



Environment and Personality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Mathew Arnold's Poem "The Buried Life"

Dr. Ali Hafudh Humaish

Wasit University, College of Education, English Department

ABSTRACT

Matthew Arnold's *The Buried Life* deals with the impact of social structures and social expectations upon individual mine. With the self's inner turmoil, buoyed by societal repression and the fear of judgment, the complexity of Arnold's depiction leads to discomfort with the chasm between what is outside and what is felt inside. In this paper, I will analyze the impact of the social environment on personality development in the Free eBook about *The Buried Life*, incorporating aspects from both history and psychology. By deconstructing the poem the research explores the ways in which Arnold calls into question the Victorian insistence that decorum and propriety hinder and finally extinguish genuine self-expression. The paper will also discuss psychological theories, such as Carl Jung's concept of the "shadow" and Sigmund Freud's idea of repression, in relation to Arnold's work. Through an examination of the poem as social psychological and literary critical text, the paper will reveal the tension between personal agency and social structure, producing insight on personality development in repressive social environments.

Keywords : buried life, personality, Jung's shadow, Mathew Arnold, repression

Carl Jung's concept of the "shadow" refers to the unconscious species of the personality that contains the repressed weakness, desires and instincts of which the conscious mind either does not recognize or treats as undesirable. The shadow, according to Jung, is what we never want to become aware of in ourselves because it is socially unacceptable and the opposite of what society wishes. The shadow acts as a warning to the persona — the outward, socially acceptable face that one allows others to see."the shadow as a concept comprises everything the conscious personality experiences as negative. In dreams and fantasies the shadow appears with the characteristics of a personality of the same sex as the ego, but in a very different configuration".(Dieckmann, 2005)

Arnold's examination of the pull between the external self and the internal self in *The Buried Life* can be interpreted as a precursor to Carl Jung's idea of the shadow."The speaker in this poem sees life as a never ending, beautifully tragic inquiry. There is no comfortable resting on laurels". (Anderson, 2013). The poet speaks about how with time we become so insular that even though we are surrounded by people we will be unable to connect honestly with them and that ultimately the things that we show to the world are not us. He calls the internal self a "buried life," meaning some parts of his personality are hidden, or buried, under the skin, due in part to the influence of social norms and expectations.

This "buried life," Jung would say, reflects the shadow, the undisclosed and unrecognized aspects of the self that are distanced from the self through layers of societal expectation. In the context of Victorian society, however, the shadow is likely to be a bundle of passions / desires / instincts that were deemed inappropriate or improper (the passions, for intimacy, vulnerability, etc) which the surrounding social context disallowed them to express. All of this reflects the unconscious struggle between the persona (the socially acceptable self) and the shadow (the repressed, secret self) — in fact, in the poem, the speaker is painfully aware of the isolation and alienation that results from the inability to show the true self.

To become whole, Jung suggested, the shadow has to be integrated into the conscious self. While Arnold does not provide a clear-cut answer to how one might reconcile this integration, the poem very much implies a semblance of understanding/convergence between the two perceptions of the self as the only ostensible way forward. This contact involves a worker's duties because they wish to interact with the human being buried within them, and bearing the truth would mean exposing the buried life, facing the shadow, and thus facing the world that actually exists. This craving for connection is a process of bringing out into awareness the darker and repressed parts of the psyche, which contributes towards solid relationships.

At the heart of Sigmund Freud's understanding of the unconscious mind is his theory of repression. "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (Freud, 2015, p 147). Repression happens when thoughts, desires, or memories that are too painful or unacceptable to be consciously acknowledged are expelled from the conscious mind, pushed down into the unconscious. Repressed desires — especially those considered socially unacceptable — continue to be active in the unconscious part of the mind and may, therefore, drive a person's behavior, emotions and relationships and eventually result in neurotic symptoms or emotional conflict. As Grob affirms "some privileged aspect of the human psyche-sometimes the poetic imagination, sometimes the passions or even the sexual drives—is seen as finally impelled by, identical with, and the expression of larger cosmic forces" (Grob, 1988, p 25)

Arnold captures the process of repression in the speaker's inner conflict in *The Buried Life* with striking detail. The speaker experiences his most intimate feelings and wants — his “buried life” — without public airing, or even full acknowledgment, since to do so would defy social taboos. The metaphor of the “buried life” suggests that these emotions are buried, and buried suggests the act of putting away emotions, which points closely to Freud's idea of repression. Arnold's speaker appears to be locked in combat with the repressed elements of his psyche, longing for a deeper connection yet also cognizant of the fact that giving voice to these repressed aspects of the self would lead to social alienation and isolation.

