

# **Eros and Thanatos**

Love across Civilizations

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Hainan University, China

**Series in Literary Studies**



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*To someone, my demiurge*



# Table of Contents

	<b>Acknowledgments</b>	vii
	<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	ix
	<b>Introduction</b>	xi
Chapter 1	<b>A Durkheimian Reading of Suicide in Goethe's <i>The Sorrows of Young Werther</i> and Foscolo's <i>The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis</i></b>	1
	A Tragic Understanding	4
	A Durkheimian Suicide	12
Chapter 2	<b>Bipolarism in the Nineteenth Century Novel</b>	21
	Mental Illness as a Cause	21
	Julien Sorel: A Case of Bipolar Disorder	25
	Madame Bovary: A Case of Cognitive Dissonance	30
	Anna Karenina: A Case of Post-Traumatic Amnesia	36
	Conclusion	43
Chapter 3	<b>A Love That Kills: The Idiot</b>	47
	The Esthetic and the Ethical Dialectic	50
	Neighborly Love vs. Preferential Love	57
	Explaining the Ending	61
	An Idiotic Ideal?	63
Chapter 4	<b>Camus, the Absurd Meursault, and Alexandros Panagoulis</b>	67
	Sisyphus and Alexandros Panagoulis	68
	The Absurd Rebellion	74
	Conclusion	79
Chapter 5	<b>When Life Imitates Art</b>	83
	Cesare Pavese: <i>Among Woman Only</i> (1949)	86
	Sylvia Plath: <i>The Bell Jar</i> (1963)	93
	Conclusion	99

Chapter 6	<b>Buzzati and Nabokov: It Is Not about Desire</b>	101
	Salvation through Youth	103
	Art after Youth	112
Chapter 7	<b>Beauty Against the Grain: The Great Gatsby</b>	117
	A Dream That Money Can Buy	118
	A Love That Money Can Buy	121
	Repeating the Past	126
	Conclusion	130
Chapter 8	<b>Norwegian Wood and A Private Life: A Limbo at the End of Youth</b>	133
	The Labyrinth of Loneliness	135
	Writing Death	140
	Eros and Thanatos	144
	An Open Finale	149
Chapter 9	<b>Travesuras de la Niña Mala: The Temptation of the Impossible</b>	153
	Characters in the Mirror	155
	The Postmodern Madame Bovary (?)	159
	Saving the Bad Girl	165
Chapter 10	<b>The Museum of Innocence: A Museum Without Innocence</b>	173
	Almost a Tragedy	174
	A Melancholic Loss	177
	Objects and Fetishism	180
	Scenes in Chronotope	182
	A Museum Without Innocence	187
	<b>Afterword</b>	191
	<b>Endnotes</b>	195
	<b>Bibliography</b>	211
	<b>Index</b>	233

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A.C.

Haikou

2023





# List of Abbreviations

*Either/Or (E/O)*

*This Business of Living (BL)*

*The Myth of Sisyphus (MOS)*

*The Rebel (R)*

*The Stranger (S)*



# Introduction

Mortal love is an old pattern. But it is the pattern we love the most. When Eros and Thanatos come together, they meet immortality of a kind. The experience of eternity grants escape from time and space, thus the implication of a life beyond life in the consciousness of those who stay behind.

Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was labeled the masterpiece of the first half of the twentieth century (Canaday 77) because inherent in it is a message of love paralleled by catastrophe. The powerful images of individuals and their reality both being dismembered by some outer invincible force make a universal statement on the nature of love. Life can possibly shift Eros from its fulfilling-affirming role and embrace its opposite. Thanatos indeed.

