

A Comparison of Salient Buddhist Concepts with Selected English Literary Works

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Abstract

The study explores the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and English literature by contrasting chief Buddhist teachings impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), nonself (anatta), karma, and compassion and selected canonical works from Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Eliot, and Woolf. Buddhism was conceived in India as a doctrine of liberation from suffering, and English literature developed in differentiating Western traditions, yet both address shared human concerns with mortality, desire, morality, and identity. Using a comparative hermeneutic approach, the analysis highlights how

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* dramatizes the annihilating power of desire and transience, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* mirrors the moral causality of karma. Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* resonates Buddhist teachings of interdependence and lovingkindness, Eliot's *The Waste Land* conveys the general suffering enumerated in the First Noble Truth, and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* resonates the law of nonself in its exploration of malleable identity. The thesis argues that Buddhist philosophy is not merely a religious system but also an effective interpretive framework for literature.

Keywords: Buddhism, Comparative Study, Existential Themes, English Literature, Intercultural Philosophy

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Introduction

Buddhism and English literature may initially appear to exist in entirely disparate intellectual and cultural universes. Buddhism began in India in the 5th-4th century BCE as a means to enlightenment from suffering, and English literature developed within the context of Western intellectual, theological, and artistic traditions. And both traditions nonetheless have concerned themselves with perennial questions of the human condition: the reality of death, the struggle with desire, the problem of suffering, the meaning of morality, and the search for identity and truth. This shared interest in the fundamental terms of human existence offers fertile ground for crosscultural comparison.

Buddhism's basic teachings, encapsulated in the doctrines of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and nonself (anatta), have been transmitted for over two millennia in scriptures such as the Dhammapada, the Majjhima Nikāya, and the Vinaya Pitaka (Rahula, 1974; Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995). These are not abstract metaphysical statements but practical insights into the nature of reality and human existence. They are joined by the doctrine of karma and rebirth, which stresses moral causality, and the cultivation of compassion (karunā) and lovingkindness (mettā), which embody the ethical heart of Buddhist practice (Gethin, 1998).

English literature, however, has long grappled with the same existential

concerns, though expressed in Christian, Romantic, or modernist idioms of Western tradition. Shakespeare's tragedies reveal the futility of ambition and the inevitability of death; Milton's *Paradise Lost* grapples with sin, responsibility, and moral accountability; Wordsworth's Romantic poetry ponders nature, transience, and remembrance; T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* presents fragmentation, despair, and the possibility of renewal; and Virginia Woolf's modernist fiction questions identity, temporality, and human relationships.

By putting these selected English literary works in juxtaposition with prominent Buddhist concepts, this article will demonstrate the universal relevance of Buddhist philosophy as a literary hermeneutic, and further enrich our understanding of canonical Western literature. Its intention is not to suggest that Shakespeare or Milton were in any sense influenced by Buddhism though Eliot did possess some documented familiarity with Eastern scriptures (Moody, 1994) but to put the two traditions into dialogue with one another, showing how they illuminate one another. This intercultural approach reveals not only similarities, then, but also dissimilarities, emphasizing both the universality of human concerns and the specificity of cultural resolutions.

This article argues that Buddhist philosophy presents an illuminating interpretive model for English literature. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is parallel to the Buddhist doctrine that desire leads to suffering; Milton's *Paradise Lost*

illustrates a moral causality akin to karma; Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* demonstrates the Buddhist recognition of impermanence and interdependence; Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is analogous to the Buddhist doctrine of no-self; and Eliot's *The Waste Land* illustrates universal suffering as delineated in the First Noble Truth. Through such comparisons, Buddhist philosophy is shown not only as a religious teaching but also as a crosscultural hermeneutic prism of contemporary relevance.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following central research question:

Main Research Question

How can salient Buddhist concepts impermanence, suffering, no-self, karma, and compassion serve as an interpretive framework for selected English literary works, and what insights emerge from this crosscultural dialogue about the universality of human existential concerns?

Subquestions

1. How do Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* illustrate the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, and in what ways do their portrayals diverge in tone and philosophical implication?
2. In what ways do T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* embody the Buddhist notion of suffering as rooted in craving, impermanence, and dissatisfaction?

3. How does Woolf's narrative style in *To the Lighthouse* reflect the Buddhist understanding of identity as fluid and nonsubstantial, and what interpretive possibilities does this open?
4. How do Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* dramatize moral consequence, and how can these narratives be reinterpreted through the Buddhist doctrine of karma?
5. How does Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* resonate with the Buddhist ethic of compassion and interconnectedness, and what does this reveal about Romantic and Buddhist approaches to nature and human experience?

