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NEGOTIATING SELFHOOD IN NOLAN'S *ACTS OF DESPERATION*: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY

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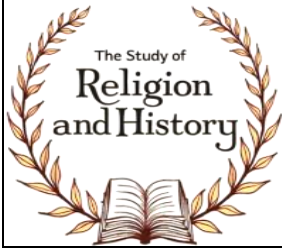
Abstract

The current research study presents a psychoanalytic reading of regression and identity crisis in Nolan's Acts of Desperation. Based on the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud and feminist ideas about identity and subjectivity, the study examines how the unnamed narrator falls into the cycle of self-destructive and obsession with love. The research closely explores the selected passages through thematic analysis and the use of qualitative textual analysis to show how the protagonist is psychologically regressive due to childlike dependency, denial of emotional abuse and retreat into fantasy as a reaction to feelings of inadequacy. Concurrently, the analysis makes the issues of her identity crisis a status that can be characterized by a discontinuous sense of selfhood, performative femininity, reliance on male validation, and self-denial at the expense of a hypothetical sense of completeness. These results show that romantic relationships and the unhealthy relationship that the narrator has with Ciaran serve as the trigger to deepen these psychological processes. This process of demolition supports the cycle of trauma via emotional seduction, idealization, and normalization of abuse. Underpinned by the trauma theory and backed by secondary sources regarding emotional abuse and female subjectivity, the paper states that regression is the coping process with anxiety, insecurity, threat of abandonment and identity crisis is a gendered conflict based on the demands of patriarchal expectations and emotional resilience. This study concludes that the Nolan narrative is eloquently revealing the destructive power of obsessive love as a form of self-destruction and how relational trauma plays a role in shattering the sense of self. In this way, it presents a useful contribution to further literature and psychoanalytic studies of trauma, femininity, and critical modes of intimacy.

Key Words: Regression, Identity Crisis, Psychoanalysis, Trauma, Selfhood

1. Introduction

Contemporary fiction has shifted even more toward a less idealized depiction of love into depiction of obsession and emotional dependency and psychological harm. In modern literature, particularly, that which focuses on female experience, romantic relationships are typically portrayed not as arenas of satisfaction and stability, but as arenas of vulnerability, instability, and emotional ambivalence. Nolan's *Acts of Despair* (2021) is written in this contemporary literary environment, which anticipates the topics of mental health, emotional instability, and the negative aspects of intimate relationships. The novel represents an increasing literary fascination with unmasking the bitter and usually devastating truths that may lie latent behind the facade of affection. The present research is particularly concentrated on the psychological aspects of regression and identity crisis in Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021). It seeks to examine the deeper psychoanalytic tendencies inherent in fear of abandonment, insecurity and split personality reflected in the obsessive clinging, emotional dependency and self-destruction of the unnamed narrator. This research study also aims at exploring the effects of feminist issues in the form of performative femininity, reliance on male



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approval and frugality on the identity crisis of the narrator in a patriarchal social structure. Exploring these interrelated problems, the research aims to demonstrate how the selected novel suggests love as not a source of emotional satisfaction, but rather one of trauma, vulnerability, and mental breakdown.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The most significant psychological consequences of relationships characterized by unequal power dynamics between men and women are regression and identity fragmentation. Selfhood is undermined through emotional dependence, recurrent rejection, and external validation requirement, disrupting agency, and resulting in self-erasure so that desire is a factor in psychological disintegration, instead of development.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To study emotional and psychological regression based on the main triggering experiences.
2. To examine identity crisis in terms of selfhood, autonomy and dependency.
3. To investigate how intimate relationships strengthen psychological instability and regressive behavior.

1.3 Significance of the study

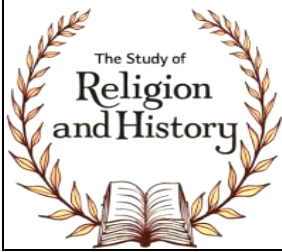
The present research study is significant in nature as it explores the concept of regression and identity crisis as some of the psychological effects of abusive relationships that people experience today. It anticipates how gendered systems of power and romantic ideals have been able to legitimize self-erasure, emotional dependence, and validation seeking, particularly towards women. It also serves a purpose in literary criticism, psychology and gender studies by offering an understanding of the depth of psychological damage inherent in intimate relationships by addressing the relationship between emotional abuse, fractured selfhood and repetitive trauma.

1.4 Delimitations of the Study

It is confined to Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021) and specifically on the subject of psychological regression and identity crisis as manifested in the character of the unnamed narrator. It is delimited to the close textual and thematic analysis and does not expand to a comparative reading of other works by Nolan or other contemporary novels. It addresses emotional abuse and gendered power relations in a literary and psychoanalytic context as opposed to clinical or sociological analysis. It is also delimited in the point of view of a narrator and does not explore the inner world of other characters.

