

## The Thanatology of Desire: The Collapse of Eros into Thanatos in Hjalmar Soderberg's Doctor Glas.

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### Abstract

This study examines Hjalmar Söderberg's novel *Doctor Glas* through Sigmund Freud's drive theory to explore the psychological conflict between life and death of instincts in the novel. The novel is chosen due to its clear portrayal of human behavior and its expectancy of Freudian psychoanalytic thought. The employs Eros and Thanatos and repetition compulsion that is mentioned in Freud's *Beyond the pleasure principle* to analyze Glas's internal conflict and moral reasoning by using psychoanalytic method through out the narrative. the research finding concludes that while Eros grows smaller in strength, Thanatos becomes the dominant one, leading to psychological collision, ethical volatility, and peace becomes something that is represented by death. It also accommodates Freud's belief that mental processes operate beyond the pleasure principle. The study concludes that *Doctor Glas* depicts desire as a detrimental force when disconnected from ethical equilibrium and advocates for additional psychoanalytic and comparative investigations into modernist literature.

**Key words:** death , desire, Doctor Glas, Eros, Freud, instinct, life, organism, Thanatos.

ثانولوجيا الرغبة: انهيار إيروس إلى ثاناتوس في كتاب هيلمار سودربيرغ،

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**الخلاصة:**

تفحص هذه الدراسة رواية الدكتور غلاس لهالمار سودربيرغ من خلال نظرية الدافع لسيغموند فرويد لاستكشاف الصراع النفسي بين الحياة والموت للغرائز في الرواية. اختيرت الرواية بسبب تصويره الواضح للسلوك البشري وتوقعه للفكر التحليلي النفسي الفرويدي. الدراسة تستخدم إيروس وثناتوس وقهر التكرار الذي ذكر في مبدأ فرويد "ما وراء المتعة" لتحليل الصراع الداخلي والتفكير الأخلاقي لغلاس باستخدام المنهج التحليلي النفسي طوال السرد. خلص البحث إلى أنه بينما يصبح إيروس أصغر في القوة، يصبح ثاناتوس هو المسيطر، مما يؤدي إلى تصادم نفسي، وتقلب أخلاقي، ويصبح السلام شيئاً يمثله الموت. كما أنه يتوافق مع اعتقاد فرويد بأن العمليات الذهنية تعمل خارج مبدأ المتعة. تستنتج الدراسة أن الدكتور غلاس يصور الرغبة كقوة ضارة عند فصلها عن التوازن الأخلاقي، ويدعو إلى المزيد من الدراسات التحليلية النفسية والمقارنة في الأدب الحدائي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الموت، الرغبة، الدكتور غلاس، إيروس، فرويد، الغريزة، الحياة، الكائن الحي، ثاناتوس.

### 1.1 Theoretical background:

According to Barnhart (1972), Sigmund Freud proposes that the human mind is governed by two contradictory forces. On one end of the spectrum, there's a natural predisposition in the human organism to seek pleasure and avoid pain, while on the other, there is a tendency towards self-destruction. Freud describes these opposing forces in poetic terms as Eros and Thanos, which remain in constant conflict and are both necessary components of human existence (pp. 114–115). Freud further explains that these two instincts shape human life, stating that “Eros operates from the beginning of life and appears as a ‘life instinct’ in opposition to the ‘death instinct’ which was brought in to being by the coming to life of inorganic substance” (Freud, 1961, p. 55).

The word "Eros" comes from a fascinating figure in Greek mythology that embodies the complex nature of love and desire. This figure stems from various sources: one account states this figure was born from Chaos as a primordial deity before the universe's creation; another portrays it as the son of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and Ares, the god of war. This dual origin hints at a conflict between love and destruction, or love and tumultuous passion, reflecting the inherent duality between desire and conflict (Carrasco, 2025)

On the other hand, there is Thanatos, also a winged figure, but unlike Eros, who stands for life or love, Thanatos stands for death. Thanatos was the brother of Hypnos, the deity of sleep, and the son of Nyx, the night goddess. It represents the necessity of the natural cycle of life and death, or the acceptance of it as an integral part of nature. In the realm of philosophy, Thanatos is not only an element of fear; it is also a sign of rebirth that represents a fresh start (The Intersection of Thanatos and Eros: Love and Death in Greek Myth, n.d.)