Literature Review

Comparative and intercultural frameworks

Comparative literature provides the theoretical transition for the reading of Buddhist philosophy alongside English texts. Damrosch (2003) builds "world literature" as a circulation of texts between contexts that provokes crosscultural reading, and Ganeri (2012) promotes "intercultural philosophy," a dialogical method that respects difference but aims for mutual enrichment. These paradigms underwrite the use of Buddhist doctrines as a hermeneutic lens without implying historical influence.

Core Buddhist concepts in scholarship

Doctrinal overviews foundational to this research are explained. Rahula (1974) summarizes the Four Noble Truths and the three marks of existence impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and nonself (anatta) as practical wisdom that leads to liberation. Gethin (1998) and Harvey (2013) formalize khandha analysis of self, ethical intentionality (karma), and cultivation of compassion (karuṇā) and lovingkindness (mettā) as well. Canonical translations (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995) locate these syntheses in primary sources.

Buddhist resonances in English literary studies

English canon studies routinely confront supporting issues death, desire, self, and ethical accountability within Western frameworks but such issues resonate within Buddhist criticism. Shakespeare's tragedies inquire into the folly of ambition and mortality of man; critical editions (Shakespeare, 1997) remain canonical textual bases for such examination. Milton's epic explores freedom, transgression, and consequence in a morally ordered world isomorphic to karmic causality, but theologically, not soteriologically, explicated. Romantic and modernist writers drive these themes out into nature, time, subjectivity, and fragmentation.

Text-specific strands informing a Buddhist reading

Shakespeare (Macbeth). Macbeth's

"walking shadow" monologue emphasizes ephemerality, which is concurrent with anicca, and the pathway from craving (taṇhā) to destruction demonstrates dukkha's causal texture (Shakespeare, 1997).

Milton (Paradise Lost). The moral economy of the poem purposive action → outcome coincides with Buddhist karma as a theory of narrative determinism (cf. Harvey, 2013; Gethin, 1998).

Wordsworth (Tintern Abbey). The poem's exploration of continuity and interdependence "a sense sublime... deeply interfused" enacts dialogue with empathic responsiveness and ecological interbeing (Wordsworth, 1994; cf. Gethin, 1998).

Eliot (The Waste Land). Postwar desert and religious dryness illustrate dukkha; Eliot's confirmed exposure to Indian sources and the "Fire Sermon" reference allow for comparative context without reductionism (Eliot, 1971; Moody, 1994).

Stream of consciousness modernism renders identity temporary process rather than essence, in accord with anatta; scholarship emphasizes Woolf's aesthetics of process and time (Beer, 1996; Lee, 1997).

Synthesis, limits, and gap

Extensive work adequately accounts for Buddhist doctrine (Rahula, Gethin, Harvey) and presents authoritative literary analysis of the chosen books (Shakespeare; Wordsworth; Eliot;

Woolf). Intercultural and world literature paradigms (Ganeri; Damrosch) sanction comparative conversation. However, most studies either (a) compare such English works within Western theories alone, (b) analyze Buddhist doctrine in the general from specific literary examples, or (c) treat author influence issues (particularly with Eliot) rather than systematic, concept-to-concept correlation between multiple canonical works.

This study bridges that gap by establishing a comparative analysis of five Buddhist concepts *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*, *karma*, and *compassion* against five paradigmatic works in tragedy, epic, Romantic lyric poetry, and modernist fiction/poetry. It is not a claim of influence, but rather an exploration of the explanatory and interpretive reward of Buddhist thought for close reading, hence contributing to comparative hermeneutics and preserving historical specificity.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this research is comparative text analysis with hermeneutics and intercultural philosophy as the guide. Comparative literature strives to illuminate works across cultural and linguistic boundaries, initiating the conversation of traditions even when traditions are not historically immediately related (Damrosch, 2003). This article applies the methodology; reading English literary texts through the interpretive lens of Buddhist thought.

Selection of Buddhist Concepts

The Buddhist concepts chosen for analysis are impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), nonself (*anatta*), *karma*, and compassion. They are central to the Buddha's message and traditionally accepted by both Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools (Harvey, 2013). They were derived from canonical texts such as the *Dhammapada*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, and *Samyutta Nikāya*, and secondary texts (Rahula, 1974; Gethin, 1998). Their universalism and existential sophistication make them appropriate for crosscultural comparison.