2. Literature Review

More recent criticism interprets *Acts of Desperation* as a novel of painful attachment, female vulnerability, and relational self-loss instead of a traditional love story (Bellamacina, 2024; Nolan, 2021). The narrator is an unnamed person whose emotional life is structured around desire, humiliation, and need to stay desired. This trend fits the modern discourse of damaging intimacy wherein emotional abuse functions through unseen control, disengagement, randomness and dependability instead of apparent violence alone (Khan & Akram, 2025; McLindon et al., 2025). These types of criticism are productive since they move the focus on romance as the fulfillment to romance as a fluctuating location of psychic harm when the silence and distance of one of the partners controls the emotional atmosphere of the relationship (Palmer et al., 2024). In this context, regression provides an effective psychoanalytic



THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.1 2026

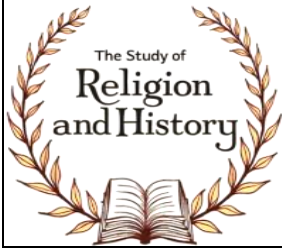
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perspective. Regression is traditionally viewed as a regression to the older and less developed forms of emotional functioning in response to stress, trauma, or anxiety, usually characterized by passivity, dependent and poor judgment (Barratt, 2020). Such regression can manifest itself in the form of over-reassurance-seeking, emotional helplessness, self-blame, and failure to lose engagement with an abusive relationship (Reid, 2024). These trends can shed a lot of light on the attachment of the narrator to Ciaran: she waits, she fears being abandoned, she sees silence as a punishment, and as she becomes more and more deprived of adult independence, in exchange she obtains partial emotional attention. Instead of introducing collapse as an abrupt state, the story is characterized with regression as progressively slow and repetitive and closely tied to emotional deprivation. The problem of identity disturbance is also equally an issue in the novel. The studies on the formation of identity accentuate that the sense of self is concise and takes center stage in ensuring emotional stability, whereas identity diffusion or low self-concept clarity exposes the individual to confusion, dependency, and fragmentation of the self (Branje et al., 2021; Maehler et al., 2025). Feminist and postmodern theories also contend that identity is not determined by nature but rather socially constructed, whereby the nature is usually influenced by power, gendered expectations, and gaze of other people (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1996). This point of view is particularly pertinent to the narrator, whose identity largely relies on the perception, selection and confirmation by Ciaran. Her wishes do not reinforce individuality but, on the contrary, blur the borders, drown out individual needs and augment the erasure of the self. In this regard, the relationship reveals a fractured self, already organized by feeling insecure and in need of external validation.

The present research study is also reinforced by studies of intimate partner violence and emotional abuse. Low buoyancy, distorted self-perception, anxiety, depression, and entrapment have been associated with emotional abuse especially since most of the victims are not able to recognize non-physical abuse when they are in them (Karakurt and Silver, 2013; Khan and Akram, 2025). Emerging research on psychological abuse also highlights the importance of coercive emotional, restrictive isolation, financial or behavioral control as major pillars of relational abuse (McLindon et al., 2025). Meta analytic findings also indicate that emotional intimate partner violence has a strong relationship with other types of controlling and violent forms, which, in turn, proves that emotional abuse is not minor or incidental but structurally related to larger mechanisms of domination (Palmer et al., 2024). In combination with trauma-bonding literature, such results answer why the narrator is still connected to a relationship that continues to strip her of her dignity and make her more and more dependent (Reid, 2024). There is still a definite gap in the reading of the selected text despite increasing focus on the discourse of toxic desire and female victimization. The available answers mostly cover the topics of obsession, vulnerability, and abusive attachment, but they do not adequately relate these issues to the concept of regression as a defense mechanism and the state of identity crisis as a fractured selfhood (Bellamacina, 2024). A more narrowed psychoanalytic interpretation is thus at hand to demonstrate how emotional abuse triggers the earlier vulnerability, creates childish dependency, and intensifies identity fragmentation. A strategy of this sort can be used to describe both the wavering between consciousness and self-disintegration of the narrator and to explain how gendered ideals of love, perseverance and sacrifice render emotional self-denial in modern fiction normal (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1996; Reid, 2024).