These myths were often used by philosophers and thinkers to shape an idea or bring coherence into a larger matter. However, in psychology it has been used to refer to the internal urges of human beings. In this context, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), a prominent modern psychologist, delves into the human psyche as he differentiates between two forces that exist in human beings and shape their behavior: sexual drive, or the libido, and the ego instinct, or what he calls "self-preservation" in his book *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905. Freud moved to classify the psyche into ego and object libido, where ego libido refers to an energy aimed inward towards the self, whereas object libido is directed outwards towards other people, which introduces the idea of the self-preservation instinct. Later in his work *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* (1915), Freud analyzes the transformation

of instinct, but still, he frames it within the context of the sexual drive or the (libido) and the ego instinct (self-preservation) (Hamad and Muhammed, 2024, pp. 294-296).

After World War I, Freud was traumatized on a personal level; he faced great poverty and hunger in Vienna, inflation wiped all his savings out, and he was left with nothing that made him worry about his family's future (Jones, 2019, p. 4). He begins to wonder whether pleasure and the libido are all there is to human behavior; that's when he introduces the dual drive model of both Eros and Thanatos in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). He introduces life instincts represented by Eros and death instinct represented by Thanatos. However, he did not specifically use the two terms in their methodological way, but later Freudian thinkers linked life and death drives to Eros and Thanatos (Hamad and Muhammed, 2024, p. 296).

From Hamlet's debilitating quest for truth to Gatsby's self-annihilating idealization of love and Faustus's fatal desire for knowledge, desire has time and again been portrayed as a force of isolation and destruction. Hjalmar Söderberg continues this tradition in *Doctor Glas*, where the inner turmoil of the protagonist turns desire into a legal ground for considering murder. In *Doctor Glas*, erotic longing (Eros) repeatedly breakdowns into a disguised death-impulse (Thanatos).

Set in Stockholm, the 1905 novel *Doctor Glas*, is an epistolary novel that tends to be taken mostly from ethical point of view. However, this is not how this paper contends it to be, as this paper pinpoint it as a psychological drama worth exploring its iceberg of hidden psychological aspects. It talks about a doctor that has not been intimate with a woman before, a virgin, that drowns in his own philosophical ideas. This doctor becomes obsessed with a patient's wife. He begins to contemplate murder as he tries to balance between erotic longing and moral obligations and convictions.

The author Hjalmar Söderberg (1869–1941), was a novelist ranking first among others. He was a part of writers who follows neo-romanticists of the nineties whom their works were known for their pessimism and disillusionment. His short stories were marked by a tone of utter elegance and conciseness of expression. His productivity arose in the first decade of the new century, alongside with a couple of short stories, his most famous work *Doctor Glas* published in 1905, dealing with a murder as it ponder on the right to kill as a topic. He has also produced some plays but they weren't successful as it lacked the capacity

to create a living character or a real dramatic force, even though his works represent an entire generation, he nevertheless lost the attachment to times with the start of the great war, his world didn't matter no more. In the end he settled in Danmark in a complete isolation and began to study the history of religion devoting himself to it completely (McClellan, 1943, pp. 240-241).

Söderberg used his term "tankeböcker" to describe his literary works which include *Doctor Glas*. The main focus of this work centers on emotional experiences together with mental reflections and initial sensory reactions. The characters in Söderberg's stories focus on talking and thinking instead of taking action because he creates his stories through character mental processes rather than following traditional plot development methods (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 7)

While previous scholarship has largely confined *Doctor Glas* to the realm of ethics, a Freudian interrogation reveals that his actions are less about a moral 'choice' and more about the catastrophic failure of psychic sublimation. To understand Glas is to study the economic distribution of his libido how repressed sexual desire, when denied an outlet, undergoes a morbid metamorphosis.

