

The Dissolution of Self in Guy de Maupassant's The Horla

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychological complexity underlying the narrator in Guy de Maupassant's short story The Horla (1887) using the analytical tool of Freudian emotional ambivalence, a fundamental concept of psychoanalytic theory. Freudian psychoanalysis provides a rigorous structure for discovering the deep influence of the unconscious mind on human behavior, emotion, and thought, identifying repressed desires, interpersonal struggle, and childhood experiences as the main influences shaping personality. The ambivalent attitude of the narrator in The Horla toward his mental state, home, and very being represents a stark internal dialectic that swings between reason and mania, between love and destruction, between self-preservation and self-destruction. He is simultaneously convinced of his sanity and beholden to irrational urges that take control of his mind. His deep attachment to his environment is dramatically contrasted with his increasing desire to destroy it. This emotional ambivalence, as revealed through detailed textual examination, operates within the psychic structure of the narrator, eventually leading him to complete psychological disintegration, thus illustrating a universal aspect of human psychology where opposing instincts coexist and create psychic intolerance.

Keywords: Dissolution, Guy de Maupassant's, The Horla

INTRODUCTION

Guy de Maupassant, a leading French novelist in the 19th century, is regarded as one of the prodigal short story authors in the literary canon. His literary masterpiece *The Horla* (his second edition, 1887) is a detailed study of psychic decline, which is enhanced by the emotional ambivalence of the narrator, being acute and disconcerting. The story follows an incessant intrapsychic conflict where conflicting affective conditions exist side by side, creating a deeper state of agitation that is an exhaustive analysis of psychological breakdown. What starts with a slight discomfort slowly turns into utter madness with the help of intense ambivalence that the protagonist has. This experience of the subject is transferred to the continuous internal storming, when the opposing feelings are in a constant tense, which marks the horror of the story under consideration.

Such ambivalence is the focus of the psychological and emotional energy of the story as it appears that the narrator is in conflict with something hidden that is either a manifestation of a crumbling mind within him or an actual supernatural entity. His feeling towards *The Horla* swings between fear and curiosity. He

is at once in fear of terror of being dominated by something unseen, of perverse admiration of its intelligence and strength, preceding this with a strange being with a mixture of respect and fear. Such conflicting feelings are directly related to the whole discourse of Maupassant about human inability to understand reason, comprehension, and even the reality itself.

It is also through the ambivalence of the narrator which is a state of rationality and delusion. Sometimes he makes a success of proving that *The Horla* is an objective reality to rationalize his experiences with empirical observation, and he almost instantly throws these models aside to give in to superstitious explanations. The example of his shifting between the cool description of events and the despairing feelings is, of course, an illustration of emotional tug-of-war between skepticism and confidence, which is characteristic of psychical ambivalence. As *The Horla* takes control over his mind, the narrator feels deeply alienated and forms a great hatred of himself due to what he understands as irrational thinking and at the same time desperately trying to hold on to life and sanity. This fear of losing self-consciousness creates a paradoxical mixture of pity and contempt with himself, which produces an unacceptable psychic mystery.

Finally, the narrator finds it important to burn down his house and commit suicide. The essence of his activities exposes the main paradox of his state: one should die to break the bonds and destroy *The Horla* and at the same time is full of attachment to life and existence. The ambivalence of emotions in the Freudian sense is a perfect mirror of these contradictory drives between self-preservation and self-destruction. There is an intense attachment of the narrator to his home, garden, and personal space as the areas of comfort and a sense of identity and at the same time, the area of prisons where he holds no power. The current investigation argues that the entire psychical dissolution of the narrator in *The Horla* is inherently driven by emotional ambivalence, which is achieved by the forces of life instincts (Eros) and death instincts (Thanatos), which eventually leads to a conflict that cannot be resolved and can only be solved by annihilation.

Objective

To explore how emotional ambivalence becomes the primary cause of the narrator's psychological decline in *The Horla* through the application of psychoanalytic theory, specifically examining how unconscious processes, repressed desires, and ambivalent emotions are represented and function within the narrative structure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The psychoanalytic model of the Austrian psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud was very successful in explaining literary works. Since its origin, psychoanalysis, has been used in addition to clinical behavior, as well as advanced literary criticism (Habib, 2008). The emphasis on the unconscious motives, repressive urges and intrapsychic conflict provided by the theory provides scholars with powerful means to dig out latent meanings in literature. According to Mahesar and Mashori (2018), Freudian methods contribute to the straightforward perception of the psychological state of the author, the way he or she constructs his or her character, and the more profound layers of the text, where other methodologies mainly resort to the surface. Lionel Trilling, a renowned critic, argues that knowledge of the mind leaves its mark on any works of art (Trilling, 1950).

