own inner world. In this sense, temporality plays an important role: his development is not possible without the passage of time and the series of experiences through which his personality is gradually shaped and integrated.

Creativity as a Process of Psychic Integration

Artistic creation represents an important part of Goldmund's developmental path. Through art he succeeds in translating his inner world into form, in connecting the previously scattered and fragmented parts of experience, and in finding a way to express them. This is a process of transforming personal experience into a symbol.

In creating a work of art, Goldmund does not abandon the world of experience but integrates it. In this sense, the creative act can be understood as a process akin to psychic integration: different, sometimes opposing, elements find a way to coexist in a new and more whole form.

Art thus becomes a space in which, on Goldmund's developmental path, the principles of Logos and Eros meet. Through creation, the relationship between Goldmund and Narcissus — which initially existed as an external relationship between two personalities — gradually becomes internalized and turns into an inner relationship between different aspects of the self.

The Return to Narcissus: An Encounter of Different Parts of the Psyche

The end of the novel, in which Goldmund returns to Narcissus and dies, represents one of the most complex moments in the work. This return should not be understood as the defeat of the principle of experience by the principle of the spirit, nor as a renunciation of vitality in favor of contemplation and reflection.

On the contrary, it can be viewed as a moment of the integration of different aspects of the psyche. Goldmund returns to Narcissus after a life's journey filled with experiences, relationships, losses, and creation. He is no longer the person who left the monastery, but a personality shaped by his encounters with the world and with his own inner experiences.

At the same time, the encounter with Goldmund represents an important moment in Narcissus's development as well. A man who devoted his life to order, the spirit, and thought is confronted with the question of finitude, as well as with the significance of the bodily and experiential aspect of existence, of which Goldmund is the bearer.

Their final encounter symbolically portrays the process of integration: two principles that had previously appeared opposed become part of a broader psychic whole.

Hesse's message is not a choice between order and freedom, spirit and body, thinking and feeling. Psychic wholeness does not arise through the dominance of one principle over the other, but through their mutual dialogue and connection.

Narcissus and Goldmund thus remain symbols of the inner principles that repeatedly meet within every person: the part of the personality that strives to understand the world and the part that desires immediate experience of life. Neither of them has absolute priority, for only through their joining can a person attain greater psychic wholeness.

Significance for Psychotherapeutic Practice

Literary works can constitute a significant space for understanding complex psychic processes portrayed through symbolic form. Psychological vocabulary is not always sufficient to convey the multilayered quality of human experience in the way that literature can. The novel "Narcissus and Goldmund" introduces the reader to the themes of friendship, love, closeness, separation, the search for identity, and the integration of different aspects of the self through the development of the main protagonists.

A particular contribution of this novel lies in its portrayal of a deep friendly relationship between two men. In this way, the significance of non-romantic and non-sexual love as a space of psychic development comes to the fore. Their relationship shows that closeness matters not only because of emotional support, but also because it represents a context in which the capacities necessary for a mature personality develop. Through their mutual relationship, Narcissus and Goldmund gradually develop the capacity to see themselves and the other as whole persons, to tolerate separation, frustration, and ambivalent feelings, as well as the capacities for mentalization, will, and initiative. It is precisely these capacities that allow the relationship to become a space of psychic development, and not merely of emotional exchange.

None of these capacities arises in a vacuum. Basic developmental competencies develop within relationships and have a dynamic nature, which is why their development lasts throughout life. What begins in the relationship with parents continues to be shaped through friendly, partner, and other significant relationships. In this sense, the

novel represents an important reminder that friendly love is not a transient developmental stage, nor something that loses its significance once a partner relationship is established, but a lasting source of psychological development.

The way in which Narcissus strives to understand Goldmund and, together with him, to explore their differences represents an important inspiration for psychotherapeutic practice. Their relationship is reminiscent of the quality of the therapeutic relationship, in which understanding, the acceptance of difference, and a shared search for meaning become drivers of change. At the same time, the motifs of separation and temporality indicate that development does not unfold in spite of separation, but often precisely through it. The novel shows that a relationship can remain developmentally significant even when it involves prolonged physical or emotional distance.

A special place in the novel is held by the process of integrating polarities, which represents one of the important themes of contemporary psychotherapeutic practice. Many clients try to reconcile opposing strivings — the need for freedom and for connection, spontaneity and reflection, order and chaos. The story of Narcissus and Goldmund offers a symbolic framework for understanding that psychic wholeness does not entail the elimination of one pole of the personality, but its connection with the other through a process of integration.

This idea is important for psychotherapists as well. From the standpoint of integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy, it serves as a reminder that no single theoretical approach is equally applicable to every client, and that therapeutic flexibility is one of the basic conditions of successful work. This entails a constant balancing between theory and immediate experience, between structure and spontaneity, between interpretation and remaining alongside the client's experience.

Finally, "Narcissus and Goldmund" reminds us that the aim of psychotherapy is not to change people according to a predetermined model, but to enable the becoming-conscious, the connecting, and the integration of what already exists within them. In this sense, Hesse's novel represents not only a literary work, but also a valuable symbolic framework for understanding psychic development, relationships, and the process of individuation.

Conclusion: Do Narcissus and Goldmund Still Live Within Us?

The novel "Narcissus and Goldmund" is significant not because it offers a recipe for life or portrays an ideal interpersonal relationship. Its value lies in the fact that it opens a symbolic space for understanding the complexity of psychic development, the shaping of personality through closeness, and the search for identity.

Their relationship represents a story about the development of the emotional capacities necessary for a relationship with oneself and with others. At the same time, it is a story about the significance of friendship as a relationship that can represent a secure foundation for growth, development, and psychological maturation. The story of Narcissus and Goldmund reminds us that psychic wholeness is not attained by rejecting particular parts of the personality, but through their gradual becoming-conscious, acceptance, and integration.

In a certain way, the very process of writing this paper reflected the theme it addresses. The need for structure, theoretical argumentation, and clarity was continually intertwined with the need for creativity, intuition, and the freedom of creation. As with Hesse's protagonists, the path toward connecting these polarities was

not simple, but required time, reconsideration, and a gradual appreciation of the equal value of both aspects.

Perhaps this is precisely why the most important question that Hesse's novel leaves the reader is the same one with which this paper began: "Do Narcissus and Goldmund still live within us?"

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