The explicit themes of *Doctor Glas* triggered public outrage when readers first encountered the book during its 1905 debut. People believed the story focused on euthanasia , abortion, infidelity and marital rights although it supported the first three topics but rejected the last one. The novel, *Doctor Glas* presents various problems which remain relevant for people in our current time ((Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 8). To understand the darkness of Doctor Glas's, the paper follows a psychoanalytic thanatological lens, as it tries to examine Eros, which signals life libido, creative desire and Thanatos which gives meaning of death drive and destruction, treating both as powers of the universe that psychologically cancel each other.

This paper tries to explore desire as a double-edged sword that can be both harmful and good, but as the expression goes, "too much of a good thing is bad", too much desire, here, proves to be destructive rather than rewarding. Thus, the diary of *doctor Glas* becomes a natural re-enactment of the union of Eros into Thanatos.

## 1.2 Literature Review

In a study titled, "*Ethical Murder and Doctor Glas*" published in 1979, " Reed Merrill contemplates a murder from an ethical angle framing it as something that can be justified when it is used as a means to an end, thereby expanding moral philosophy boundaries in literature.

In an essay titled, "The Shadow Who Wished to Become a Man: Doctor Glas in the Twenty-First Century", published in 2009, Theresa Jamieson , revise two interpretations of Doctor Glas, (by authors: Bengt Ohlsson and Dannie Abse), arguing that contemporary adaptations move people's attention to things that have been overlooked previously shedding light on important hidden aspects of the novel, thus challenging previous interpretation that have simplify its intricate complexity. Another study done by Richard Cooper (2009), titled, " Solo doctors and ethical isolation", cooper argues that the ethical decision making is undermined by professional isolation in medical practice. Cooper mixes ethical theory, limited empirical research, and the literary case of *Doctor Glas* to show the dangers of ethical isolation.

Three years later, Lena Ahlin, wrote an essay titled, "The Doctor and the Pastor: on Love and evil in Hjalmar Soderberg's *Doctor Glas* and Bengt Ohlsson's *Gregorius*", published in 2012, The article explores the justifications and construction of evil that is challenged ethically in *Doctor Glas* and its re-vision in *Gregorius* with a specific focus on the authority, motivation, and moral imagination of its narrative.

Since this novel is Scandinavian, many foreign researchers sought to analyze it, in an Italian article published in 2022, titled , "Verità della physis e menzogna sociale: Doktor Glas, un Übermensch fallito?" (Santovito, 2022) which in English, means " The Truth of Physis and Social Falsehood: Doktor Glas as a Failed Übermensch?". This essay investigates the connection between Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doctor Glas* and Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. The analysis looks at important ideas like knowledge, truth, and the "death of God," demonstrating how they influence Doctor Glas's philosophical system. The study contends that the doctor's transition from a metaphysical to a scientific worldview is mirrored in the protagonist's struggle to deal with the loss of metaphysical meaning, which is portrayed as an existential crisis.

This novel has been picked by many scholars, either English or from other nationalities, but none of them has looked at its psychological side. scholars have analyzed it

mostly from an ethical standpoint which makes this paper original in its discussion as it aims to studies Hjalmar Soderberg's *Doctor Glas* from a psychological point of view which utilizes Sigmund Freud's life and death instinct in analyzing its main protagonist. This paper offers a new psychoanalytical reading by foregrounding Freud's life and death instinct or the drive theory as a valuable framework through which Soderberg's *Doctor Glas* novel can be read

### 2.1 The Collapse of Eros into Thanatos in Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doctor Glas*

Söderberg accepted agnosticism as his belief system which he shared with numerous modern breakthrough writers. He rejected the idea of God who actively changed human situations, he also refused to believe that people could control their own life paths. He is also a determinist whose world view is shaped by a deep belief in fatalistic and in the inevitability of human outcomes. Söderberg believed that events in life exist beyond our power to influence because external elements control their direction. The search for human comfort leads people to chase after false promises which will never bring them real satisfaction. (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 3) which goes hand in hand with Freud's drive theory of life and death instinct.