In 1915, Egon Schiele, wanting a more conventional involvement, is asked to break off his relationship with his lover Wally Neuzil.<sup>1</sup> The painting *Death and the Maiden* is the farewell to Wally: it announces separation and death. Schiele and Wally lie on a mattress covered with a white sheet. Because the sheet is rumpled, the scene suggests they had just made love. Yet, there is a sense of isolation and desperation due to the end of their relationship. The two lovers share the same destiny. Both are consumed to the extreme, but they stare in different directions: he feels guilty, and she feels abandoned. He looks grief-stricken, and she senses abandonment. While utterly bonded to each other, their eyes confess that they are alone in their grief. The overall arrangement on the canvas creates a tremendous tension between a pledge to life and the claims of death. She is resting her face on his chest, but her hands, held together behind his coat in a weak embrace, cannot retain her lover. Thus, the end is approaching. The subject matter also reminds us that the anguish inherent in love develops into a matter of necessity rather than desire, with fear assuming here a magnitude well beyond the boundary of an ordinary relationship. While projecting the artist's own feelings, the unsmiling canvas ventures to describe the frightened expression of the century. In Schiele's words, no one is saved.

From visual art to philosophy, the unexpected combination does not break. Writing on love in the Western tradition, from Plato to Freud, is to engage with the utopian wholeness of being and with Thanatos. Assuming that the source of love is life, for Martin Heidegger, 'being-in-the-world' constitutes being 'thrown into the death', which is not conceived as the end of us but as how an existing human can be and cope with uncontrollable conditions. But we live, we love with the awareness that we are going to die. The tone that reveals this death-awareness is not fear but anxiety: "anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise" (251). On the other hand, if

we recognize death as a possibility or an event of life, we can try to live authentically. In *Science of Logic* (1812), G. W. F. Hegel argues that the hour of birth is the hour of death. Only finite things experience birth, and therefore, to be born, simply to be, means to be limited, finite. Arthur Schopenhauer relates death to sexuality which is another active manifestation of the Will, destructive in its essence: "it robs of all conscience those who were previously honourable and upright, and makes traitors of those who have hitherto been loyal and faithful" (*The World as Will and Representation* 533-4). Being sexuality a manifestation of the will to live, it is only in death that one is released from the longing and suffering of love. Natural death, not suicide, is the end of that insatiable Will that longs for a life of senses beyond our control. In this vein, because death is a final renunciation of desire, Schopenhauer claims, it is also "the great opportunity no longer to be I" (507).

However, the most fascinating representation of Eros and Thanatos in Western philosophy is told by Plato. The beauty of Plato's *Symposium* myth is inevitably stained with death. Human beings were a perfect whole until Zeus, the father of the gods, split them in two. Since then, all the halves wandered the world over seeking one another: "[a]fter the original nature of every human being had been severed in this way, the two parts longed for each other and tried to come together again" (24). The body, but perhaps the soul, has been torn apart as punishment for its terrible offense against the gods: that of being god-like. Therefore, Love has become the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost. Don Juan never found it; Don Quixote and Cyrano did find it, but they preferred fighting off invisible windmills and enemies. In the twentieth century, philosophy was flanked by psychoanalysis, whose aim is to diagnose as neurosis the refusal of homologation. The myth has been explained, tragedy has been transformed into pathological behaviors, and at last, Don Juan and Don Quixote have been cured. Yet death remains an inalterable inexplicability. Concerns over civilization's increasing tensions lead Sigmund Freud to incorporate into the cultural process of construction a self-destructive drive. In the *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1937), he writes:

after long hesitation and indecision we have decided to postulate only two fundamental drives, Eros and Thanatos, the destructive drive. The goal of the former is to bring about and maintain ever greater unities, hence coalescence; the goal of the latter, on the contrary, is toward dissolution, and thus to destroy things. (...) We call this drive, therefore, the death drive (71).

The antagonistic effects of these two drives, attraction and repulsion, affirmation and denial of life, constitute the structure of a civilization. Freud reckons that beyond life instincts and the reality of pleasure, a death drive is active in man.

Paradoxically, he wrote, “the aim of all life is death” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 38). Freud came to consider the death drive (Thanatos) an affirming principle, paralleling the life-affirming principle (Eros). The holocausts of the twentieth century seem to confirm that, indeed, human beings have a propensity for annihilation. “Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help, they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this and hence comes a large part of their present unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety” (“On Love and The Death-Drive” 7). While the result of the immortal struggle cannot be foreseen, at least we should accept that Eros and Thanatos work together. They are not oppositional, as we might believe. Haruki Murakami has his narrator in *Norwegian Wood* (1987) to recognize that by living, we nurture death: “[d]eath exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life” (31). Eros uses Thanatos as a form of being to the extent that the destruction of the individual through some sort of death is the most profound aesthetic of love.

