The European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 2026, No 1
ISSN 2414-2344

PREMIER Publishing
ppublishing.org

Section 3. Philology

DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-1-18-22

AKUTAGAWA RYŪNOSUKE: THE ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF THE AUTHOR'S PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS IN "SPINNING GEARS"

Gülnar Yunusova [1]

[1] Department of "Azerbaijan–Asia Literary Relations,"Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Nizami Ganjavi Institute of Literature, Baku, Azerbaijan

Cite: *Yunusova G. (2026). Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: The Artistic Representation of the Author's Psychological Crisis in "Spinning Gears". European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 2026, No 1.* https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-1-18-22

Abstract

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke is recognized as one of the most prominent figures of twentieth-century Japanese literature and is widely regarded as a master of the short story genre. Drawing inspiration from both classical Japanese literature and Western modernism, Akutagawa developed a distinctive literary style and played a significant role in the formation of modern Japanese literature.

Written only a few months before the author's death and published posthumously, the short story "Spinning Gears" occupies a special place in Akutagawa's literary legacy. The work is often interpreted as an artistic reflection of the writer's psychological condition, particularly his mental disorders and suicidal tendencies. In the final years of his life, Akutagawa experienced severe psychological distress and, due to suffering from hereditary psychosis, lived in constant fear of developing schizophrenia. This fear is clearly manifested in "Spinning Gears." The narrative foregrounds visual hallucinations, paranoia, memory loss, and persistent thoughts questioning the nature of the self and existence.

The aim of this article is to examine the literary representation of the psychological crisis experienced by the author in "Spinning Gears," and to analyze how elements such as hallucinations, suicidal ideation, and stream of consciousness are employed within the text.

Keywords: *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Spinning Gears, death, superego, psychological crisis*

Introduction

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa was born in Tokyo in 1892. Shortly after his birth, his mother developed a severe psychiatric disorder and later died in a psychiatric institution. This maternal illness profoundly shaped Akutagawa's psychological development, instilling a lifelong fear of inheriting the same fate. He reflected: "I was only afraid of ending up in an asylum like my mother" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 62). Over time, this fear assumed an obsessive character, manifesting in insom-

nia, depression, and chronic psychological tension.

Melanie Klein conceptualizes the formation of the paranoid–schizoid position in early childhood as the result of the dynamics of internal impulses, the libidinal and destructive fantasies they engender, and their interaction with primary object relations (Grimmer). This theoretical framework provides a productive lens for understanding Akutagawa's early psychological disturbances and persistent sense of internal fragmentation. Akutagawa's early literary output, notably the short story Kodoku Jigoku ("The Hell of Solitude", 1916), vividly mirrors his psychological state and inner torment: "Everything that surrounds a person can, in a blink of an eye, turn into the hell of anguish and torment. A few years ago, I fell into such a hell. Nothing can bind me for long. That is why I am constantly seeking change… If I ever lack the strength to do so, only one path will remain – to die" (Akutagawa, 1995, p. 72–73).

These words reveal a profound sense of loneliness, existential anxiety, and the early formation of thoughts of death. Akutagawa repeatedly struggled to overcome his psychological isolation, noting that the "cruel demon of the end of the century" dominated his spirit (Akutagawa, 2015, p. 347). The prolonged internal conflict, exacerbated by the fear of repeating his mother's fate, gradually eroded his psychological resilience. Ultimately, in July 1927, at the age of thirty-five, Akutagawa committed suicide by ingesting a lethal dose of medication. He articulated his contemplation of death as follows: "I wish to die from the sorrow that wounds my heart, from the bitterness that defiles my body. That is why I want to die. My life is not worth a single penny. Nor is my death. Yet, even if it is worth nothing, this death is better than life" (Akutagawa, 2015, p. 58). In this context, Cesare Pavese's assertion that "everyone has a good reason to commit suicide" (Demirdagh, 2020, p. 29) allows Akutagawa's suicide to be interpreted not as romanticized but as the culmination of a profound psychological and existential crisis.

Nikolai Berdyaev, in On the Slavery and Freedom of Man, observes: "Death is the experience of rupture in the destiny of the personality, the cessation of its connection with the world. Death is not the end of the inner existence of the personality, but the end of the existence of the world as another being encountered by the personality on its path" (Berdyaev, 2018, p. 64). Berdyaev's perspective symbolically complements Akutagawa's: death does not annihilate the self but signifies the cessation of the connections that link the individual to the world. Although Akutagawa often depicted suicide as a folly in his writings, confronted with extreme psychological vulnerability, he perceived death as the only viable recourse.