*Doctor Glas* is narrated by a doctor named Tyko Gabriel Glas, who introduces himself as a thirty-three-year-old doctor who hates his profession and who has never been with a woman. Normally a doctor is supposed to be caring and a little bit sympathetic. However, in the beginning of the novel, Glas meets a pastor that hinders his peaceful mood just by his existence, as he talks to him, his thoughts pivots to an old problem so often discusses on the cafe table of weather people can kill a Chinese mandarin just by the click of a button and inherent his riches. He contemplates on the idea by showing no hesitancy in pushing that button if it were up to him to kill the switch on the pastor and end his life, "I think if I could kill that pastor by pushing a button on the wall, I'd do it." ( Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 15)

His name carries three meanings associated with his name. Tyko is the name of the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, who kept a distance from daily life in order to study the sky. Though he is also referred to as an angel of punishment and devastation, Gabriel is the angel who declared the birth of Christ. As a result, the name is appropriate for a doctor who deals with life and death as well as for Dr. Glas, who must determine whether to make his own decisions and take independent action (Atwood, 2002).

This provides an early indication of the character's true nature. Interestingly, much like his internal thoughts, his genuine intentions remain hidden from others, and only the reader is

granted access to his inner world. From the beginning, the narrative introduces several instances in which the main protagonist display noticeable fluctuation in emotions and psychological drives. He recalls that he was once an excellent student who consistently strived to be the best, yet over time he lost his vigor and motivation, suggesting an early psychological and emotional decline that shapes his later actions

I was very ambitious as a child. I learned to control myself early, to distinguish between my innermost, constant will and a momentary impulse, a fleeting desire, to listen to the one voice and disregard the other... But then I stopped. No specialized training, no doctorate. People were willing to lend me the money, however much I needed, but I was tired. I felt no desire to specialize, and I wanted to earn my own living. My schoolboy ambition for high grades, once satisfied, faded away, and oddly enough no adult ambition took its place. I think it was because by then I had started to think. I hadn't had time before. (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p.24)

In *envy and gratitude and other works 1946-1963*, (1975), Melanie Klein (1975) states " it is inherited in Freud's discoveries that the exploration of the patient's past, of the childhood, and of his unconscious is a precondition for understanding his adult personality"(p. 177). This perspective focus on the importance of early psychological development in shaping an individual's later behavior and motivations. In the case of Glas, his early life shows a strong investment in his Eros, especially in his desire for academic excellence and personal achievement. However, this intense focus on achieving better and more exceptional academic results gradually led to feelings of boredom and loss of ambition. Instead of embracing motivation and satisfaction, his persistent pursuit of perfection created emotional exhaustion which made his enthusiasm towards success eventually weakened.

Even though Dr.Glas hated the pastor, he nevertheless grows fond of his wife secretly during one of her visits to his clinic. She complains about how the pastor sometimes forces himself upon her, calling her to mate wrapping his sparkling words with the duty of wives under God's wishes. as a man of inner thoughts, Dr.Glas threatens the pastor internally, in his mind. As his wife Mrs. Gregorius, complains about her husband, pleading to help her get rid of him, Dr.Glas thinks to himself:

Never have I felt with greater force that morality is a spinning merry-go-round. I knew this before, of course, but I'd always imagined that the revolutions must be measured in centuries or eons. Now they seemed like minutes or seconds. I grew dizzy, and the only

guidepost through the madness was the voice I heard inside me, the voice whispering between its teeth: watch out, pastor! (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 34)