According to Barry (2017), psychoanalysis is a critical approach that has used various analytical tools to identify and explain the psychological aspects that can be found in any literary work. Waugh (2006) has also highlighted the fact that the human mind is a large area of research and that literature is a part of the

research in the contemporary investigation, making psychological investigation prevail in the modern criticism. In modern psychoanalytic studies, however, the ambivalence has been identified as co-existence of cooperation and opposition in the psyche. Dibekulu (2025) explored this construct within the contemporary clinical setting and demonstrated how it has been developed and matured in the modern therapeutic care. However, what is referred to as ambivalence was a serious mental illness, which was firstly introduced by Bleuler (1911), when he explained it as an ambivalence attitude, which is an unclear mental state towards the same objects or circumstances, and in this case an individual has two opposing qualities, feelings of love and hatred, attraction and repulsion.

The vague nature of the events described in the text of *The Horla* further adds to the scholarly discussion that the events experienced by the narrator could either be described as psychological disorders (hallucination or madness) or rather be a result of the truly supernatural worlds, a subject that Lusk and Roeske (2003) attempt to address in their work. Such an interpretive ambiguity, in its turn, highlights the fact that ambivalence in the center of the story is making it impossible to answer the question of the nature of the experiences which the narrator goes through on a final basis.

In Freudian schools of thought, two conflicting forces control the human psyche, i. e., Eros and Thanatos. Eros summarizes life instincts, and it is shown within the care, affection, reproduction, creativity, and constructive activities, and Thanatos summarizes the death instincts, which drives people to aggression, destruction, and eventual death.

Awan et al. (2025) argue that the lack or failure of regulatory social set ups, which include family set ups, codes of morality and the larger society structure do actually trigger the instability of morals, psychological disorientation and violence, and hence provides an environment that allows the death instincts to dominate and subdue the life instincts.

Eros becomes a survival inclination, self-growth, relationship building, and aestheticism, whereas Thanatos forces people into self-destruction, aggression, and death.

Euba (2023) explored *The Horla* through the psychiatric perspective, and it explains how personal experience with mental illness made Maupassant write about psychological decline.

Ghosh (2023) discussed the symbolic meaning of the domicile in the context of the work *The Horla* in the context of the uncanny by Freud, thus showing how the domestic environments that people are used to turn into the place of horror and alienation.

Although the existing body of the scholarship confronts the unequal aspects of emotional ambivalence in *The Horla* and uses Freudian categories unequally, there is still a great scope to conduct specific psychoanalytic research into the functioning of emotional ambivalence as the main driver of the psychological breakdown of the narrator- a task that the proposed work is aimed at achieving.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To deconstruct the short story by Maupassant, the current work takes the psychoanalytical theory by Sigmund Freud with the idea of emotional ambivalence as its approach. Emotional ambivalence (as defined by Freud in Totem and Taboo (1913)) refers to the simultaneous presence of two states of affect towards the same object, person or situation.

A person who develops ambivalence has both positive and negative attitudes simultaneously, which gives one deep psychological tension and conflict. This is one of the ideas that hold the central place in early psychoanalytic theory and continues to play the central role in comprehending human complex emotions and behaviors.

The Horla has a range of aspects that could be interpreted psychologically, however, the given work will concentrate specifically on the possibility of applying the concept of emotional ambivalence to the material of the story by means of textual analysis. The idea of ambivalence provided by Freud is particularly applicable to the discussion of the conflicting nature of the impulse's narrator displays when simultaneously feeling love and hatred, longing to live and longing to die, being rational and irrational in his thoughts. It is an analytical device that is directed by the principle of emotional ambivalence, which helps to understand the influence of the conflicting emotions of the narrator on the unique language, symbolism, and mood of psychological tension of the story. The framework allows looking at how conflicting forces in the psyche, namely, Eros (instincts of life) and Thanatos (instincts of death) generate unbearable psychological pressure that, eventually, leads the narrator to a state of utter mental collapse.