The very form of the poem — where the speaker meditates on the difficulty of knowing another person at all — implies something like an unconscious repression at work. It is not that the speaker does not want to connect meaningfully with others; the psychological barriers erected by repression are so powerful that it is impossible. The “buried life” is also a repressed emotional life, and aspects of the personality that are at odds with the public self the world requires. In short, the speaker is suppressing the aspects of himself that would normally enable honest emotional intimacy and true communication.

Freud argued that the function of repression was not negative per se; it was necessary to protect the individual from emotional suffering. In Arnold's poem that duality is repression that splits the self, the person between how one is forced to exist and what one experiences. Between the world inside and outside the speaker and the longing for the insubstantial as contrasted against the societal pressures of the man outside, we are left with a sense of disdain and helpless frustration that never quite goes away. The speaker's struggle of wanting “to live and not pretend” alludes to the conflict set up by repression — he desires to be genuine but social forces compel him to conform.

The hidden tenets of Jung's shadow and Freud's repression provide valuable intersections to the psychological conflict present in *The Buried Life*. The “buried life” expressed in the poem represents the shadow as well as the repressed unconscious. It symbolizes the parts of the self that have been pushed away and spurned by the conscious mind — the shadow of Jung — and, in contrast, it manifests the parts of the self that are simply suppressed by societal norms — the repressed wishes and feelings of Freud.

The alienation felt by the speaker, and the challenges involved in gaining real communication with others, is indicative of the influence of both repression and the shadow. The social environment forces a semblance of respectability and propriety, requires the individual to suppress or repress parts of their personality that could be construed as socially unacceptable. Yet the end of the speaker yearns for a deeper nexus of carnal connection, with the tension in their desire for being understood signaling the unreflected-back parts of the self that society refuses to know or express.

Both Jung's notion of shadow integration and Freud's perspective on the need to recognize and work through repressed desires, for example, point toward the idea that facing the darker, hidden side of the self is a crucial step toward psychological vitality. The speaker of *The Buried Life* knows about this internal conflict yet feels trapped by the social forces that stop integration of this sort from happening. The poem concludes with an unresolved tension, capturing the tragedy of a self corrupted and buried in repression and societal expectation.

There are poets who debate the gap between one's internal self and their external representation, and illustrate how people appear to hide their true selves due to the confines of society. Penned in the Victorian age, a time noted for its priorities of propriety, decorum, and social obligation, Arnold's piece captures the pressures individuals experience in hiding their most intimate thoughts and feelings for the sake of adhering to public persona. The poem explores the notion that the self is so often “buried” under layers of social masks that it can be a struggle for basically anyone to communicate his or her true self, either to others or even to oneself, honestly. Arnold's exploration of this theme reflects a greater societal condition, one that has psychological and social ramifications in a society focused on façade rather than authentic selfhood.

Using vivid metaphorical imagery, including the idea of the “buried life,” Arnold implies that the internal self — the domain of individual thought, personal aspiration, and emotion — is suffocated by societal dictates that require outward conformity and repress self-description. One no longer knows his own nature, the sense of self becomes fragmented, real communication with others is no longer possible. The speaker in the poem reflects on the impossibility of really knowing someone else, capturing the isolation of the moments when the people around them are unable to be their true selves for fear of judgment or rejection.

The dynamic between one's internal self and visible presentation in *The Buried Life* suggests a leap into examining how social settings affect individual personalities. While Arnold is critiquing the rigid Victorian norms that suffocate individuality, his poem also mirrors modern psychoanalytic theories about repression and the clash of the conscious and unconscious mind. Through this intricate exploration of the human condition, Arnold delivers a timeless meditation on the quest for authenticity amidst a society that frequently prioritizes outer glamour over true self-expression. Through this paper, I will examine how Arnold's poem epitomizes the social pressures that shape the orator, as well as the psychological ramifications that can stem from said repression as it navigates between the inner-self and external facade.

