

Ashton Clyde Yeomans
2405022

NARCISSUS AND ECHO

PORTFOLIO CONTENTS

1. Short story: *Narcissus and Echo* [word count: 1972]
2. Critical commentary [word count x]

1.

NARCISSUS AND ECHO

Rugged sailors filed onto the ship's deck, emerging from the thick fog obscuring St. Katherine's dock from their view. A horrid mist had settled over London the days thus far that month, and the captain noted bitterly in his head the complications of boarding, and sailing, a vessel in such conditions; but the coin offered to discreetly lure one particular sailor away from London was generous enough to brave the foreseeable challenges. The boy was, according to the gentleman from whom the captain had received the donation, unfit for a role he had inserted himself into- or created for himself- within the family: too young and of unequal social standing. This was taken by the captain to mean that he was the father of some unborn child, mothered by a high society lady and thus must be kept away from England during the birth of his child. The captain might have thought the arrangement cruel if the pay for his part in it wasn't so philanthropic.

Months later, through which the fog persisted, the captain's speculation was brought to reality when a child was born in a most agonising manner and without his father present. He bore, to the eye of all who perceived him, a striking resemblance to a porcelain doll in a faithful imitation of his blessed mother. No blemishes on either mother nor son's skin, perfect coral lips and grey-blue eyes. He was a pleasure to the eye of everyone who saw him in his cradle, all of whom would comment on his perfect replication of his mother's beauty. And yet, despite the high praise commended to her child, a terrible feeling had possessed the new mother. She turned to her own mother one day and asked, "Do you think he could live long with such beauty?"

"Yes," Her mother responded, "If he never comes to know himself."

In November, many years later, the boy celebrated his 20th birthday. An idol of fashion and beauty, he was the inspiration behind flattering illustrations in magazines and the spectacle of London. Though many alike to him whose parentage was questioned would face scrutiny and scandal at the hands of the fickle upper class society, the mystery of his own only flattered his beauty more. Nobody dared to even consider the reveal of his father's identity could bring shame to his family. It would be as if dishonour and humiliation would crack this persona, and it was in nobody's interest to destroy the one perfect thing in their world. Many offers of marriage had been made to him, and he denied them all. There was no allure in marriage to him, which only added to his persona. Yet there was a source of entrancement for him: he was captivated by white collars and button-downs, and rolled sleeves at the billiards table. Large hands clasped around intricately decorated whiskey glasses and loose collars in casual company. He thought, had his fortune and wealth failed him, he might have made a good valet. His desirable beauty was beneficial to him as it was blinding against his behaviour, though he was not aware of it and instead considered himself incredibly lucky at how he was able to avoid trouble with little effort. If he made a close friend, there was no question of what occurred between them. If he rejected the advances as a woman, the believed reason was simply to be that he was so coveted that he was able to take his time in selecting the perfect wife. His close friendships with men were customary within his class: men without wives simply spent their time with other men, there was no doubt of it. It didn't in any way matter how charming, or beguiling, one was. Until April.

The April following his 20th birthday, Oscar Wilde was tried. The boy had never met Wilde, but the trials impacted him, and every other alike to him, so thoroughly the boy began to fester a fury. All of a sudden, relationships between two men were analysed to such an egregious extent that the boy always felt as if he would awake one morning to find a constable waiting for him. It occurred to him now that he had no chance to be uncaring. He halted all relations, and preferred to walk through the city to take his mind away from his life. May saw Wilde imprisoned, and the boy prayed that it would be

over. It was the day of Wilde's sentencing when he began to receive letters. They were carefully written, the ink laid so thickly on the page it was impossible to read. And despite the care that went into these letters, they were written in a child's hand.

There was a young impoverished boy who had noticed, as had everyone, the boy's beauty. During the boy's walks through London, he would follow him in an obsessive pursuit. He had seen him enter the homes of his friends and had been bewitched so intensely that he waited through the cold night until he left. Upon his breast he always wore a yellow flower, and so unknowing of the boy's name, he nicknamed him Narcissus. Due to his life-long responsibility to support his family, he was not afforded the privilege of an education and was thus illiterate. But as a child his father had one day presented him with a lavish gift: a picture book of flowers with their names written beside the illustrations, and one of which was the same yellow flower he saw the boy wear. His Narcissus became an infatuation, and he was unable to think of anything but him. He was lucky, his Narcissus was also of the Oscar Wilde sort. One night, reading his beloved book, he was inspired to communicate with his Narcissus. He acquired the means to write a letter, and addressed it simply to "Narcissus". Unable to write anything else of his own imagination, he pondered his options. He found himself with his arm slipped inside the mouths of post boxes, retrieving one letter from each and copying it to the best of his ability before leaving it in Narcissus' path to find- perhaps on the cobbled streets, or on the bench he liked to rest at during his walks through Hyde Park. The boy didn't mind what the contents were, only hoping they would bring attention to himself; he wanted his Narcissus to pursue him, to discover him. The bizarre nature of such letters being addressed to him should confuse him greatly, and compel him to find the culprit behind the absurdness. This was how he was to meet his Narcissus. But it took longer than he expected. He was correct in his belief that his Narcissus would be utterly perplexed by these strange letters, bearing the name of a flower before delving into strange affairs written in an inexperienced hand, like a child intercepting his father's letters and learning literacy from them.