As Freud explains " one might assume that the death instinct worked silently within the organism towards its disintegration" (Freud,1957, p. 97). Here, the whispering voice, when Dr.Glas says" watch out, pastor!" that highlights a tone of threat and warning, which goes hand in hand with Freud's description of Thanatos as a non-rational, something that hides like a silent killer setting the mood towards dissolution. This single sentence hints that the drive has found its object and it is prepared to take action. At this point, there is a clear Thanatotic shift from internal breakdown to external hostility. Thanatos is silently working its way through the organism it has found its drive, and begun acting on it. by abusing his medical judgment as a physician, Doctor Glas lies to the pastor for the sake of his wife, telling him that he knew many theologians in Uppsala that were not insured against intercourse or the result of it

I knew many theologians there, and I didn't get the impression that the study of theology provided any special insurance against that sort of fire. And with regard to age—yes, how old are you, Pastor? Fifty seven? That's a critical age: desire is the same as before, but satisfaction has its price... I can't imagine you would choose to drop dead in the same manner as the late King Frederik I (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p.38).

Glas explains in one of his writings, that he is not a man but a shadow of a man, " it seems to me that I myself am the shadow who wished to become a man." (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 42). Analyzed under Freud's drive theory, Freud states that

We might suppose that the life instincts or sexual instincts which are active in each cell take the other cells as their object, that they partly, neutralize the death instincts (that is, the processes set up by them) in those cells and thus preserve their life (p. 44)

Doctor Glas aspires to become a complete and unified man, which aligns with Freud's concept of Eros as a force that strives towards unity and cohesion. However, by describing himself as a shadow, he reveals that although libido is present within him, the ego fails to achieve a stable and integrated form, resulting in an incomplete psychological unity.

Dreams play a vital role in the process of eros formation. In his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explains "the content of the dream is thus the fulfilment of a wish; its motive is a wish" (p. 100). Dreams are part of doctor Glas's life from the moment he met the pastors' wife, Mrs. Gregorius. He narrates a dream, in this dream scenario, Glas sees himself

in a private but uncomfortable medical setting, examining Pastor Gregorius, who seems sick and fragile. Glas acknowledges an underlying danger that appears to be more related to his own thoughts and intentions than the patient's health, even though he publicly minimizes the severity of the illness, "not serious, but dangerous." (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 42)

As he was observing the pastor's case, he says that his heart must be taken out, with an ordinary knife, then he put a handkerchief on the pastor's face, then at the last moment pushes a button on the wall, killing the pastor instantly, " But instead of operating, I quickly pressed a button on the wall. I removed the handkerchief. He was dead." (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 43) The dream itself is an expression of the death instinct, where a physician loses all rationality and finds it perfectly plausible to do a serious surgery on a heart using an ordinary knife, as stated by Freud that the death instinct characterize by the lack of rationality, so Thanatos actually disguises as rational but its actually destructive. What Freud calls the "instinct seeking to dissolve those units [of living substances] and to bring them back to their primeval, inorganic state" (Freud, 1920, as cited in Benvenuto, 2014).

The other thing in the dream refers the subtlety of the procedure of how the pastor loses his life by pushing a button on the wall in a manner of organized, orchestrated murder referring to the silent process of the death drive, as it hopes to make the organism returns to its earlier state of being. Whether in this dream, in fantasy or as he murmurs and whispers that he wish him dead. Doctor Glas goes back to a loop of a particular pattern, as Freud terms it as "repetition compulsion" as Freud discovers that " the repetitiveness of certain patterns of human behavior and the inevitability or, if you wish, the inescapable nature of this repetitiveness" (xiv). Freud further explains:

It is clear that the greater part of what is re-experienced under the compulsion to repeat must cause the ego unpleasure, since it brings to light activities of repressed instinctual impulses. That, however, is unpleasure of a kind we have already considered and does not contradict the pleasure principle: unpleasure for one system and simultaneously satisfaction for the other. (Freud, 1961, p. 14)

As a result, Dr. Glas's dream serves as mental self-punishment rather than just wish fulfillment, signifying Thanatos turning inward. In this dream the pastors wife appears playing on the piano then she delivers a bouquet of black flowers to Doctor Glas while undressed which refers to the nurturing of the eros represented by the erotic desires, but the dream ends when some woman yells from the other room, "The world is burning, the world is burning!"(Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 43). The desire, although strong, it does not result

in a union or life, it collapses instantly into chaos, there is no peace in it nor a relief from it. This dream foresees what actually occurred in the novel which is the real murder of the pastor and the unrealized desire of acquiring Mrs. Gregorius love.