For Akutagawa, literature functioned not merely as an aesthetic endeavor but as a vehicle for moral and intellectual engagement. His prose is marked by precision, multilayered symbolic imagery, and profound philosophical reflection. Through these qualities, Akutagawa emerged not only as a master of the short story but also as a seminal representative of modern consciousness and intellectual inquiry in twentieth-century Japanese literature.

The Artistic Representation of Psychic Disintegration and the Death Instinct in "Spinning Gears"

Written shortly before Akutagawa's suicide in 1927, "Spinning Gears" (Haguruma) stands as one of the rare works in the author's oeuvre in which psychological crisis is transformed into an artistic form not merely at the thematic level, but as a direct structural manifestation of consciousness itself. Although the story contains autobiographical elements, its primary aim is not to recount lived experiences in a linear manner, but rather to render visible the very mechanism of psychic disintegration through literary form.

Prior to his suicide, Akutagawa suffered a severe nervous breakdown accompanied by persistent hallucinations. In "Spinning Gears", published posthumously, the author attempts to articulate the inner process that conditioned his final choice between "madness" and "death" (Kato, 1983, p. 241). When read through the theoretical lenses of Freud's death instinct (Thanatos), Melanie Klein's paranoid-schizoid position, and the existentialist notion of ontological anxiety, the story acquires a deeper analytical resonance.

Throughout the narrative, the image of the "spinning gears," endlessly rotating within

the protagonist's consciousness, functions as a sustained metaphorical symbol of mental and psychological tension. Spinning Gears departs from classical plot structures and is presented as an introspective, fragmented text. The protagonist – an "I" that closely overlaps with the author's own self – confronts a series of psychological disturbances, including hallucinations, fear of death, social isolation, and progressive estrangement from reality within the flow of everyday life.

In this story, Akutagawa attempts to construct an artistic model of inner psychosis. Rather than external events, the narrative foregrounds the protagonist's stream of consciousness. He constantly perceives the spinning gears, lives with their sound, and experiences their increasing intensity over time: "The spinning gears gradually increased; they filled my field of vision halfway, though not for long – they soon disappeared, followed invariably by a headache" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 34).

Thus, the "spinning gears" emerge as a symbol of incessantly rotating thoughts and psychic tension that deprive the protagonist of inner calm. Psychologically, this uncontrollable structure represents a mechanical, automatic, and destructive system of thought within the human mind. It functions as a metaphor for the internal mechanism that leads toward suicide: the individual no longer governs his thoughts; rather, the thoughts govern him. Akutagawa's assertion that "human life is a hell worse than hell itself" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 49) is concretized throughout the narrative by visual hallucinations, paranoia, and intense mental disturbances. These experiences delineate Akutagawa's schizoid condition and offer a psychological sketch of the impending suicide.

The story consists of six sections, structurally tracing the gradual disintegration of consciousness. At the outset, ordinary details of daily life – the haste to attend a wedding, casual conversations on a train – reflect a relatively stable phase of consciousness. This stability, however, is merely superficial. Rumors about nightmares emerge as the first irrational elements entering the realm of reality. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this stage corresponds to the unconscious still under control, yet beginning to assert its presence. Akutagawa presents fear not as a concrete event, but as anticipation and possibility, marking the initial transition from neurotic anxiety to psychotic experience.

The episode involving the coat hanging on the hotel room wall foregrounds the problem of divided identity: "It seemed to me that the coat hanging on the wall was myself; in haste, I threw it into the wardrobe. Then I approached the thermos and stared carefully into the mirror. My facial bones protruded. A maggot appeared vividly before my eyes" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 36).

The sensation that the coat contains the self indicates the collapse of the boundary between the "self" and the "non-self." Forcing it into the wardrobe constitutes an attempt to repress unacceptable psychic content. Freud's concept of repression is clearly operative here: the repressed image does not disappear but returns in a more dangerous and destructive form. The careful scrutiny of the face in the mirror and the depiction of the skull beneath the skin transform the body from a bearer of life into material evidence of death. The image of the maggot intensifies the idea of decay and confirms the centralization of the death instinct within consciousness.

In the second section, the protagonist's sense of guilt differs sharply from conventional moral culpability; it is instead an ontological guilt arising from existence itself. Akutagawa compares himself to the protagonist of Tolstoy's Polikouchka: "I began reading Tolstoy's Polikouchka. The protagonist had a complex character – vain, ambitious, and prone to seizures… The tragicomedy of his life became a caricature of my own" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 40).

At this stage, Freud's concept of the superego emerges in a pathological form. In The Ego and the Id, Freud identifies the three core components of the psyche – id, ego, and superego – as internal mechanisms governing human behavior (Freud, 1961, pp. 25–27). According to Freud, the ego's decisions are never fully autonomous but represent a compromise between the impulses of the id and the normative demands of the superego (Freud, 2019, p. 47). The conflicts among these psychic agencies shape behavior and choice, and the protagonist is portrayed as a captive of this internal mechanism.

