



Original Article

Between Life and Possibility: Existential Anxiety and the Search for Meaning in Matt Haig's The Midnight Library

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Abstract:

This research paper examines The Midnight Library through an existentialist framework, with particular attention to existentialism, possibility, freedom and choice, loneliness, regret, and the search for meaning. The paper argues that Haig transforms the supernatural concept of the Midnight Library into a philosophical thought experiment through which the protagonist is bound to examine the assumptions underlying her despair. By experiencing multiple possible lives, Nora discovers that there is no predetermined or universally perfect existence waiting to be found. Rather, meaning emerges through the ways individuals respond to uncertainty, exercise freedom, accept responsibility, cultivate relationships, and engage with the possibilities available to them. The novel explores the complex relationship between freedom, regret, responsibility, and the desire to discover a meaningful life.

Keywords: *The Midnight Library, Matt Haig, Existentialism, Existential Anxiety, Search for Meaning, Freedom and Choice, Regret, Possibility, Mortality, Identity, Loneliness, Alienation, Acceptance, Hope, Self-Transformation, Human Existence, Camus, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre.*

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Introduction:

“Between life and death there is a library, and within that library, every life contains many choices.” This evocative premise in Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* establishes the novel’s central philosophical concern that human existence is shaped by choices, possibilities, and the consequences that follow from them. At the centre of this exploration is Nora Seed, a young woman whose life has become overwhelmed by regret, loneliness, disappointment, and a profound sense of meaninglessness. Burdened by the belief that she has failed to make the right choices, Nora reaches a psychological crisis in which she loses her desire to continue living. At this critical point, she enters the mysterious Midnight Library, a liminal space situated between life and death.

The library contains an infinite number of books, with each book representing a different possible version of Nora’s life based on choices she might have made differently. The Midnight Library therefore becomes more than a supernatural setting; it functions as a philosophical space in which Nora is able to confront the consequences of her imagined alternatives. Guided by the librarian Mrs Elm, Nora is given the opportunity to experience several lives that emerge from choices she regrets not making. She becomes an Olympic swimmer, a successful musician, a glaciologist, a pub owner, a wife, and a person who follows paths radically different from the life she originally lived. Initially, these alternative lives appear to offer the happiness and fulfilment that Nora believes she has lost. However, her experiences gradually reveal that no life is entirely free from uncertainty, suffering, disappointment, or imperfection. Each

possibility carries its own difficulties, responsibilities, and unexpected consequences. Through these experiences, Nora begins to recognize that her dissatisfaction has been intensified by an idealized understanding of what her life could have been.

Nora’s journey ultimately represents a movement from existential despair towards an affirmative engagement with life. Her transformation does not arise from discovering a flawless alternative existence but from recognizing the value and possibility contained within her actual life. The novel thus suggests that overcoming existential anxiety requires neither the elimination of suffering nor the achievement of an ideal life. Instead, it involves accepting the imperfect nature of existence while remaining open to change, connection, responsibility, and future possibilities. In this sense, Nora’s movement from regret and meaninglessness towards acceptance can be understood as a movement towards an active optimism of life, in which existence itself becomes an opportunity to create meaning rather than merely a condition to be endured.

Matt Haig is a British author known for his speculative fiction and nonfiction genre. Some of his nonfiction books is inspired by mental breakdown he had when he was 24 years old. Facing anxiety occasionally he has been diagnosed with ADHD and autism. Matt Haig is said to be an atheist, for him books are his faith and the library is his church.

Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library*, published in 2020, is a contemporary novel that brings together psychological fiction, fantasy, and philosophical reflection to examine some of the fundamental questions of human existence. Through its imaginative premise and emotionally complex protagonist, the novel



explores the relationship between choice, regret, possibility, anxiety, and the search for meaning. Rather than presenting existence as a fixed or predetermined condition, Haig portrays life as a continuous process of making choices and responding to the consequences of those choices.

The protagonist, Nora Seed, is deeply dissatisfied with her life and burdened by a multitude of regrets. She believes that she has failed in several important areas of existence, including her relationships, career, ambitions, family life, and personal aspirations. Her inability to reconcile herself with these perceived failures gradually produces feelings of loneliness, disappointment, worthlessness, and meaninglessness. When Nora reaches a point of extreme despair, she enters the mysterious Midnight Library, a liminal space situated between life and death. In this extraordinary library, every book represents a different version of her life—one that she might have experienced had she made different decisions at crucial moments. The library consequently becomes a symbolic space of possibility in which Nora can confront her past choices and imagine alternative futures.

The novel's premise immediately raises several important existential questions: What makes a life meaningful? Is there such a thing as a perfect life? Are human beings free to construct their identities, or are their lives fundamentally determined by circumstances? Does having unlimited choices necessarily lead to happiness? What happens when awareness of countless possibilities becomes a source of anxiety rather than a source of freedom? These questions place *The Midnight Library* within a recognizable existential tradition concerned with individual existence, freedom,

responsibility, anxiety, alienation, mortality, uncertainty, and the problem of meaning.

