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A MACAT ANALYSIS

**SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S
THE SICKNESS
UNTO DEATH**





An Analysis of

Søren Kierkegaard's

**The Sickness
Unto Death**

Shirin Shafaie



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REASONING – creating strong arguments

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CRITICAL THINKING AND *THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH*

Primary critical thinking skill: INTERPRETATION

Secondary critical thinking skill: CREATIVE THINKING

Søren Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* is widely recognized as one of the most significant and influential works of Christian philosophy written in the nineteenth century.

One of the cornerstones of Kierkegaard's reputation as a writer and thinker, it is also a masterclass in the art of interpretation. In critical thinking, interpretation is all about defining and clarifying terms – making sure everyone is on the same page. But it can also be about redefining terms: showing old concepts in a new light by interpreting them in a certain way. This skill is at the heart of *Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard's book focuses on the meaning of “despair” – the sickness named in the title. For Kierkegaard, the key problem of existence was an individual's relationship with God, and he defines true despair as equating to the idea of sin – something that separates people from God, or from the idea of a higher standard beyond ourselves.

Kierkegaard's interpretative journey into the ideas of despair, sin and death is a Christian exploration of the place of the individual in the world. But its interpretative skills inspired generations of philosophers of all stripes – including notorious atheists like Jean-Paul Sartre.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ORIGINAL WORK

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1813, **Søren Kierkegaard** rarely left his hometown, traveling only to study briefly with philosophers in Germany. He never married, ending a brief engagement because he feared the commitment would interfere with his work. Inherited wealth allowed Kierkegaard to self-publish and he did so prolifically, mostly using a variety of pseudonyms. Yet, because he wrote in Danish, the philosopher remained relatively unknown outside of Denmark until his works were translated into English and German in the early twentieth century. He died in 1855, aged just 42.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ANALYSIS

Dr Shirin Shafaie holds masters degrees in philosophy and middle eastern studies from the Univeristy of Tehran and SOAS. She took her PhD in politics at SOAS where she now teaches in the Department of Politics and International Studies.

ABOUT MACAT

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Professor William Tronzo, University of California at San Diego



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WAYS IN TO THE TEXT

KEY POINTS

- The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1813 and died there 42 years later. During his life, he left Copenhagen only briefly, making short trips to Berlin to study under philosophers there.
- Kierkegaard published *The Sickness Unto Death* under a pseudonym in 1849, when he was 36. But his work did not reach a wide community of philosophers until the twentieth century, when scholars translated it into German and English.
- Kierkegaard shifted the focus of philosophy. He was the first to consider the questions of existence as they relate to a single individual, rather than the more abstract “world spirit”* that philosophers before him analyzed. In *The Sickness Unto Death* he contemplates the problem of the despairing individual, finding the solution in Christian faith.

Who Was Søren Kierkegaard?

Born in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, in 1813, Søren Kierkegaard rarely left his hometown. He made only a few short visits to study under German philosophers in the city of Berlin. He did not expect to live past the age of 34, but he survived another eight years, dying in Copenhagen in 1855.

Søren's father Michael* carried a deep sense of guilt because as a child he had cursed God. Michael believed that his family's tragedies—including the premature deaths of most of his children—were God's punishment for this youthful transgression.

Søren Kierkegaard's one romantic relationship proved unhappy and left a deep impression on him. He fell in love with a young woman named Regine Olsen* and asked her to marry him. But he broke off the engagement suddenly about a year later, fearing that marriage would interfere with what he saw as his life's mission: devotion to God and the study of theology. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, he puts forward a solution to the problem of human despair. Seeing such despair as a failure to recognize an eternal element in ourselves, Kierkegaard identifies the solution: Christian faith.

During the nineteenth century, other philosophers—especially the German idealist* philosopher G. W. F. Hegel*—attained much more fame than Kierkegaard. But in the early twentieth century, scholars translated the latter's books from Danish into German and English. Once Kierkegaard's ideas received broader exposure in the philosophical community, they quickly became essential elements of modern philosophical movements, especially existentialism.*

What Does *The Sickness Unto Death* Say?

As one of the first philosophers to champion the individual, Kierkegaard's work stood in stark contrast to the dominant philosophy of his time, Hegel's absolute idealism.* Hegel focused on “world spirit” (*Weltgeist*) and did not recognize the significance of the individual.

Hegel's methods inspired Kierkegaard, but he did not agree with the conclusions of the German philosopher. In fact, he made it his life's work to combat Hegel's systemic and abstract approach. Kierkegaard shifted the focus of philosophy to concrete problems experienced in individual human life.