3. Research Methodology



THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

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ISSN E : 3006-3337

In this research study, the qualitative research methodology is used to study the chosen text in detail. This method is seen as suitable as it permits to interpret psychological patterns, thematic issues, and narratives in terms of regression and identity crisis in detail. The approach is founded on a close reading of the texts, the purposive selection of the passages in point, and thematic analysis based on psychoanalytic and feminist approaches. In such a way, the research paper will attempt to understand in a systematic and critical way how emotional abuse, dependency, and fragmented selfhood are portrayed in the selected text.

3.1 Research Design

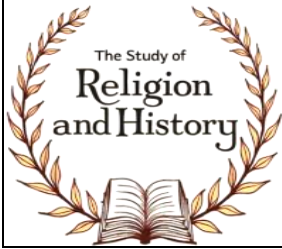
This study takes a qualitative design since it is not concerned with the number but on meanings, experiences, and psychological patterns that the text depicts. The qualitative research approach is appropriate in the literature study since it allows the deep interpretation of the characters, themes, language, and narrative forms in their textual and conceptual context (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The analysis is based on the interpretive reading, as the emphasis is made on the regression and identity crisis, which are explored using the thoughts, emotions, and relationships of the narrator. This methodological orientation is thus textual, interpretive and theory based (Sileyew, 2019). The research employs purposive sampling to identify the passages in *Acts of Despair* that are relevant to the research problem and directly describe emotional dependency, identity fragmentation, and regressive behavior. The purposive sampling method is suitable due to the possibility of selecting textual evidence that is the most related to the research aims and theoretical issues (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The combining analysis is the textual analysis and thematic analysis. Textual analysis is used to analyze the language, symbols, and details of the story to reveal meaning, whereas thematic analysis is applied to reveal common patterns in the chosen passages (McKee, 2003; Braun and Clarke, 2021). This technique proves to be effective in the psychoanalytic reading as it ties very close textual evidence to analysis of overarching themes.

4. Data Analysis

The main data for this research study comes only from a close textual analysis of Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021) and therefore make up the main source of data for the whole research process (Cooley et al, 1971). In this regard, the key task of the researcher will be to carry out a detailed and systematic study of the novel, aimed at discovering and analyzing manifestations of psychological regression and identity crisis, experienced by the protagonist.

4.1 Protagonist's emotional and psychological State

The protagonist's psychological instability is first and foremost a "split" in her identity, being torn between a lively public persona and a private reality of self-torture and incoherence. She regresses by using romantic love as a "shield" or "higher purpose" or to have a justification for her existence because her suffering is not viewed as a sign of illness but as a meaningful prerequisite for the "grace" of being loved. This interpersonal dependency provokes a descent of child-like helplessness in which she abdicates her agency to "worship" her partner, Ciaran, and thereby essentially loses her own sense of self in order to find stability in his presence. Key events that trigger this regression are her first encounter with Ciaran, which immediately causes self-destructive behavior such as excessive drinking that she recognizes as a "marker of a beginning." Living in isolation in her apartment also speeds up her decline as the absence of an external witness makes her personality seem like "*props for a bad theatre production.*"



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Vol.4 No.1 2026

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ISSN E : 3006-3337

In Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021), psychological instability in the protagonist is essentially due to a "split" in the protagonist's identity, in which she alternates between a high profile vitality, and a private reality of self-torture which is constantly used as a "shield" to justify her "rotten moments" and her lack of self-coherence.

"I stood in that gallery and felt not only sexual attraction (which I was aware of, dimly, as background noise) but what I can only describe as grave and troubling pity. By this I don't mean that I felt myself to be above him." (Nolan, 2021, p. 5)

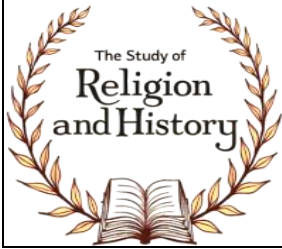
Analysis

These lines encapsulate the protagonist's first encounter with Ciaran, the beginning of her emotional and psychological deterioration by making a passing attraction with him into an overwhelming pity that foreshadows her descent into obsessive dependency. In "The Awakening", she writes of the sensation of not superiority but an acute tenderness for his humanity, which becomes extreme and breathless, the beginning of idealizing him as superior and as someone to worship and adore, drawing her back into her old ways of finding validations through men. This is the moment at which she regresses, as it changes her from experiencing suffering as meaningful to experiencing pointless pain for the sake of love, reinforcing behaviors of self-erasure and desperation that we saw in her earlier adulthood's "*sordid checkpoints*." From a psychoanalytic perspective and using Freud's theories of idealization and projection, the protagonist's pity is a projection of her fractured self onto Ciaran, where she elevates him to an ego-ideal, a way of escaping her divided self, similar to R.D. Laing's concept in *The Divided Self* of harboring an inner terror like an "Atom Bomb." This is consistent with Erik Erikson's stage of identity vs. role confusion where her unworked out identity crisis causes her to regress towards fusion with another, deifying his body as a "*site of prayer*" in order to deny her own existential dread, ultimately deepening her dependency and childlike vulnerability.