Matthew Arnold in his poem *The Buried Life* writes powerfully about the damage done to the individual personality by social situations, its repression, alienation and concealment in the face of everyday social expectations. This poem highlights a stark psychological and emotional struggle within the self — the inner self being the repository of unexpressed thoughts, feelings and desires, and the outer self, the face the self must show the world, the facade leavened by society, convention and expectation. The poem's key metaphor of the “buried life” captures the idea that the individual's inner world is buried from the outer world — and, at times, even from oneself — because of the pressures of social conformity. This paper will explore how the social atmosphere presented within *The Buried Life* becomes a nurturing force for personality, stifling authentic selfhood and resulting in the splitting of the self. Norris believes that it is “about caring too much about what other people are thinking and wanting to find a way back to yourself”. This idea of “finding a way back to yourself” definitely seems to dominate the first verse” (Norris, 2019)

Arnold wrote *The Buried Life* in the Victorian age, a time of narrow social standards, moral imperatives, and class differences. The social milieu of Victorian life was one of high value and importance placed on decorum, propriety, and appearance, which made people become more concerned with

their public persona than their private thoughts and feelings. Such adherence to social codes quashed real self-expression and formed a gap between the inner self and outer behavior. In such a repressive context, the social environment developed personalities that valued restraint, conformity, and emotional suppression. Arnold's poem grapples with this very tension.

The first few lines of the poem have the speaker meditating on how hard it is to really know another person, with the line "What man has thought of his friend?" This rhetorical question mimics the poem's central argument: That true intimacy will never happen when people cannot show their inner creatures. The speaker implies that society demands that people conceal certain aspects of themselves, traits that could be construed as undesirable, defective, or unpalatable, whether these social standards are from moral, religious or cultural sources. The internal had no place in the outside context of Victorian society, as it was repressed or hidden in the desire to keep social decorum.

And here, the speaker complains about how he cannot communicate fully with anyone else, but still, each individual presents their communication as inherent and living. He writes, "And what we feel of the buried life is too much for words." So much of what makes us unique is silenced socially and so all that jewellery of individuality stays unworn and unused, leaving nothing but a series of shallow interactions. The speaker's isolation, in other words, is a direct outcome of the social environment, which gravitates toward restraint and the repression of one's private self in favor of the collective will.

The "buried life" is a metaphor for the self that people safely confine away from themselves and others because of social conventions. The term "buried" is important, because it implies that parts of the self are not just hidden but actively oppressed, buried under layers of social propriety. The speaker's inner world of thought, emotion, desire — so human — is properly buried,

Alas, is even Love too weak

To unlock the heart, and let it speak rendered incapable of rising into expressibility in a society where outward control and conformity are prized. This duplicitous repression of the genuine self embodies an elemental clash: between the individual's authentic character and the demands of the social milieu. He is saddened that humans are more dishonest

towards each another, more suspicious of each another, and more distrustful of each

another. He reasons that at one time there was the purity of commonality, but that now there is 'something' that separates men from their inner selves and their outer selves:

I knew the mass of men conceal'd

Their thoughts, for fear that if reveal'd

They would by other men be met

With blank indifference, or with blame reprov'd (Cisneros, 2023, p 52)

Arnold conveys the psychological and emotional toll of such repression through the speaker's tone of frustration and longing. genuine connectivity around the reality of reaching another human being "We do not speak," he declares, "We cannot be" (the object of authentic, unguarded connection), noting how the line separating inwardly and outward beings forbids any genuine, frank discourse. But instead of expressing themselves authentically, this person feels trapped in a double bind: they cannot express their true selves because of social restraints, and at the same time, their inability to convey who they are to others creates a sense of isolation.

The buried life metaphor also alludes to the battle between the conscious and unconscious mind. The impulse to express and connect is there in the unconscious, but societal parameters of appropriateness govern the greater portion of consciousness and repress the emergence of this "buried" self. This tension between the private, repressed self, and the outward-facing, compliant social personality, produces a fracturing of the sense of self in which your real personality is obscured and hidden behind social performances or masks.

Arnold examines the world we live in which requires people to bury their authenticity in order to fulfill the roles they feel are laid out for them. This is especially noteworthy in the poem's implication that, despite individuals' desire for a more honest relationship, they are not capable of fully opening up to others. The speaker's abortion of "Let us live and not pretend" represents a yearning for credentialed personhood that the social atmosphere muzzles. By portraying the buried self, Arnold's work implies that processing identity within a repressive society is essentially negotiating between a private self and a public persona coerced by society.

But they course on for ever unexpress'd.