Moreover, repression in the theory by Freud gives another background of the emergence of the unconscious desires and fears in the narrator about *The Horla*. Freud claimed in his works that the impulses that are not acceptable to the conscious, rather than being forgotten, are simply pushed into the unconscious, where they still manage to affect the thoughts, feelings, and actions in some way (Freud Repression, 1915). In the case of *The Horla*, the unseen creature may be viewed as the manifestation of the unresolved psychological issues, a part of the narrator that he cannot freely recognize and admire. Such a psychoanalytic interpretation makes it possible to understand the work with the sophisticated level of how the internal psychological force produces the perception of the external supernatural phenomena and reveals the strength of the unconscious mind to form the perceived reality.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the qualitative research approach that focuses on interpretation by analyzing the text closely to understand the psychological condition of the narrator using the Freudian theory of emotional ambivalence. The study is narrowly dedicated to exploring the issues of how contradictory feelings influence human behavior as it is presented in the literary works (McKee, 2003). Close reading is a scientific and exact way of overcoming literary research, which includes a focused analysis of words, imagery, symbols, and plot. This method deals with critical reading of the textual components in the social and psychological framework, paying attention to the overt meanings and the hidden psychological meaning (Fossey et al., 2016).

The methodology of textual analysis deals with comprehending the meaning of information that comes through language, symbols, literary structures, and patterns through which people make sense of and communicate their life experiences and mental realities (Allen, 2017). In this study, textual analysis is narrowed down to the passages which disclose the ambivalent feelings of the narrator, linguistic patterns, repetitiveness, and symbolism in the illustration of the psychological conflict. The discussion will discuss the narration techniques used by Maupassant such as first-person narration, disjunctive journal entries and unreliable perspective as an effective way of externalizing the inner emotional conflict and psychological ambivalence of the narrator.

This research is carried out in a systematic investigation of the text, as it is seen that the text has certain evidence of this type, namely emotional ambivalence in thoughts, feelings, and behavior of the narrator. The passages are chosen depending on their relevance to illustrate the conflicting impulses especially on

rationality and irrationality and life preservation and self-destruction. Each chosen passage is analyzed in detail in order to explain how it displays Freudian ideas of ambivalence, Eros, Thanatos and the unconscious. The analysis of texts takes into account the manifest content (what is said literally) and the latent content (psychological meaning) of texts, as per the practices of recognized psychoanalytic interpretation.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Nature of Ambivalence

The narrative of *The Horla* of the narrator occurs at many levels that are interlinked with each other, and all these levels make the story a true psychological revelation. His conflicting feelings form the unique mood of the narrative of unease and horror, as well as that the internal psychological struggle could create a deeper experience of terror than an external menace does.

Rationality Versus Irrationality: The Narrator's Conflicting Self-Perception

One of the main causes of a psychological conflict in the narrator is discovered in the state of the incessant war between his rational and irrational attitudes. In the story, he appears both as an individual of good sense and scientific mind, and as a man falling into a state of utter irrationality and insanity. Such back and forth movement between conflicting self-images creates a great amount of authority as to whether his mind is sound and whether his experiences are real.

Even in the first pages of the story, the authorial voice is characterized by an unshaken sense of his rationality and mental health, he says, who can know the feeling of a man, of a healthy mind, full awake, full of reason. Such a declarative position establishes an impression of the narrator as an inherently good and logically minded person, and places him as a conqueror of the irrational. Furthermore, when he comments, it is like, how weak we are! We can neither see the too small nor the too large things, he demonstrates high level of philosophical interest in the epistemological boundaries of perception of human beings and the intellectual interest in the sub-layers of the reality.

Yet, as the story unfolds, this conceptual base keeps crumbling under the weight of the disturbing events that the narrator is going through. His mental fears and mental struggles trigger a radical transformation between the measured scientific observation and the fanatical self-examination. He starts doubting his own sanity and declares that he is unquestionably the toy of an illusion. One of these nervous disorders of which we have no idea of the numberless variety. In trying to justify his terrorism using the recognized psychiatric paradigms, he strangely becomes deeply uncertain; the expression of it being without a doubt indicates that he is in a serious state of desperation in trying to persuade himself that there is indeed a rational explanation even when he is imagining the onset of lunacy.

These efforts to maintain a rational point of view appear in the way the narrator conducts his empirical studies so systematically. He organizes controlled experiments to find out whether a nocturnal intruder is drinking his water, carefully placing objects in order to monitor any disturbances and tries to find scientific answers to apparently supernatural phenomena. These efforts are a good example of his desire to maintain a logical state of mind and not to give in to irrational fear. In its turn, every failure in the efforts to explain the inexplicable accelerates his psychological degradation since the search after logical explanation of the events only makes him more terrified and lost.

Progressively, the confidence of the narrator in the empirical rationality becomes completely destroyed and his manic self-examination enhances his fear instead of mitigating it. He is brought to a terrible conclusion: I am mad, there is no doubt about it. This statement is a summary of the inherent ambivalence of the narrator, as he states he is certain, at the same time stating that he is utterly unsure whether he is sane. The actual cognitive dissonance of this paradox is the center of his condition: he cannot see whether his experiences are the manifestations of reality or delirium of reason or madness. Failure to solve this dichotomy creates psychological tension that is unbearable.