Selection of English Literary Works

The chosen literary texts span Renaissance tragedy, Christian epic, Romantic poetry, and modernist literature. They were picked due to their thematic resonance with Buddhist issues:

- Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606): explores ambition, impermanence, and despair.
- Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667): dramatizes free will, sin, and moral consequence.
- Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* (1798): meditates on nature, time, and memory.
- Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922): depicts fragmentation, suffering, and renewal.
- Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927): explores temporality, identity, and impermanence.

These works were not chosen because they expose obvious Buddhist influence but because the thematic preoccupations of these works find an echo in Buddhist thinking.

Limitations

There are limitations to this approach. Buddhism is a large and internally diverse tradition, and reducing it to five concepts threatens oversimplification. Likewise, English literary texts occupy particular historical and theological contexts that might be resistant to Buddhist interpretation. Nevertheless, the objective here is less to overwrite historical context than to create new meanings in dialogue.

Overall, the method of this study is comparative and interpretive, placing English literature and Buddhist philosophy in conversation with each other in order to highlight universal existential concerns and illuminate crosscultural resonances.

Approach to Analysis

Analysis proceeds in two steps. First, each Buddhist concept is briefly described in doctrinal terms, with reference to canonical sources and scholarship. Then, second, the concept is set alongside selected English literary texts, observing parallels, contrasts, and interpretive possibilities. For example, impermanence (anicca) is paired with Macbeth's characterization of life as "a walking shadow," while Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* depicts time and identity fluidity.

This is a hermeneutical, not an historical, approach. It does not attempt to trace influence but uses Buddhist philosophy as an interpretative framework for rereading. This is in line with what Ganeri (2012) calls "intercultural philosophy," in which traditions engage with each other not to erase their difference but to enhance understanding.

Discussion

Impermanence (Anicca) and the Fragility of Life

The Buddhist doctrine of impermanence states that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, constantly arising and passing away (Rahula, 1974). Nothing in life not material objects, feelings, nor even the self remains stable. It is a recognition of impermanence that is required for liberation, as attachment to the false permanence of things generates suffering.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* powerfully illustrates this doctrine. In Act V, Scene V, Macbeth laments: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more." This metaphor for impermanence suggests that human life is fleeting, unreal, and ultimately devoid of any lasting meaning. The nihilism of Macbeth's despair differs from the Buddhist embrace of impermanence. Whereas Buddhism encourages acceptance and liberation through wisdom, Macbeth succumbs to despair and futility.

Another intense comparison is offered by Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf's narrative style, particularly in the chapter "Time Passes," emphasizes the relentless movement of time and the impermanence of human lives. Characters fade into memory, and even the Ramsay family home disintegrates. The liquid, protean nature of perception in Woolf's work has a strong congruence with the Buddhist insight that everything is constantly in movement. Yet, unlike Macbeth's despair, Woolf transmutes impermanence into aesthetic form, revealing moments of transcendence within the flux of time (Beer, 1996).

So both Shakespeare and Woolf enact the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence but with a differing tone: Shakespeare stresses futility, while Woolf discovers meaning within transience.

Suffering (*Dukkha*) and the Human Condition

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism teaches that life is suffused with suffering or discontent (*dukkha*). This *dukkha* is brought about not only by pain but also by impermanence and desire (Rahula, 1974).

The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot is a classic literary representation of *dukkha*. Written in the aftermath of the First World War, the poem presents a broken, barren world haunted by loss, despair, and spiritual emptiness. Its fragmented images "a heap of broken images, where the sun beats" echo the Buddhist description of life as inherently dissatisfactory. Eliot, who had read Indian philosophy at

Harvard, was familiar with Buddhist texts and even quotes directly from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and the Buddha's Fire Sermon (Eliot, 1971). The pervading sorrow in *The Waste Land* thus resonates directly with the Buddhist diagnosis of the human condition.

Similarly, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* acts out the destruction caused by craving (*tanhā*). Macbeth's uncontrolled ambition propels him from success to paranoia, tyranny, and despair. His suffering is not imposed by an external fate but is the result of his own desires and attachments, aligning with the Buddhist doctrine that craving is the root of suffering. The play thus embodies the Second Noble Truth: desire gives rise to suffering.

Shakespeare and Eliot together illustrate the Buddhist doctrine that life, if driven by craving or lived in ignorance, inevitably comes to be defined by suffering.