"At that time I lived in a bedsit in Ranelagh on street level, where I left the window open at night so I could climb back in if I had lost my keys, which I often had. The first night I moved in, I sat in my bed after unpacking and looked around at the ephemera and trinkets." (Nolan, 2021, p. 9)

Analysis

This passage very powerfully demonstrates the protagonist's deep sense of fragmentation and instability when being pushed into solitude. Living alone in her Ranelagh bedsit, a description of practical habits such as leaving the window open for easy re-entry after losing keys (a common occurrence) gives a subtle hint of her chaotic, impulsive lifestyle and avoidance of full commitment to independence. Once settled in, she looks around her conglomerate of "*ephemera and trinkets*" drawings, notes from past lovers and friends, postcards and photographs, porcelain figures, antique ashtrays that she needed to quickly create a sense of identity in a new place. Now, in isolation, these things are hollow and performative, like "*props for a bad theatre production, trying to summon up a personality where there was none.*" This realization is a turning point: her external markers of self are meaningless without other people to receive or value them. The essence of the confession "*Living alone, I began to split apart from myself in a deeper and more grotesque way than ever before*" reveals her growing dissociation or inner division that perceives her public and outgoing demeanor yet she is tormented by a private torment she cannot escape, this anticipates the novel's exploration of



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Vol.4 No.1 2026

ISSN P : 3006-3329

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dependency on relationship to feel coherent or "realized." This provides the background for her desperate attempt to obtain love as a force for merging, with relational merger replacing true integration, and emphasizes the continuing conditionality of her identity on being looked upon and desired by others.

"I texted him in the morning and we agreed to meet at 2 p.m. outside the Natural History Museum. I showered in near-boiling water and spat blood into the sink when I brushed my teeth." (Nolan, 2021, p. 16)

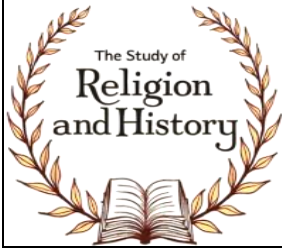
Analysis

This is the passage in which the protagonist is in a liminal state, almost ritualism, of preparation for her first date with Ciaran; the physical discomfort and emotional anticipation are bound up in a way that reveals to the reader her reliance on altered states as a way to deal with the existential dread that she experiences. After texting him to confirm their meeting at the Natural History Museum at 2 p.m. outside, she takes a scalding shower and spits blood while brushing her teeth--graphic manifestations of the toll that the heavy drinking of the previous night is taking on her body. Yet she describes herself as being in the "sweet spot" of a hangover: Not violently sick, but still protected by "fuzz and numbness" that dulls awareness of deeper troubles. She explicitly prefers this state to being completely sober, stating that "going through life hangover is an ordeal, but being without one is no picnic either." The hangover serves as a paradoxical ally, its aches, thirsts and haze keep her busy with somatic needs in the here-and-now so that she can't really confront the "anything else that might trouble you" namely, the chronic fear, fragmentation, and emptiness that haunt her sober mornings. In this way, the passage indicates how, for her, alcohol and its aftereffects serve not only as a route to escape, but as a temporary anesthetic and organizing principle, through which she will be able to move through the day and towards the encounter which she so desires without being consumed by her unmediated self.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, this moment represents a classic use of substances and bodily self-harm as defensive man oeuvres in dealing with overwhelming anxiety and fragmentation of the self (Laing's 'divided self'). The scalding shower and bleeding gums can be interpreted as mild masochistic enactments and self-inflicted pain that allows for a concrete, controllable sensation as an antidote to the diffuse, annihilating terror of waking "terribly frightened" and feeling unreal. The hangover itself is a kind of transitional state between the deathly numbness of inebriation and the unbearably clear reality of sobriety, recalling Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion fused with the death drive: She submits herself to the physical depletion over and over again, because the resulting haze is a temporary reprieve from psychic pain, which latches anxiety into manageable somatic symptoms. In Kleinian terms this is a withdrawal to the paranoid-schizoid position which splits (good/bad feelings, drunk/sober self) and projects (onto the body as the place of sufferings) to defend against depressive integration and the terror of total emptiness. The "sweet spot" of the hangover therefore becomes a perverse environment of holding self-generated and unreliable but better than the raw exposure of an un-numbed psyche.