The narrator switches between the rational and irrational point of view throughout the text. Sometimes he praises the clearness of the intellectual thought and the calmness of the nature and confirms his mental well-being by saying, I am quite alright, I am quite in my own wits and yet. The trailing conjunction of and yet is also very important and this indicates that although he claims to be rational, a sense of disturbance plagues his self-evaluation. When the narrator is faced with events that he cannot explain, such as the presence of an invisible being, of an unusual consumption of his water, or unusual physical manifestations, his initial response is to refuse to believe in supernatural explanations in favour of a scientific context, but these defences gradually weaken as the events continue to accumulate.

Finally, the narrators sensory and psychological integrity is shattered altogether, as the narrator weeps that she no longer takes pleasure in living, in saying, in touching, in hearing, in feeling. I am lost.” This statement highlights the catastrophic consequences of unsuccessful ambivalence: the inability of narrator to balance rational with irrational perceptions ends up in the alienation of his own sensory being. The five senses that usually ground him on objective reality lose their reliability and no longer find pleasure or meaning. The consequent alienation defines the end stage of his psychologic breakdown, in which coherent experiential reality has been destroyed by ambivalence.

The path that the narrator takes to think with confidence and all rationality to the complete breakdown of the psyche is an example of how emotional ambivalence the impossibility to agree with conflicting perceptions causes unbearable mental torture. His consciousness cannot hold fixed convictions about whether he is sane or not, and what his experiences are, swinging between opposing explanations. This ongoing tension is shot through with the horror mood of the story and illustrates the poisonous effects of psychological ambivalence.

Life Instinct Versus Death Instinct: Eros and Thanatos in Conflict

Emotional turbulence and psychologic descent of the narrator in *The Horla* can be tediously interpreted using the psychoanalytic theory of Eros and Thanatos -the two instincts that create the emotional ambivalence of the narrator. The result of these opposing forces is a long-running psychological tug-of-war between the life-affirmation and death-oriented drives, between the constructive and destructive drives as well as between the self-preservation and the self-destruction drives.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator demonstrates a deep attachment to his home, his objects, the world of nature and life as such. He expresses true pleasure in life stating that life is good and shows a strong urge to enjoy every aspect of life. He brings out very enthusiastic admiration of the beauty of nature and writes of intense love to the environment he is in and he finds this hard to wait until he can witness the beauty of the world light up once again. This strong sense of appreciation of life is Eros, the life instinct which emphasizes continuity, harmony, creation, and closeness. His emotional attachment to his home and items that mean comfort and meaning is an indicator of strong motivators that make him want to persist, and when he declares, I hold desperately to life, the imagery is a graphic depiction of his

strong will to continue the existence despite the increasing psychologic pressure. His life instinct drives him to struggle to survive even with the suffocating presence of *The Horla* and his mental degradation.

However, when the invisible force slowly gains its control over the individual, there is a deep psychological change which occurs. What used to be the beloved home of the narrator, a place of refuge, where he could find his safety and comfort, turns out to be the source of fear and seclusion. He complains, then I walk and walk in my living room, oppressed by an indecisive and irresistible fear, the fear of bed and the fear of sleep. The room that should be a place of relaxation and rest is causing immense stress. He is certain that his home has been haunted and that *The Horla* has taken possession of the house thus completing the transformation of its home environment into a prison. Such a dramatic turnaround demonstrates the power psychological forces have to radically change the relationship to the surroundings with which one is used to be in, and turn the sources of comfort into the sources of terror.

The desperate question of the narrator, who knows whence these influences are which turn our cheerfulness into melancholy and our self-confidence into woe? is beautifully phrased to show how he himself is confused by his own mental conversion. This query reveals the surging power of his unfinished inner struggles and subliminal fears. The more and more these subterranean psychological forces take the upper turn in his consciousness, the more his affective states change in drama, in caprice, without discoverable external causation. The ambivalence comes to crisis levels, since he is both desperately holding onto life and being irresistibly drawn to self-destruction.

Such ambivalence of the narrator leads to a disastrous choice of killing both what is seen as the external threat and himself. The determination to kill and destroy is his last desperate effort to come to terms with the psychology strain that could not be endured because of the presence of *The Horla*. His intrinsically confused character is reflected in his self-destructive act of setting his house on fire, and by doing so destroying that which he previously loved. The only way of escaping the grip of *The Horla*, to him, seems to be death and destruction. When he says, I will kill myself not to be thus long tortured, he shows how death is even better than the constant mental agony of ambivalence. This ambivalence of emotion is the typical expression of emotional ambivalence the oscillation between the drive to self-preservation (Eros) and the drive to self-destruction (Thanatos).