Non-Self (*Anatta*) and Fluid Identity

The doctrine of *anatta* denies the presence of an everlasting, unchanging self. Instead, the self is constituted by five aggregates (*khandhas*): form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Identification with a static self perpetuates suffering (Gethin, 1998).

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* offers a literary analogy. Her stream of consciousness writing reveals identity to be fluid, relational, and in perpetual flux. Characters are not essences but

constellations of perceptions and recollections, constantly shifting with time and situation (Lee, 1997). The literary technique has strong affinities with the Buddhist view of the self as an impermanent construct.

Furthermore, Woolf's portraits of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe depict the relational character of identity. Mrs. Ramsay's selfhood cannot be divorced from her domestic and social function, and Lily's sense of identity is forged in and through her art. Both of them demonstrate the Buddhist principle that selfhood is conditional and relational rather than inherent.

Woolf's fiction thus depicts anatta, but without Buddhism's soteriological dimension. Whereas Buddhism teaches that enlightenment, as the understanding of nonself, leads to liberation, Woolf employs it as a modernist aesthetic for depicting the complexity of human experience.

Karma and Moral Causality

Karma in Buddhism is intentional action with effects, either in this life or over rebirths. The law of karma emphasizes moral accountability and the inevitability of effects (Harvey, 2013).

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* dramatizes a moral order akin to karma. Satan's rebellion against God sets in motion consequences not only for himself but also for all of humanity. Adam and Eve's choice to disobey results in suffering and exile. Framed though it is in Christian theology, such moral causality is akin

to the Buddhist principle that volitional actions have inevitable consequences.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* also demonstrates karmiclike causality. Macbeth's actions, motivated by ambition, lead not to glory but to ruin. His downfall is a model of the Buddhist teaching that unwholesome actions motivated by greed and aversion lead to suffering. While not framed in karmic terms, the play dramatizes the moral necessity of consequence.

Milton and Shakespeare therefore envision a moral universe in which actions have consequences. The Buddhist law of karma provides a lens through which one can interpret how the plays dramatize consequence and responsibility.

Compassion and Interconnectedness

Buddhism espouses compassion (karunā) and lovingkindness (mettā) as the principal virtues for spiritual growth. Compassion arises from a sense of interconnectedness: all beings are prone to suffer and are hence deserving of sympathy (Harvey, 2013).

Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* resonates to this vision. The poem is a meditation upon the continuity of nature and the oneness of human experience. Wordsworth writes of "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused," a mystical intuition of unity. This is in harmony with the Buddhist ethic of compassion, which perceives the interdependence of all beings.

Moreover, Wordsworth's love of nature

anticipates modern environmental ethics that find close parallels in Buddhist interdependence. While Wordsworth presents it in Romantic rather than Buddhist terms, his sympathy and union with nature is the equivalent of Buddhist compassion.

Broader Implications

The comparison of Buddhist philosophy and English literature is of broader importance to both fields. To literary criticism, the application of Buddhist concepts offers new interpretive possibilities, allowing canonical works to be read through nonWestern lenses. This enriches understanding and attests to the universality of existential concerns. To Buddhist philosophy, such comparisons underscore its universal relevance, showing that its insights are applicable across time zones and cultures.

This crosscultural dialogue also contributes to comparative literature and philosophy, towards global humanities as a field. It demonstrates how traditions can illuminate one another without without clashing with disparities. In placing Buddhism alongside English literature, we see both the common predicaments of humankind and the different ways cultures have addressed them.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the way Buddhist principles of salience, impermanence, suffering, non self, karma, and compassion, are made meaningful in selected English

literature. *Macbeth* by Shakespeare illustrates craving and impermanence; *Paradise Lost* by Milton illustrates moral causality like karma; *Tintern Abbey* by Wordsworth expresses interconnectedness; *The Waste Land* by Eliot illustrates suffering; and *To the Lighthouse* by Woolf illustrates the nonself doctrine.

While having a separate tradition each, Buddhism and English literature share the common grappling with the de facto facts of human life. Through comparative analysis, we find that literature is a reflection of Buddhist wisdom and that Buddhism provides a filter for raising literary insight. This crosscultural dialogue points to the universalization of human issues and to the possibility of philosophy and literature together illuminating the human condition.

Lastly, the comparison verifies that even if contexts and frames differ, conflict with mortality, pain, lust, and ethics hold humanity together across cultures. By reading English literature through Buddhist philosophy, we not only better comprehend texts but also foster intercultural enrichment and philosophical depth.

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