Existentialist thought particularly emphasizes the individual's confrontation with freedom and the responsibility that accompanies it. Anxiety can arise when individuals recognize that their lives are not governed by a single predetermined path and that their choices have consequences. In Haig's novel, Nora's existential anxiety originates not simply from the fear of death but from her overwhelming awareness of unrealized possibilities. She continually imagines the lives she might have lived and interprets them as evidence of her failures. Her regret therefore becomes a psychological burden that prevents her from recognizing the value of her present existence.

Initially, the Midnight Library appears to offer Nora complete freedom because it provides access to countless alternative lives. However, her experiences gradually demonstrate that unlimited possibility does not automatically produce happiness or meaning. Every alternative life contains its own difficulties, uncertainties, responsibilities, and forms of loss. Nora ultimately learns that a meaningful existence cannot be achieved by discovering a perfect life. Instead, meaning emerges through accepting the uncertainty and imperfection of existence, recognizing the value of relationships, taking responsibility for one's choices, and remaining open to future possibilities. Her journey therefore represents a movement from existential anxiety and regret towards acceptance, hope, and an active affirmation of life.

Existentialism and Existential Anxiety:

Existentialism may be understood as a philosophical approach that places the



individual at the centre of questions concerning freedom, uncertainty, responsibility, mortality, choice, and the search for meaning. Although existentialist thinkers differ significantly in their philosophical positions, they share a continuous concern with the individual's confrontation with existence and with the fundamental question of how one should live. Existentialism therefore does not provide a single, predetermined answer to the meaning of life; rather, it emphasizes the individual's responsibility to confront uncertainty and construct meaning through lived experience, choices, and relationships.

A central concept within existential thought is existential anxiety. Such anxiety emerges when an individual becomes conscious of the uncertainty of existence, the openness of the future, personal freedom, and the inability to exercise complete control over one's circumstances. The philosophical discussion of anxiety can be traced to Søren Kierkegaard, who associated anxiety with the individual's encounter with possibility and freedom, and was later developed in different ways by existential thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. In existentialist thought, anxiety is not simply an ordinary emotional disturbance; it can arise from the individual's awareness that existence is uncertain and that choices carry responsibility and consequences.

Nora Seed's experience in *The Midnight Library* exemplifies this form of existential anxiety. Her crisis does not arise merely from the series of unfortunate events she has experienced. Her deeper problem is the interpretation she places upon those experiences. Nora increasingly perceives her disappointments as evidence that she has chosen the wrong paths and failed to become the person, she could have been. Her regret

therefore becomes an existential condition rather than merely a response to particular events. She repeatedly imagines alternative versions of her life and asks questions such as:

- What if she had stayed with Dan?
- What if she had continued swimming?
- What if she had remained in the band with her brother Joe?
- What if she had gone to Australia with her best friend Izzy?
- What if she had pursued a career as a glaciologist?
- What if she had made different choices at crucial moments?

Nora's consciousness becomes trapped in a continuous cycle of "what if" questions. Possibility, which is ordinarily associated with freedom and opportunity, becomes a source of psychological suffering. She does not simply regret particular decisions; she imagines an almost unlimited number of alternative lives and compares her actual existence with idealized versions of herself. In this way, Haig demonstrates how excessive reflection on unrealized possibilities can transform freedom into anxiety.

The Midnight Library makes this abstract existential problem visible and experiential. Instead of merely imagining alternative lives, Nora is given the extraordinary opportunity to enter them and experience their consequences. The novel consequently transforms a philosophical question into a narrative and psychological experience. The library becomes a space in which Nora is forced to confront the consequences of her assumptions about happiness, success, failure, and fulfilment.



The Midnight Library is therefore the most significant symbolic setting in the novel. Situated between life and death, it contains an apparently infinite number of books, each representing a possible version of Nora's existence. The library initially appears to provide Nora with an opportunity to discover her "perfect life." Each book seems to answer the question: What might I have become if I had chosen differently? In this sense, the library functions as a physical representation of human possibility, unrealized potential, and the alternative selves that individuals construct in their imagination.

The supernatural setting temporarily separates Nora from ordinary time and space. The conventional limitations of human existence appear to be suspended, allowing her to move between different possibilities and examine the consequences of different decisions. Yet the library gradually exposes a paradox. Although it appears to offer complete freedom, it also creates uncertainty and confusion. If an apparently infinite number of lives are available, how can an individual determine which life is truly the right one? The abundance of possibilities does not eliminate anxiety; instead, it intensifies it.

This paradox represents one of the novel's central existential insights: freedom without certainty can generate anxiety. The library consequently represents both hope and existential burden. It provides Nora with opportunities, but it cannot provide an external formula that determines which possibility will make her life meaningful. Nora must ultimately discover that meaning cannot simply be selected from a catalogue of alternative lives. It must be created through engagement with one's actual

circumstances, relationships, choices, responsibilities, and possibilities.