Theorization of repression by Freud in his works, including Repression (1915), clarifies that the repressed impulses be it love or hatred, desire or fear, do not disappear out of the consciousness but they move into the unconscious where they still continue to have an influence on thoughts and behaviors. The ambiguous presence of *The Horla* is the manifestation of the unresolved and suppressed past experiences of the narrator, any possible family traumas, and underlying anxieties in his psyche in *The Horla*. This unseen being can be seen as an extension of his conflicts in the unconscious, and a representative of the psychological forces that he is not able to consciously recognize and to incorporate. The fact that the narrator is not able to deal head-on with these repressed aspects directly contributes to the development of this ambivalence which ends up contributing to his eventual death.

The climax of the story is the best manifestation of the resolved psychological conflict when it cannot be resolved. The increasing understanding of a sinister fear in his house drives him to take some extreme measure of halting the house on fire and renouncing society. This suicidal gesture is an indicator of the final breakdown of his connection with the natural home and social networking. This act by the narrator of setting his house on fire with both Horla and his servants locked in the house is a desperate bid at freedom. First, he shouts victory: It is dead... I have watched it burn in those fires, thinking that he has been able to destroy the being that was plaguing him. However, this extrinsic gesture of destruction is instantly inverted since he realizes the pointlessness of his activities.

The tragic logic of his ambivalence is revealed in his last, heartbreaking conclusion, as he realizes, with no doubts, that he has to kill himself; Heaven knows, He is not dead- The annihilation of the alien other is impossible since *The Horla* is not a separate object but instead a product of his own mental struggles. This realization causes the final decision to be made: when the perceived threat cannot be removed outside, then the only remaining solution is self-destruction. The struggle towards freedom ends in the desire to commit suicide, which is a combination of the attempted murder of the perceived monster and the destruction of the main character himself. This apocalypse of destruction and self-destruction is the last act of unbearable emotional ambivalence the forces of opposites cannot be moved to reconciliation, then it is the psyche itself that must be destroyed.

Furthermore, in a careful examination of the text, the readers can note that the narrator first takes the optimistic stance, which is marked with a love of life and the ability to think logically. However, the feeling that he is being looked at and that this could be some of the unconscious psychological forces gradually turns into the person who sees himself as a very pessimistic person full of fear, suspicion, and self-vilification. This metamorphosis proves that the unsolved psychological conflicts and emotional ambivalence may radically change the personality and perception, finally leading to the total psychological disintegration.

CONCLUSION

The Horla by Guy de Maupassant (1887) is a deep psychological understanding of emotional ambivalence and its catastrophic effects on the human consciousness. The story is a brilliant example of the mind struggle between devotion and ruin, sanity and delusion, self-preservation and self-destruction, thus displaying the highly conflicting feelings in the narrator. Maupassant uses emotional ambivalence as the cornerstone of the organization of *The Horla*, which makes it the engine of the psychological horror in the story. The impulses which the narrator experiences at the same time and in contradiction to each other between life and death instincts reveal the essentially contradictory essence of human psychology, proving how the contradictory forces in the psyche may cause unbearable psychological stress.

The narrator is characterized by his conflicting impulses, which are expressed in the opposition between Eros and Thanatos, and which are, in fact, the main preconditions of his emotional turmoil and mental decline. His conscious thoughts and behaviors are in a constant manifestation of ambivalent emotions about his rationality and irrationality, which creates an incessant doubt of his mental state and the nature of reality. His deep interest in his garden, his home, and his life itself at the beginning demonstrate the example of rationality and optimism, presenting a man who is able to see beauty and sense in life. But as the story goes on, his irrationality gradually takes over, driving him to seclusion, aversion to himself and total mental breakdown.

The analysis demonstrates that emotional ambivalence, when left unresolved, can lead to complete psychological collapse. The narrator's inability to reconcile opposing forces within his psyche—the simultaneous pull of life and death instincts, the conflict between rational and irrational thought, the paradox of loving and wanting to destroy his home—creates unbearable tension that can only be resolved through annihilation. Maupassant's masterful portrayal of this psychological deterioration not only creates a powerful horror narrative but also offers insight into the universal human condition where contradictory impulses exist within all individuals. The story serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of the human mind when confronted with irreconcilable internal conflicts, making *The Horla* a timeless exploration of psychological complexity and the devastating consequences of emotional ambivalence.

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