In the third section, the motif of the "spinning gears" ceases to function mere-

ly as a metaphor and becomes a direct visual expression of the psychic condition. Semi-transparent gears rotating within the eyes symbolize the automation of consciousness and mental processes independent of will: "Once again, semi-transparent spinning gears appeared in my right eye... I swallowed 0.6 grams of veronal and tried to fall asleep... Like an old man who has suffered for years and quietly awaits his own death..." (Akutagawa, 2003, pp. 52–54). These gears neither stop nor can be controlled; they rotate aimlessly. In this sense, they become the artistic equivalent of psychosis and the mechanized consciousness of the modern individual. The temporary relief afforded by sleeping pills underscores the illusory and transient nature of chemical "salvation" in the face of profound psychic suffering.

In the fourth section, fear of death is no longer abstract but personified as a concrete subject. The death that claimed the protagonist's brother-in-law now follows him as well: "Death, like my sister's husband, was pursuing me" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 59). The mirror scene once again raises the problem of the "double self": "I approached the mirror I had not looked into for a long time and fixed my gaze directly upon myself. It was clear that he, too, was smiling, as if to remind me of my double" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 59). At this stage, the psychic condition can no longer be described merely as neurotic anxiety, but as a schizoid process progressing toward the fragmentation of personality.

In the fifth section, religious debate exposes the metaphysical dimension of Akutagawa's crisis. The argument with a priest concerning the existence of God reveals a profound contradiction between the need to believe and the inability to do so. Here, Akutagawa approaches an existentialist stance, emphasizing the radical loneliness of the human being in the face of the cosmos.

In the final section, the return to the family creates an illusion of stability, yet the psychological crisis intensifies further. Doubt, fear, and a sense of divided identity become permanent states. Akutagawa perceives life as "hell" and openly articulates a passive suicide fantasy: "I no longer have the strength to write. To live in such a mental state is unbearable torture. Will there truly be no one who will quietly strangle me while I sleep?" (Akutagawa, 2003, p. 75). This desire does not constitute an active intention to commit suicide; rather, the wish to be strangled in one's sleep represents a passive suicide fantasy and reflects the final stage of psychic exhaustion.

Conclusion

"Spinning Gears" functions as an artistic diagnosis of Akutagawa's psychic crisis. Within the framework of modernist poetics, the author universalizes his individual neurotic experience, producing one of the most conceptually intense examples of psychological modernism in twentieth-century world literature. By abandoning classical plot structures and linear narration, the work immerses the reader directly into the process of psychic disintegration; rather than explaining events or offering resolution, it enacts the fragmentation of consciousness. The central motif of the "spinning gears" serves as a metaphor for the automated, mechanized, and uncontrollable system of thought within the human mind, subverting individual volition and rendering the subject a passive object of his own cognition. Accordingly, suicide is not presented as a spontaneous decision but as the logical outcome of prolonged psychic disintegration. Akutagawa does not choose death; rather, he presents it as the inevitable consequence of a consciousness that has exhausted all possibilities of life, making the story both a key to understanding the author's final mental state and a universal model of the crisis of modern consciousness.

References

Berdyayev, N. (2018). On the slavery and freedom of man (V. Azeryar, Trans.). – Baku: Ganun.
Akutagawa, R. (2015). The gods' mockery (R. Ramizoğlu, Trans.). – Baku: Azerbaijan Translation Center.

Kato, S. (1983). A history of Japanese literature, Volume 3: The modern years (D. Sanderson, Trans.). Kent: Paul Norbury Publications.
Akutagawa, R. (2003). Haguruma「歯車」. – Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
Akutagawa, R. (1995). Rashomon「羅生門」. – Tokyo: Horupu Shuppan.
Freud, S. (1961). The ego and the id. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 19, p. 12–66). – London: Hogarth Press.
Freud, S. (2019). Ben ve id (A. Yardımlı, Trans.). – Istanbul: İdea Yayınevi.
Demirdagh, R.A. (2020). Death in Literature and the Discourse of Suicide in the Poetry of Nigâr Hanım (Edebiyatta ölüm ve şair Nigâr Hanım'ın şiirlerinde intihar yazını). Çukurova University Journal of Social Sciences Institute, – 29(2). – P. 28–41.
Grimmer, B. (n.d.). Paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions: Changing functional levels in psychotherapy (S. U. Girginer, Trans.). Retrieved from https://www.scribd.com/document/964585452/Paranoid-%C5%9Eizoid-Konum

submitted 14.01.2026;
accepted for publication 28.01.2026;
published 29.01.2026

Contact: gulnaryunusova@yahoo.com