4.2 Sense of self, relationships and autonomy

In Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021), the psychological instability of the protagonist is fuelled by a deep fragmentation of the self, where she alternates between a very much alive, public persona and a private reality of self-inflicted 'torture' and 'submission'. She develops



THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.1 2026

ISSN P : 3006-3329

ISSN E : 3006-3337

emotionally backward by considering romantic love a "shield" or "higher purpose" to validate the "rotten moments" of her existence, essentially abdicating her adult agency in her life to find a child-like or quasi-religious "grace" through others. Her descent is triggered by key events such as her first meeting with Ciaran (which she recognizes as a "marker of a beginning" for self-destructive cycles), and the isolation of living alone, causing her identity to feel like empty "props for a bad theatre production". This dependency is even strengthened by her decision to "worship" her partner: using his body as a "site of prayer" in order to flee her own reality, ultimately finding herself in a state of "total distress and bewilderment" suggestive of a loss of basic psychological stability.

"I needed these things, fixed them as soon as I arrived somewhere new, but now I was alone they seemed foolish. They looked like props for a bad theatre production, trying to summon up a personality where there was none." (Nolan, 2021, p. 9)

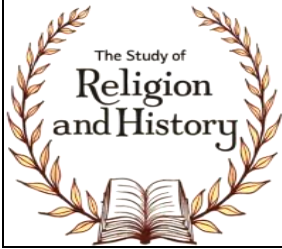
Analysis

The public performance works because other people see the happy, flirtatious, party-going version, and accept her claims of contentment. This split enables her to lead a social and sexual life, but at the expense of increasing alienation within: the more convincing the outward mask becomes, the more unreal and grotesque the hidden one becomes. The passage makes solitude into the unbearable glass which highlights the absence of a coherent, intrinsic personality, and points her towards ever-increasing dependence on others to make her feel momentarily whole or "realised" (as she will later express). From the psychoanalytic point of view, this moment is an admirable and explicit illustration of R.D. Laing's concept of the divided self (explicitly invoked in the novel's epigraph): the protagonist lives with a "false-self system" that seems adaptive and socially successful but is experienced internally as mechanical, empty and grotesque. The trinkets are like failed transitional objects (Winnicott), intended to bridge emptiness and reality but are in isolation and explicate the lack of a real, spontaneous self. Her public life is a classic schizoid compromise in that she holds a compliant, charming persona to avoid annihilation anxiety, and the private self is split off into something monstrous and unrecognizable. The "grotesque" splitting implies a regression to primitive defense mechanisms, such as dissociation and depersonalization, as a defense against the terror of non-being in the absence of an external object to reflect back a coherent image of her. This sets up the central psychic economy of the novel: because solitude reveals the terrifying empty space where a stable self should be, she will desperately strive to achieve romantic merger (first with Ciaran, then in obsessive worship) as the only available way to unify the divided self (if only temporarily), even if such unification arrives through self-erasure, masochism, and the idealization of the other. The passage is thus at once a diagnostic and a prophetic one: for her outward vitality is the very mechanism which deepens her inner collapse and drives the escalating acts of desperation of which is the consequence.

"Being in love was like that to me, a shield, a higher purpose, a promise to something outside of yourself. That night I first met Ciaran I got as drunk as I'd ever been." (Nolan, 2021, p. 10)

Analysis

This excerpt defines how Nolan anticipates the existential dependence of the protagonist on a romantic love as an ordering and holding power that manages the lack of religious piety and parental care in her adult life. She recollects a story where one of her friends thinks of his father or God watching him at work in order to impose productivity on him, a



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Vol.4 No.1 2026

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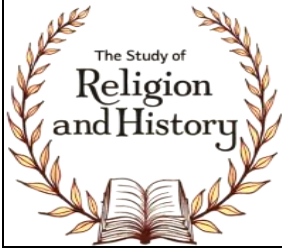
distant, critical yet inspiring stare. This role of love plays a similar role in her case: it is a shield, a higher purpose, a promise to something beyond yourself that limits inner turmoil, gives a meaning to otherwise banal or agonizing situations and forces practical action. Love, then, is not just a fulfillment of affection but a sort of a divine system of surveillance that makes life become bearable and meaningful. The next turn to the nightly meeting with Ciaran where she was drunk as I had never been in my life brings two types of intoxication. No coincidence defines the juxtaposition: the idealized fantasy of love as a restful presence is immediately followed by the fact of her self-medication with alcohol, and this is a way of highlighting the fact that both systems (love and drink) play a similar protective role, that of forestalling the raw and uncivilized horror of facing herself alone. According to the psychoanalytic approach, the text serves as a profound backsliding to the pre-Oedipal dependency and the tendency to use external objects human, or chemical, to manage the unacceptable affects and maintain psychic balance.