As Doctor.Glas speaks about his difficult childhood, he remembers that he needs to change or throw away his medical compartment in which his secret pills potassium cyanide was hidden, as he explains that he wasn't suicidal, he just wanted to be prepared for anything, as he states:

I made them myself a few years ago; they contain potassium cyanide. I wasn't feeling suicidal at the time, but I felt that a wise man is always prepared. A little potassium cyanide in a Glass of wine or the like causes immediate death. (Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 47)

According to Freud that there are two dispositions, one that is functional and the other dysfunctional, "In fact, a member of the organism may have cross-functions, which would account to a considerable degree for the fact that the human organism seems at times to be against itself" (Ayar and Demir. 2022, p. 155)

In this sense, preparing pills that have potassium cyanide, in order to kill the switch at any second, is something destructive towards oneself, and it tilts to the death instinct. The desire strengthen over the days, Doctor Glas lost all rationality and begins to think about how he could murder the pastor by using the same pills he had originally prepared for himself. He now considers using them on the pastor to end his life: " my potassium cyanide pills, which I originally prepared without a thought of anyone other than myself, will naturally come to use now"( Soderberg & Rachman, 2015, p. 17).

Dr. Glas had an idea of killing the pastor in his clink, knowing that it would damage his reputation; however, by this point the Thanatos aspect of his personality rationalizes everything and makes the act appear completely logical: " That he dies here, in my office" (p.71). Later, he sits on a bench near a tree, where pastor Gregorius joins him for a glass of wine. At that moment, Doctor Glas opens his watch case and pretends to take a pill, which sparks the pastor's curiosity. The doctor then offers one to the pastor, who dies immediately after taking it.

The killing of Pastor Gregorius In *Doctor Glas* can be seen as a dramatic realization of the dual drive concept of Freud, in which Eros and Thanatos become intricately intertwined within a single moral fantasy of the subject. The rational reason Glas gives himself for killing pastor Gregorius in order to "save" Helga from marital rape cannot be separated from his own

erotic investment in her. As a result, the killing of the pastor becomes an action in which Eros and morality are fused into one, allowing Glas to perceive the act as both ethically justified and emotionally necessary.

Freud's concept of the death drive, whether directed outward toward others or inward toward the self, helps clarify the ways in which Glas's violence can be understood as a displacement of his repressed aggression onto a target who stands in the way of realizing his Eros-driven desires. This duality ultimately leads to the collapse of Eros in Thanatos, where the life instinct, expressed through Glas's desire for Helga, pushes him to commit murder, an act that subsequently produces anxiety, stress, and recurring nightmares.

### Conclusion

This research showcases that Doctor Glas achieves its strongest interpretative value through Sigmund Freud's drive theory presented in *Beyond the pleasure principle*, especially the interaction between Eros (life instinct) and Thanatos (death instinct). While the novel initially presents themes of desire, morality, and ethical responsibility, a Freudian reading reveals that these elements gradually lose their unifying and life-affirming function. Desire no longer produces pleasure or connection but instead becomes repetitive and unstable, allowing Thanatos to dominate libidinal energy.

Glas's psychological fragmentation, moral confusion, and self-perception as a shadow illustrate the breakdown of Eros and the growing influence of the death drive. *Doctor Glas* structure, marked repetition and obsessive thought, reinforces Freud's idea that the psych is driven by repetition rather than meaningful progression. Ultimately, Doctor Glas portrays the collapse of Eros into Thanatos, where desire, morality, and pleasure become instruments of destruction, confirming Freud's view that the death drive eventually governs the fate of the human organism

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