In his book *Love in the Western World* (1939), Denis de Rougemont notes that the origin of romantic love in the Western tradition is to be found in the myth of Tristan and Iseult. Tristan and Iseult fall in love by mistake; they accidentally drink a love potion intended to be shared by King Mark and Iseult. Devoured by passion but loyal to the king, theirs is a legend of unrequited love and love for obstacles that finds final union only in death. When Tristan is deceived into believing that Iseult is not coming to rescue him, he dies. When Iseult arrives to rescue him, she lies down beside him and dies after finding him dead. De Rougemont claims that because passion means suffering, romance comes into being only when it is doomed by life itself: “love and death, a fatal love—in these phrases is summed up, if not the whole of poetry, at least whatever is popular, whatever is universally moving in European Literature, alike as regards the oldest legends and the sweetest songs.” De Rougemont summons the idea with a final plain statement: “[h]appy love has no history” (15). If the argument is valid, then beginning with the Tristan and Iseult myth, the Liebestod (love-death/eros thanatos) enters the Western tradition as a representation of immortal love:

[m]y lords, if you would hear a high tale of love and of death, here is that of Tristan and Queen Iseult; how to their full joy, but to their sorrow also, they loved each other, and how at last, they died of that love together upon one day; she by him and he by her (Bédier, *The Romance* 1).

The Liebestod is a *sine qua non* of Western love narrative, for it represents infinite love. Because the elements and characters within the human universe cannot transcend its particulars, death alone can represent infinity.

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# Index

## A

Absurd, 77, 202, 218, 219, 227  
Albert Camus, 67, 73, 75, 76, 77,  
78, 100, 213, 219, 227  
Alexandros Panagoulis, xvi, 67, 68,  
71, 72, 78, 79, 202  
Alienation, 101  
Anna Karenina, xvi, xvii, 11, 21, 22,  
24, 36, 58, 109, 130, 191, 198,  
199, 212, 213, 218, 220, 229, 230  
Aristotle, 83, 175, 211, 229

## B

Bakhtin, 52, 64, 118, 127, 133, 134,  
148, 173, 174, 182, 183, 184, 208,  
209, 211  
Beauty, 11, 79, 107, 117, 191, 192,  
202, 206  
Bipolarism, 21, 163, 198, 214  
Buzzati, xvi, xvii, 101, 102, 103,  
104, 106, 108, 109, 110, 112, 114,  
205, 206, 211, 213, 215, 217, 220,  
221, 225, 226, 227, 229, 232

## C

Camus, 29, 67, 68, 69, 70, 73, 74,  
75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 84, 155,  
192, 202, 203, 213, 214, 223  
Cesare Pavese, 83, 91  
Chen Ran, 133, 134, 135, 136, 138,  
141, 148, 208, 219, 221, 227, 232

## D

Dürkheim, 1, 4, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18,  
19, 20, 21, 22, 43, 98, 197, 215,  
225, 228

## E

Eros, i, xi, xii, xiii, xiv, xv, xvi, xvii,  
xviii, 65, 122, 133, 134, 144, 145,  
147, 150, 186, 208, 216, 222  
Esthetic, 47, 228  
Ethical, 47, 48, 232  
Existentialism, 48, 167

## F

Fitzgerald, xv, xvi, xvii, 117, 118,  
119, 122, 123, 124, 125, 127, 129,  
130, 131, 171, 206, 207, 208, 212,  
213, 214, 215, 216, 218, 225, 226,  
229, 230  
Flaubert, xvi, 22, 24, 33, 35, 36, 45,  
55, 61, 155, 156, 160, 161, 162,  
163, 164, 198, 199, 208, 212, 214,  
216, 219, 223, 230  
Foscolo, xvi, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,  
11, 12, 195, 196, 197, 198, 211,  
212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 219,  
221, 224, 225, 230  
Freud, xi, xii, xvii, xviii, 20, 25, 26,  
30, 34, 54, 93, 101, 126, 133, 134,  
144, 147, 150, 167, 173, 174, 178,  
181, 184, 186, 189, 199, 208, 217,  
219, 222

