



THE GENERAL PORTRAYAL OF SUICIDE IN WESTERN LITERATURE

Shukurova Sabokhat Odilovna

(PhD), The University of Economics and Pedagogy Russian Language Department, Associate Professor, Doctor of Philosophy Philological Sciences, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the literary representation of suicide across the history of Western literature, with a focus on key works from antiquity to the 21st century. The paper applies a comparative and philosophical approach, examining the changing attitudes toward suicide from a moral, religious, psychological, and existential perspective. Drawing on primary texts by authors such as Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, Camus, and Woolf, this research identifies recurring motifs and ideological frameworks that shape the literary treatment of suicide. The study argues that suicide functions not only as a narrative device but also as a lens through which deeper socio-cultural, ethical, and metaphysical dilemmas are explored. It contributes to the broader discourse on how literature reflects and challenges dominant moral paradigms concerning life, death, and agency.

KEYWORDS

Suicide, Western literature, existentialism, tragedy, moral philosophy, literary motif, death in literature.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide, a profoundly unsettling yet intellectually captivating subject, has long occupied a central place in the Western literary tradition. As both a personal act and a societal phenomenon, suicide has evoked varied responses—ranging from condemnation to glorification—depending on the moral, religious, and cultural context of its depiction. In literature, suicide has never been a mere plot event; it is often a symbolic expression of despair, agency, sacrifice, protest, or philosophical inquiry. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of how suicide is represented in major Western literary texts, tracing its evolution from ancient tragedy to modern existentialism.

The depiction of suicide in literature reveals much about a society's collective understanding of morality, freedom, mental illness, and the value of human life. In ancient Greek texts, for instance, suicide was frequently framed within the discourse of honor and heroic resistance. In contrast, medieval Christian literature regarded suicide as a sin, often omitting or morally condemning suicidal characters. The Enlightenment and Romantic periods introduced psychological depth and emotional turmoil, while 20th-century existentialist literature reinterpreted suicide as a philosophical act responding to the absurdity of life.

By synthesizing literary analysis with historical-philosophical interpretation, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How is suicide framed thematically in various literary periods?

2. What narrative functions does suicide serve in Western literary texts?
3. In what ways do these portrayals reflect or subvert the prevailing moral and philosophical attitudes of their times?

Through a diachronic exploration of key texts and authors, this paper argues that suicide, as depicted in Western literature, functions as a unique site of tension between individual will and societal expectation, between inner turmoil and external forces. The analysis will follow the IMRAD structure: Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion, concluding with a synthesis of findings and recommendations for future research.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach rooted in literary and philosophical analysis. The primary methodology involves close reading of representative texts from distinct literary periods. These texts have been selected for their historical significance, thematic richness, and enduring influence within the Western canon.

A chronological framework guides the analysis, beginning with classical antiquity and proceeding through the medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romantic, modernist, and postmodern eras. Within each period, key works are analyzed with attention to the following:

- Thematic portrayal of suicide
- Psychological and philosophical motivations
- Narrative function and symbolic meaning
- Socio-religious context and reception

Primary texts were selected based on their central engagement with the theme of suicide and their capacity to represent broader literary trends. Secondary sources include critical essays, philosophical treatises, and historical studies on suicide and its literary representation.

RESULTS

Classical Antiquity: Suicide as Heroism and Duty

In ancient Greek and Roman literature, suicide often appears as a heroic or rational act, associated with honor, personal agency, and resistance to tyranny. In Sophocles' "Antigone," the titular character's suicide is an act of defiance against unjust laws and a commitment to familial duty. Similarly, Euripides' "The Bacchae" and "Hippolytus" reflect the tragic consequences of divine-human conflict, where self-destruction becomes the only escape from shame or madness.

Roman writers such as Seneca and Plutarch emphasized stoicism and rational control. In Shakespeare's adaptation of Roman themes, notably "Julius Caesar," Brutus' suicide is depicted as an act of philosophical resolution rather than despair.

Medieval Literature: Theological Condemnation and Silence

The medieval Christian worldview largely condemned suicide as a mortal sin. Augustine and Aquinas strongly opposed suicide, influencing literary production. Consequently, suicides are rare and often portrayed with moral overtones. In Dante's "Inferno," suicides are punished in the seventh circle of hell, where they are transformed into gnarled trees, eternally deprived of human form.