And long we try in vain to speak and act

Our hidden self, and what we say and do

Is eloquent, is well—but 'tis not true!

And then we will no more be rack'd

With inward striving, and demand

Of all the thousand nothings of the hour

Their stupefying power;

Social class, gender roles, and religious affiliation were among the most determining factors of a person's social identity in Victorian society. These roles often prescribed how a person was allowed to express themselves emotionally, intellectually and physically. Collectively, the harsh expectations of the social landscape forced an element of performativity into the development of personality, in which people fashioned their identities to suit societal acceptance rather than intrinsic inclination. That is to say that in this same light, the speaker of the poem is a loving victim of social expectation, unable to escape the prison of identity performance.

This theme is especially apparent in the final stanza of the poem, in which the speaker meditates on the challenge of reconciling what gets shown to the outside world with what exists on the inside. "There has been no thought of what man has thought of his friend." is not simply an outcry about the shallowness of human relationships but also an acknowledgment that the impossibility of revealing the self leads to a false and inadequate form of self-knowledge:

And there arrives a lull in the hot race

Wherein he doth for ever chase

That flying and elusive shadow, rest.

An air of coolness plays upon his face,

And an unwonted calm pervades his breast.

And then he thinks he knows

The hills where his life rose,

And the sea where it goes

The speaker's desire for engagement is moderated by the knowledge that engagement is doomed in a world that compels people to wear masks of status and comportment to hide their true selves beneath.

The Buried Life can be read as a critique of how Victorian society prioritized outward behavior over inward authenticity. Arnold's treatment of the buried self underlies the psychological harm that is inflicted by a denial of individuality to meet the values of the group. The poem implies that a society which prioritises outward appearances and social propriety over genuine emotion leaves its citizens emotionally fractured, cut off from one another, unable to experience a true bond.

The speaker's failure to adequately articulate his feelings becomes a mark of critique against the social environment's impact on the locus of personal identity. Arnold, as the preacher, recognizes how hard it is to be a true person in a world that wants everyone to be just like everyone else. Transcending this superficiality is the central challenge in this sense, The Buried Life reveals the drawbacks of a social environment that values surface reality over the depth of human experience. By presenting a person's internal life as hidden from view but also "buried," Arnold emphasizes how alienated individuals are — from themselves, from others — which she suggests is a result of the social structures we find ourselves trapped in, which silence our self-presentation.

Conclusion

Matthew Arnold gives a compelling meditation on the impact of the social environment on personality development in The Buried Life. Through the metaphor of the "buried life," Arnold critiques a society that mandates repressive norms, suppressing authentic self-expression and compelling individuals to offer a disingenuous, socially acceptable version of themselves. The poem considers how personality is pressed by societal forces like class, gender, and morality to become a matter of repression, telling us to bury our inner selves in favor of something more widely accepted, more normative, more pressured. Thus leading to isolation, alienation, a fragmented sense of self; pointing to the destructive nature of social conventions on the growth of the self. At its core, The Buried Life is a striking reminder of the importance of living in an authentic way and the value of self-expression in a culture that often prioritizes surface level images over true self.

References

- Arnold, M., & Sharp, W. (2001). *The Strayed Reveller, Empedocles on Etna, and other poems*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA4730637X>
- Anderson, D. (2013, February 15). *The Buried Life*. Retrieved February 12, 2025, from <https://thearnoldianproject.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/the-buried-life/>
- Gabriel [Cisneros]. (2023). *The whispering voices behind the poetry of Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold: three theoretical approaches to selected works: formalist, psychoanalytic, and Marxist* [MA Thesis]. Texas Southern University.
- Dickemann, H. (2005). "Shadow (Analytical Psychology)" in *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* by Hans Dieckmann; De Mijolla; Alain de Mijolla (Ed.).

Freud, S. (2015). *The Ego and the Id* (J. Riviere, Trans.). Hogarth Press.

Freud Sigmund. (1900). *The interpretation of Dreams* (First).

Grob, A. (1988). *The Poetry of Pessimism: Arnold's "Resignation": Vol. Vol 26*. West Virginia University Press.

Norris, R. (2019, September 9). **FEATURED POEM: THE BURIED LIFE BY MATTHEW ARNOLD**. *The Reader*. Retrieved February 7, 2025, from <https://www.thereader.org.uk/featured-poem-the-buried-life-by-matthew-arnold/>