The first letter was an act of curiosity, and he knew he shouldn't have read it. It was not his name written across the front, but he wondered who in the world would leave a letter on a bench. He learnt absolutely nothing from it, and thought it a waste of time. Three days later, the second one appeared on the wall outside his house. Then, they began coming through the letterbox. To a degree it frightened him, but he was also secretly excited by it. The idea of having a mysterious and faithful anonymous admirer was thrilling to him. But in May, all excitement of it depleted and he decided he desperately needed to find this secretive person and beg- or threaten- them to stop. He often consoled himself, telling himself it was sure to be a woman. Perhaps she had seen the way he denied so many hands in marriage and was frightened of marriage herself. But that horrifying thought crossed his mind far more than he liked to admit. If this person knew about his favoured bench in Hyde Park, or about his home address, then they might know about his own personal affairs. Or what if this person was a man themselves, and the authorities found them before he did? And this person told the police all about his personal life. It would be him at the Old Bailey next.

Narcissus was there that day when the once brilliant playwright was hauled out of the court, and saw with his own eyes the treatment of people alike to him by people of his own class. All of those who he'd been around in his childhood, who'd had a hand in raising him, were spitting in the face of a man who they'd applauded for his wit and talent only months earlier. Narcissus saw a glimpse of the man himself, towering over the crowd at his incredible height. The scene was far too overwhelming, and Narcissus stumbled away as black spots began clouding his vision. He wasn't sure how long he clawed his way through the maze of streets, but found himself at St. Katherine's dock by the time night had come. It had become rather difficult to make out the shadows of the buildings, and to

differentiate where one object ended and another began. He was certain he was paranoid, but every so often the sound of somebody behind him stuck his ears in a painful reminder of this letter business. But this time, he was sure he'd heard someone. He called out, and all that he got in response was his own echo. He felt foolish.

Narcissus turned himself back to the body of water, facing away from where the boy was hiding. He crept out slowly, and began to edge his way towards the beautiful man staring into the water. It was almost as if he was having a sort of epiphany during a bout of melancholy. The boy laid his hand on the shoulder of his Narcissus, and watched as his face, reminiscent of a porcelain figure like those in a museum, contorted into an expression of horror. He cursed at him, cast the boy's arm off of him, and stared cruelly at him.

Narcissus wasn't too sure what he was doing but felt an eruption of fury within him, perhaps motivated from the fear of the sight he had seen earlier. He refused to be the next one treated like filth after a sentencing in the Old Bailey. All he knew in that moment was the sight of Wilde, and once he awoke from his trance-like state, he was alone again on the dock. His company had vanished and all was still excluding an array of bubbles on the surface of the water. His sleeves were wet, he was sweating profusely, and he was kneeling on the dock. His coat, somehow floating on the water, was hitting the bottom of a boat. Though momentarily blinded, he saw himself for the first time in his reflection on the water. Creases of anger on his skin, his hair tousled, furrowed brows, his lips slightly agape. He saw, for the first time, what most people saw when they looked at him. But within him he felt guilt. A strong knot weighed down his stomach as he looked at his own reflection, and his eyes fell on the boutonniere bobbing in the water. The little yellow daffodil he wore to signal the spring season. The guilt, in that moment, felt intolerable.

The next morning, as the sailors began filing onto St. Katherine's dock, the boutonniere was the first thing they noticed. Then the coat, tangled in some netting. It became apparent to all the gentlemen on the dock that day what had happened as they fished the belongings out of the water and hung them up in memorial.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

I began my research into the tale of Narcissus and Echo with Ovid¹, and soon discovered *Tales from Ovid*² by Ted Hughes. I used both to form the structure of my retelling. The themes within the myth of beauty, narcissism, and self-absorption presented through the character of Narcissus reminded me of the poet Lord Alfred Douglas, and how the narcissism and beauty of his youth lead to his downfall. Furthermore, his favourite book in his youth was *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, who he began a tumultuous relationship with that lead to Wilde's arrest at the hand of Douglas' father³. The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*⁴ could also be argued to be a retelling of the myth of Narcissus and Echo, so much so that Narcissus is actually mentioned within the first chapter as a point of comparison while describing the character of Dorian Gray. This is what inspired me to set my retelling in 1895 during the trials of Oscar Wilde, putting a character heavily inspired by both Dorian Gray and especially Lord Alfred Douglas in the role of Narcissus. But grounding the story in a reality known to its readers made Echo difficult, but due to the class divisions of the time it was common for the working class to be illiterate, so I came up with the idea of Echo not being able to write and needing references to write from, thus echoing others' letters. I also wanted the genre to be gothic horror, like the novel which it is partially inspired by. For extra research I read another gothic horror novel, *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier⁵. I enjoyed the aspect of the character from whose perspective we read not being named within the book, and tried to implement that in my short story. I found my usual writing style of being heavily descriptive to not work with the limit on word count, and so opted for a more distant style as if describing the story while watching it through a glass screen and an omniscient narrator.

In terms of effect and success, I struggled with exploring my ideas in detail within the word count I was confined to and should have made the story less complex. It also took me longer than expected and though the distant narration style allowed for the plot to move quicker to keep within the word limit, I feel it had a strained effect on the pacing and made it difficult to keep it paced well. I feel the ideas I had may have been good for a novella, but were too intricate for a short story. I also feel the symbolism was either far too apparent or wasn't clear enough, and the ending wasn't as effective as it could have been. I would have liked to explore the characters in further detail and flesh out their personalities and fears (especially Narcissus' fear of being outed as a queer man). In my planning, I referred to the character of Narcissus as Alfred Grey, a combination of those whom he is based on as a placeholder name to refer to when not being called his given nickname Narcissus, which could have benefited the story had it been introduced instead of trying to replicate the effect of mystery given in *Rebecca*.

¹ Riley, H.T. and Ovid (2018). *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*.

² Ovid and Hughes, T. (1997). *Tales from Ovid*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

³ Murray, D. (2020). *Bosie: A Biography of Lord Alfred Douglas*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

⁴ Wilde, O. (1890). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Lippincott's Monthly Magazine.

⁵ Du Maurier, D. (1938). *Rebecca*. Harpercollins.