According to Kleinian terminology, love is a manic defence against depressive anxiety: by making the Other into a superior purpose and a defense, she avoids realizing her own destructiveness, emptiness, and fragmentation. This transition to drunkenness reveals the weakness of this defence. Without a direct object of relation, she will then revert to a lower-order, self-soothing mechanism that is more bodily. The isolated drinking to kill time in a less pathetic way is the same as Freudian addiction, a form of liquidating the reality principle and projecting anxiety into somatic symptoms (the hangover haze, which is also referred to in other words). The passage thus discloses an addictive form in which both love and alcohol serve as frantic efforts to re-create an external containing space that can monitor, arrange, and redeem her being, thus avoiding the annihilating anxiety that appears in sober loneliness.

"It felt good in a way, because he was so excited and I was pleased to make him so, but I was filled with sadness. I hadn't wanted to sleep with him. I had wanted never to sleep with him, had wanted us to keep talking, to wake up to his messages, to be amused by one another."
(Nolan, 2021, p. 22)

Analysis

This passage crystallizes the protagonist's quasi-religious substitution of romantic love for lost faith and makes it the ultimate redemptive and purifying substance in her otherwise chaotic and empty life. She imagines love not as a gentle comfort, but a cataclysmic event, all-consuming: it would "set ablaze the fields of my life in one go, leaving nothing behind" suggesting a total annihilation of her current self - her shame, her fragmentation, her "rotten moments" - followed by rebirth, into worthiness, by the presence of love alone. Love becomes "the great leveller" and "great consolation" a cleansing agent which makes her worthy by its very arrival, obliterating distinctions of merit or moral failing. Having given up religion in early childhood, she developed an extreme, even devotional "great faith in love" in its place, one complete with the self-consciousness and defensiveness of someone who aware how clichéd or vulnerable such a confession sounds ("Oh, don't laugh at me for this, for being a woman who says this to you.") I hear myself speak"). This plea shows us both how deeply she believes, and that she awaits judgment, underscoring how love had become her only remaining source of meaning and transcendence and self-justification in a world that offers her no other spiritual or existential anchor. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this section exposes a classic displacement of the religious instinct onto the erotic object where love is a substitute for the



THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.1 2026

ISSN P : 3006-3329

ISSN E : 3006-3337

lost omnipotent parent/God of childhood (recalling Freud's statement in *The Future of an Illusion* that religion is a collective neurosis based on wish-fulfillment and dependency). The imagery of love as a purifying fire that burns everything away goes together with the death drive fused with libidinal longing: the protagonist unconsciously seeks dissolution of the ego (the "fields" of her life razed) in order to escape the unbearable weight of her fragmented, unworthy self, a masochistic fantasy of merger which promises rebirth through total surrender.

This is a regressive solution to narcissistic injury, by making love the "great leveller," on which she projects the powers to obliterate her defects as she perceives them, and to confer unconditional acceptance, circumventing the depressive work of mourning and integration. The defending aside ("don't laugh at me . . . I hear myself speak") is a way of indicating a split, wherein a part of her holds onto this idealizing transference, while another part is observing it with shame and irony, foreshadowing the contempt of the superego (internalised as the "enlightened reader" or judgmental other). In Lacanian terms, love here takes the place of the objet petit a, the elusive object-cause of the subject's desire that promises to fill the subject's fundamental lack, but one whose improbability only increases the desperation, making faith in love an ever-repeating cycle of idealization, disappointment and renewed desire. This lays the psychic foundation for her later worship of Ciaran as the embodied vehicle of that salvific force.^{3.7s}FastI texted him in the morning and we agreed to meet at 2 p.m.

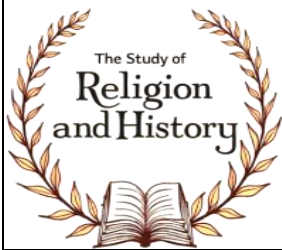
4.3 A psychological instability and the patterns of regression

In Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021), the protagonist's romantic and interpersonal relationships help to give psychological instability its impetus by playing upon a "split" in her identity in which she swings between an energetic public persona and a private life of self-inflicted "torture" and "stillness". She undergoes emotional regression through love as a "shield" or "higher purpose" that legitimizes her "rotten moments" seeking childlike "grace" to absolve her of the burden of practicing being a coherent person. This descent is caused by her initial meeting with Ciaran (which she identifies as a "marker of a beginning" for her self-destruction) and is worsened by the isolation of her apartment, which makes her feel as though her personality is merely a collection of "props for a bad theatre production". Ultimately, her relations reinforce these patterns as she encourages herself to "worship" her partner as a "site of prayer", a psychological surrender which leads to a state of "total distress and bewilderment" in which she abdicates her autonomy in order to escape her own "living flesh".

