

Regret, Choice, and Existential Meaning in *The Midnight Library*: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

This paper examines *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig as a contemporary exploration of regret, existential choice, and mental health. Through the protagonist Nora Seed's journey across alternate lives, the novel interrogates the human tendency to idealize unrealized possibilities. The study argues that Haig presents a philosophical yet accessible narrative aligned with existential thought, emphasizing that meaning in life emerges not from perfection but from acceptance and engagement with one's present reality.

Keywords: Regret, Existentialism, Mental Health, Choice, Alternate Lives, Self-realization.

Introduction

Contemporary fiction frequently reflects the psychological struggles of modern life, particularly anxiety, depression, and indecision. *The Midnight Library* (2020) emerges as a significant text in this context, combining speculative fiction with philosophical inquiry. The novel explores how regret shapes human perception and how individuals often idealize alternative possibilities.

The narrative follows Nora Seed, a woman overwhelmed by dissatisfaction and regret, who finds herself in a mysterious library between life and death. Each book in this library represents a different life she could have lived. This paper analyzes the novel through an existential framework, focusing on freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning.

Theoretical Framework: Existentialism

Existentialism provides a crucial lens for interpreting the novel. Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard emphasize individual freedom, responsibility, and the creation of meaning in an uncertain world. A foundational principle of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals define themselves through their actions. As Sartre states, “*Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself*” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*). This idea is central to Nora’s journey, as she confronts the consequences of her choices.

Sartre further argues that “*man is condemned to be free*” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*), highlighting the burden of responsibility that accompanies human freedom. This notion is reflected in Nora’s realization that every life, regardless of its apparent success, involves difficult choices and consequences.

Similarly, Kierkegaard describes anxiety as “*the dizziness of freedom*” (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*), emphasizing the psychological weight of choice. His observation that “*life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards*” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*) captures the tension between reflection and action.

Camus introduces the concept of the absurd, arguing that meaning must be created despite life’s uncertainty. As he writes, “*The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart*” (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*). This perspective is crucial to understanding Nora’s transformation.

Narrative Structure and Alternate Lives

The Midnight Library functions as a metaphorical space between life and death, where each book represents a possible life shaped by different choices. As Mrs. Elm explains, “*Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived*” (Matt Haig, *The Midnight Library*).

Through this structure, Nora explores multiple alternate lives. She becomes a pub owner and realizes that a seemingly peaceful life can be emotionally unfulfilling. As a glaciologist, she experiences intellectual satisfaction alongside isolation and danger. In another life, she discovers that her guilt over her cat’s death was misplaced. She also encounters a version of herself who achieves professional

success yet feels emotionally disconnected. Her experience as a mother introduces both love and responsibility, while her life as an academic reveals that intellectual fulfillment alone cannot resolve inner dissatisfaction.

These experiences collectively demonstrate that no life is free from struggle, reinforcing the existential idea that perfection is an illusion and that each choice carries its own consequences.

Regret and Existential Choice

Regret is the central emotional force in the novel. Nora initially perceives her life as a failure, but her journey through alternate lives reveals that regret often stems from incomplete understanding. The novel captures this idea through the observation that *"it is easy to mourn the lives we aren't living"* (Matt Haig, *The Midnight Library*). From an existential perspective, regret arises from awareness of unchosen possibilities. However, Sartre emphasizes that *"freedom is what you do with what's been done to you"* (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*), suggesting that individuals must focus on present action rather than past alternatives. Similarly, Kierkegaard's insight that *"life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards"* (Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*) reinforces the importance of moving forward despite uncertainty.

Through Nora's experiences, Haig challenges the assumption that different choices necessarily lead to better outcomes, emphasizing instead the importance of acceptance.

Mental Health and Existential Anxiety

The novel offers a nuanced portrayal of depression, presenting it as a persistent condition shaped by loneliness, societal expectations, and personal disappointment. Nora's mental state reflects existential anxiety, a confrontation with meaninglessness and uncertainty.

Rather than offering simplistic solutions, the narrative emphasizes gradual transformation. This aligns with Camus' insight that meaning must be created through engagement with life. His reflection that *"in the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer"* (Albert Camus, *Return to Tipasa*) highlights the possibility of resilience even in despair.

Meaning, Authenticity, and Self-Realization

A key insight of the novel is that meaning is not found in external achievements but in one's relationship with life. Nora ultimately realizes that there is no perfect life and that fulfillment arises from small moments of connection and presence.

This realization reflects Sartre's assertion that "*man is nothing else but what he makes of himself*" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*), emphasizing self-definition through action. It also aligns with Kierkegaard's warning that "*the most common form of despair is not being who you are*" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*), highlighting the importance of authenticity.

The novel further reflects Camus' philosophy that embracing life's imperfections leads to fulfillment. As he suggests, "*real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present*" (Albert Camus, *Notebooks*).

Conclusion

The Midnight Library offers a compelling exploration of regret, choice, and meaning in contemporary life. Through Nora's journey, Matt Haig challenges the tendency to romanticize alternative possibilities and instead advocates for acceptance of the present.

By integrating existential philosophy with narrative storytelling, the novel demonstrates that a meaningful life is not one free from mistakes but one that is consciously lived. Its relevance lies in its ability to address the uncertainties of modern existence while offering a hopeful perspective grounded in self-awareness and acceptance.

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