**G**

Gatsby, xvi, xvii, 11, 87, 117, 118,  
119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125,  
126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 162,  
170, 171, 191, 192, 193, 206, 207,  
208, 213, 215, 216, 218, 221, 222,  
223, 225, 226, 227, 229, 230, 231  
Goethe, xvi, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10,  
11, 12, 18, 19, 84, 90, 196, 197,  
198, 204, 212, 218, 220, 221, 226,  
231

**H**

Haruki Murakami, xv, 133, 134,  
224, 227  
Hegel, xii, 56, 219  
Heidegger, xi, 75, 219

**J**

Julien Sorel, 21, 22, 25, 37, 198, 227

**K**

Kierkegaard, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 54,  
56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64, 65,  
201, 202, 219, 220  
Kristeva, 29, 34, 42, 52, 173, 174,  
176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 188,  
220  
Kundera, 92, 191, 221, 230

**L**

Lacan, xvii, 112, 173, 174, 176, 178,  
179, 192, 215, 221  
Lolita, xvi, 101, 102, 103, 105, 106,  
107, 108, 109, 111, 112, 113, 114,  
192, 206, 211, 214, 219, 223, 224

**M**

Madame Bovary, xvi, xvii, 10, 11,  
21, 22, 30, 31, 33, 36, 55, 109,  
130, 153, 154, 155, 159, 198, 199,  
208, 214, 216, 219, 225, 230, 231  
Mario Vargas Llosa, xv, 153, 154,  
195, 214, 216, 218, 220, 227, 228  
Montale, 102, 105, 110, 206, 223  
Murakami, xvi, 133, 134, 135, 136,  
138, 142, 146, 207, 208, 215, 220,  
222, 224, 228, 229, 230, 232

**N**

Nabokov, xvi, xvii, 101, 104, 106,  
114, 200, 205, 206, 211, 214, 219,  
224  
Norwegian Wood, xiii, xv, xvi, 133,  
134, 135, 138, 141, 142, 146, 148,  
149, 150, 207, 208, 224

**O**

Oriana Fallaci, xvi, 68, 71, 80, 191,  
203, 211, 215, 231  
Oscar Wilde, 83, 84, 85

**P**

Pamuk, xv, xvi, xvii, 173, 174, 175,  
177, 178, 184, 185, 187, 188, 209,  
216, 218, 219, 225, 226  
Plato, xi, xii, xvii, 1, 11, 83, 84, 129,  
130, 171, 192, 209, 212, 214, 219,  
226, 231

**R**

Romanticism, 1, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 20,  
84, 196, 212, 223, 227, 231  
Rougemont, xiv, 4, 227

**S**

- Sartre, xiv, 69, 113, 153, 155, 167, 168, 227
- Schopenhauer, xii, 13, 21, 197, 223, 228
- Sigmund Freud, 217
- Stendhal, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 36, 45, 199, 227, 229
- Suicide, 1, 12, 13, 14, 20, 21, 23, 35, 77, 83, 92, 130, 197, 211, 212, 215, 217, 218, 219, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 228, 231
- Sylvia Plath, xvii, 83, 85, 93, 98, 99, 186, 191, 204, 205, 215, 217, 219, 222, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 230

**T**

- Thanatos, i, xi, xii, xiii, xiv, xv, xvi, xviii, 65, 122, 133, 134, 144, 145, 147, 148, 150, 186, 193, 208, 216, 222
- The Idiot, xiv, xvi, 47, 50, 51, 52, 54, 57, 63, 73, 200, 201, 202, 215, 216, 220, 222, 229, 232
- Tolstoy, xvi, 10, 22, 24, 36, 38, 39, 42, 45, 198, 200, 212, 229, 230