"The first time I saw him, I pitied him terribly. I looked around to see where the drinks were, I was thirsty, and that's when it began. Is it possible to love someone without knowing them, by sight? How can I describe what happened to me without the word love?" (Nolan, 2021, p. 3)

Analysis

This passage shows how the protagonist's love life with Ciaran causes her psychological instability to immediately intensify and perpetuates a backwards pattern of self-abnegation. Her first "pity" for him is not real sympathy but a reflection of her own need - a neurotic and almost narcissistic identification with him, which she immediately names "love." This instant worshipful idealization avoids any sort of real interpersonal contact, creating a dynamic in which Ciaran is not a person but a sacred object. Her statement that his body became "a site of prayer" and a place where she could "forget about my own living flesh" tells us the basic mechanism of her regression, the basic way in which the relationship is for her a means of psychic escape. Instead of encouraging growth or autonomy, it enables her to downshift to a



THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.1 2026

ISSN P : [3006-3329](#)

ISSN E : [3006-3337](#)

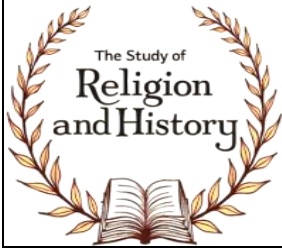
state of fusing devotion, in which her shaky sense of self is melted down in obsessive worship. This pattern of seeking transcendence through annihilation in another person, of treating her partner as an idol rather than as an equal, is one of the reasons for the breakdown in her psychological state, as it steadily erodes her already tenuous autonomy and perpetuates a cycle of dependency. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this is a vivid illustration of pathological idealization and a regression to a state of primary narcissism. The protagonist's immediate, sight-based "love" and "pity" for Ciaran represent a projection of her own inner void onto him; he is cathected as an idealized self-object, a part of her own psyche of which she experiences herself as being missing or deficient.

"Living alone, I began to split apart from myself in a deeper and more grotesque way than ever before. There was my public life, where I worked and went out dancing and drinking and was amusing and energetic in company; where I made eyes at men in bars and sometimes went home with them." (Nolan, 2021, p. 9)

Analysis

This passage directly shows how the main character's already tenuous sense of self is further broken through the lack of constant external validation, and shows a core instability in the character's sense of self that romantic relationships will later exploit. Her experience of "splitting apart" describes a pathological division between a performative, socially acceptable identity, and an unarticulated, private self. The "public life" she describes is not authentic expression but a performance of autonomy and happiness; the kind that is made through drinking, dancing and sexual availability and hides a deep dependency on being seen and desired by others. This split is not simply a case of compartmentalization, but a "grotesque" disintegration in which the only time her identity exists is in response to an audience. Romantic relationships make this fragmentation more extreme, in that they provide a more intense, concentrated source of validation. Her pattern of "making eyes at men" and going home with them is a regressive behavior, and temporarily sutures up the split by offering a role (the desired woman) to play, but ultimately reinforces her dependency and keeps her from ever developing an integrated and autonomous self. Each time she encounters an audience, she reinforces an established pattern that she will only be confirmed as valuable and real in the eyes of another human, furthering her psychological instability.

The "public life" is the False Self in action, the compliant, entertaining persona that is built up to deal with the demands of the environment, to achieve object connection. This self is "amusing and energetic" in that it is designed with the function of attracting and holding attention of objects (other people), whose responsiveness temporarily wards off the experience of inner annihilation. The "splitting apart" represents a failure of ego integration, a defense mechanism in which the psyche differentiates opposing self-states (the needed self-versus the shown self) in order to avoid the anxiety of their conflict. This is characteristic of borderline personality organization, in which splitting is employed to cling to the good object (the admiring public) by disavowing the bad, needy, or empty self. Her behavior with men in bars is a compulsive repetition of original attachment failure in which she seeks to master the seductive and controlling male gaze. However, this only reinforces the split; each conquest gives a temporary sense of wholeness from outside recognition, further causing an impoverishment of development of an internalized, true self. The regression is, therefore, systemic; her patterns of relations are not errors but enactments of deep structure that makes



THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.1 2026

ISSN P : 3006-3329

ISSN E : 3006-3337

existence indistinguishable from being perceived, and traps her in a cycle of dependency and self-alienation.