Texts such as "The Canterbury Tales" contain indirect references to suicide, but these are filtered through religious doctrine, portraying the act as either tragic folly or divine punishment.

3.3 The Renaissance: Psychological Complexity and Moral Ambiguity

The Renaissance marked a renewed interest in human psychology and classical themes. Shakespeare's "Hamlet" provides a complex exploration of suicidal ideation through the famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. Hamlet's philosophical inquiry reflects existential uncertainty and moral hesitation, marking a shift from purely religious condemnation to introspective ambiguity.

Othello's suicide, by contrast, is framed as a mixture of guilt, honor, and loss, embodying both classical and Christian motifs. In this period, suicide begins to serve as a dramatic resolution that underscores moral complexity.

3.4 The Enlightenment: Rationalism and Moral Debate

Enlightenment thinkers debated suicide with a new emphasis on rationality and personal liberty. David Hume's essay "On Suicide" challenges the Christian prohibition, arguing that suicide can be morally permissible. Literature from this period, such as Voltaire's "Candide," critiques institutional hypocrisy but rarely centers suicide as a dramatic event. However, the discussion becomes more secular and philosophical.

3.5 Romanticism: Emotional Turmoil and Individual Despair

The Romantic era introduced a new emphasis on emotional expression, individualism, and the sublime. Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther" is emblematic, portraying a sensitive protagonist who commits suicide due to unrequited love and existential melancholy. The novel sparked the "Werther effect," raising public concern over literary influence on suicide.

Romantic poets like Lord Byron and Percy Shelley also explored suicidal themes, often linking death to unattainable ideals, artistic suffering, and a yearning for transcendence.

3.6 Modernism: Alienation, War, and Existential Crisis

Modernist literature responded to the trauma of World War I and the rise of psychoanalysis. Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" presents Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran who takes his life as a protest against societal indifference and medical misunderstanding. Woolf critiques both war and institutional failure.

In Albert Camus' "The Stranger," Meursault's emotional detachment and acceptance of death resonate with existential absurdism. Camus's philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" positions suicide as a central question of meaning, ultimately advocating defiance in the face of absurdity.

Postmodern and Contemporary Literature: Fragmentation and Identity

Postmodern literature often deconstructs traditional narratives of suicide. In works such as Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" and David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest," suicide is depicted through the lens of mental illness, societal dysfunction, and existential fragmentation. These texts challenge simplistic moral or romantic interpretations, instead offering a deeply psychological and socially critical perspective.

Recent literature, including young adult fiction, explores suicide in the context of bullying, trauma, and identity crisis, often with a focus on prevention and awareness. The evolution of suicide in literature increasingly mirrors contemporary debates on mental health.

DISCUSSION

The portrayal of suicide in Western literature has undergone profound transformations, shaped by shifting theological, philosophical, and psychological paradigms. In classical antiquity, suicide was often depicted as noble and heroic, aligning with values of honor and agency. With the rise of Christianity, literary representations became more negative and moralistic, condemning suicide as a violation of divine law.

The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods introduced greater nuance, allowing for philosophical debate and introspective analysis. Romanticism elevated personal emotion and individual tragedy, while modernism and existentialism transformed suicide into a symbol of alienation and metaphysical inquiry.

Contemporary literature continues to diversify the discourse, incorporating mental health awareness, trauma theory, and social critique. The evolution of suicide's portrayal reveals literature's enduring capacity to reflect and interrogate the deepest anxieties and ethical questions of human existence.

The literary motif of suicide functions on multiple levels: as character resolution, narrative climax, philosophical metaphor, and social commentary. Its persistence across genres and epochs underscores its complexity as both a human reality and a symbolic construct.

CONCLUSION

Suicide in Western literature is not merely a theme but a dynamic and multifaceted symbol of human struggle. From Sophocles to Camus, from Dante to Plath, the act of self-destruction has served as a lens through which authors examine the limits of agency, the burden of existence, and the failures of society.

This paper has traced the portrayal of suicide across literary history, demonstrating that literature offers a unique vantage point for understanding evolving conceptions of morality, identity, and suffering. Future research may expand this inquiry to include comparative studies with non-Western literatures or interdisciplinary analyses involving psychiatry, theology, and cultural studies.

In sum, literature does not offer definitive answers to the question of suicide, but it compels us to confront it with empathy, critical thought, and ethical seriousness.

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