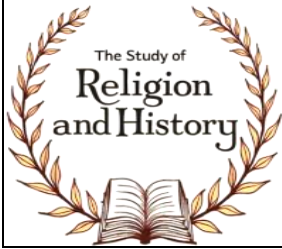
The protagonist's love, which is independent of the actual qualities of the object, is a classic example of transference love in its most extreme form: Ciaran is a blank screen onto which the unconscious, archaic images of objects can be projected. That "there wasn't a thing he or anybody else could do to change it" is her revelation of the psychic determinism of her drive; this love is a symptom, a preordained script, from her unconscious, that she is driven to enact, regardless of external reality. This is in accordance with the death drive (Thanatos), in that she acquiesces to a fatal and destructive pattern that promises the eerie calm of psychic inertia; the end of questioning, choosing, or desiring. Furthermore, her rejection of his actual qualities (humor, thoughts, shared culture) suggests a refusal of the Symbolic Order (the realm of shared meaning, difference and exchange). Instead she withdraws into the Imaginary register where Ciaran becomes a specular-image completing her own fragmented sense of self in a delusional dyadic unity. This position is deeply regressive and represents a repudiation of the Oedipal resolution, and an insistence on a pre-symbolic, fusional love that assures her own psychic annihilation as its central condition.

The unnamed protagonist of Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021) is forced into relentless degradation of patterns of dependent behavior that are childlike as she attempts to counter emptiness, inadequacy, or anything that threatens her autonomy. Her identity is radically divided, she is reconstructed out of these ephemera and trinkets of former relations, with no inner kernel, the performative aspect of a performative public, and the aspect of terror of disintegration of a subject division. Romantic relationships become the key propellant and accelerator: she falls in love with people like Ciaran as objects of worship, becoming a part of a fusional and regressive fantasy in which she has to suppress her own reality all the time. At the end, her obsessive love turns out to be self-destructing in repetition of the fundamental trauma by replacing the genuine selfhood with the deceitful completeness provided by turning into the object of another.

5. Findings, discussion and conclusion

In Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021), the protagonist's emotional and psychological regression is not a linear, progressive, plunging downward, but a cyclical, returning to dependent and self-destructive patterns. Her regression is in essence a getting worse from the fears of adult independence back into the familiar and comforting state of needing outside validation and escape of a child. Key events serve the purpose of a catalyst for this falling down of a slope.

Subsequent triggers are often times of intimacy or perceived abandonment which reveal her fragile selfhood. Her pattern of using alcohol to mediate experience is a consistent regressive behavior; the binge following her first meeting with Ciaran, in which she drinks until she physically marks herself, is a direct recurrence of a pre-existing coping mechanism used to numb existential fear and fill up emotional voids. Furthermore, interactions that emphasize her insufficiency, such as her date with the wealthy American editor, where the magnificence of the editor's home instantly takes away her felt power and makes her a shy and self-conscious living being, produces a regression of her mind into a transactional view of relationships where she can only feel that her worth is her youth.



THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND HISTORY

Vol.4 No.1 2026

ISSN P : 3006-3329

ISSN E : 3006-3337

In due course, these struggles are part of a larger theme in which dependency is the driving force of self-destruction. Her reliance on others to determine her identity and on alcohol to regulate her emotions are a vicious cycle. Each failed relationship or hangover morning compounds the self-loathing and emptiness, and the overriding desperation for the things that are her worst enemies. The novel asserts that when the self is felt as a vacuum, the efforts to fill it, be it an individual or a drug, and become a progressively destructive act. Her lack of self, fear of autonomy and dependent relationships are not discrete problems but parts of the same underlying pathology: a flight from the self so intense that it is a war on the self in which the desire for love and the practice of self-destruction become indistinguishable.

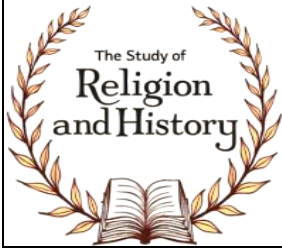
In Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021), romantic and interpersonal relationships serve as catalyst and crucible for the protagonist's psychological instability, and are used to systematically compel her patterns of regression.

5.3 Recommendations

Further study can build on this interrogative by contrasting the depiction of female desperation by Nolan with that of modern Irish authors to explore how generational and economic factors influence depiction of love and dependency. Moreover, the replacement of romantic love with religion can be examined in the future through the means of the tracking of the loss of faith during childhood followed by the near-sacred faith in love and the psychological implications of its loss. The role of bodily pain, grievances and hangovers can also be considered as a form of punishment, ritual and attempted agency in the disintegrated self of the protagonist.

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Vol.4 No.1 2026

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