Haig also incorporates the philosophical ideas of Henry David Thoreau into Nora's intellectual and personal journey. Thoreau's emphasis on nature, simplicity, deliberate living, self-awareness, and perception becomes significant in Nora's developing understanding of existence. His statement, "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see," acquires particular significance in the novel because Nora's transformation depends upon a change in perception. She gradually learns that the meaning of her life cannot be determined solely by external achievements or by comparison with imagined alternative lives. What changes is not necessarily the world around her but her way of seeing and interpreting that world. Thus, Haig connects existential anxiety with perception and suggests that the movement towards meaning begins when the individual learns to recognize possibility within the imperfect reality of lived experience.

Possibility: Freedom or Anxiety:

"Would you have done anything different, if you had the chance to undo your regret?" (29) Haig uses the idea of existential anxiety to the possibility and freedom.

The concept of possibility occupies a central position in *The Midnight Library*, where Matt Haig presents possibility as both a source of freedom and a potential cause of existential anxiety. The Midnight Library contains an apparently endless number of possible lives, suggesting that human existence is not completely predetermined and that individuals possess the capacity to imagine and pursue different futures. From one perspective, this abundance of possibilities can be liberating



because it challenges the belief that a person is permanently defined by past mistakes, present circumstances, or previous choices. The future remains open, and change is therefore possible. However, Haig simultaneously exposes the disturbing side of unlimited possibility. If countless ways of living are available, how can an individual determine which life is truly desirable, meaningful, or authentic?

Nora Seed's existential crisis demonstrates this paradox. At the beginning of her journey, she assumes that a different choice might have produced a happier and more successful existence. She therefore imagines that more possibilities can lead to more chances of happiness. The *Midnight Library* appears to confirm this belief by giving her access to lives that emerge from decisions she did not make. Nora experiences several alternative identities and discovers that she could have become a successful athlete, musician, scientist, wife, businesswoman, or traveller. Yet these experiences gradually challenge her assumption that an alternative life would necessarily be a better life.

The novel eventually leads Nora towards a more complex understanding: more possibilities do not necessarily produce more meaning. The fundamental problem is not that Nora has too few possible lives but that she has become unable to appreciate the life she actually possesses. Her imagination has transformed unrealized possibilities into idealized alternatives, causing her to judge her present existence against lives that exist only hypothetically. Through experiencing these alternatives, she learns that every life contains difficulties, uncertainties, responsibilities, disappointments, and unexpected losses. There is no existence completely free from suffering.

This distinction is central to Haig's existential argument. Possibility becomes meaningful only when it is connected to choice and action. Human beings cannot simultaneously live every possible life. To exist is to choose one direction while inevitably leaving other possibilities unrealized. Every choice therefore involves both freedom and limitation. Choosing one possibility means accepting that countless other possibilities will remain unrealized.

Haig's treatment of Nora's despair also resonates with the existential philosophy of Albert Camus, particularly his reflections on absurdity, suffering, despair, and the human struggle to continue living despite the absence of guaranteed answers (151). Camus's philosophy emphasizes the tension between the human desire for meaning and the uncertain or indifferent nature of existence. In *The Midnight Library*, Nora initially responds to this tension through despair, believing that her failures have made her life meaningless. Her eventual transformation, however, involves rejecting the assumption that life must first provide an absolute meaning before it becomes worth living.

Thus, *The Midnight Library* presents possibility as a double-edged concept. It can expand freedom and hope, but when viewed through regret and comparison, it can also intensify anxiety. Haig ultimately suggests that a meaningful life does not emerge from experiencing every possible alternative. Instead, meaning develops when an individual accepts the necessity of choosing, takes responsibility for that choice, and engages fully with the life that is actually being lived. Choosing one life necessarily means allowing other lives to remain possibilities rather than realities, and



accepting this limitation becomes an essential part of mature existence.

Regret and the Illusion of the Perfect Life:

“The things we regret most are the things we never did.” This idea of Horace Jackson Brown jr.’s captures one of the central psychological and philosophical concerns in Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library*. Throughout the novel, Haig explores how unrealized possibilities can become powerful sources of regret, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. The human tendency to imagine how life might have been different often creates an idealized version of the past in which the paths not taken appear more attractive than the life actually experienced. Through Nora Seed’s journey, Haig demonstrates that regret is not simply a response to past decisions; it can also become a distorted way of interpreting the present.

Regret forms the emotional foundation of Nora’s existential crisis. She believes that her unhappiness is primarily the result of the choices she has made throughout her life. She regrets abandoning swimming, ending her relationship with Dan, leaving her brother Joe and the band, not accompanying Izzy to Australia, and failing to pursue her academic and professional ambitions. These regrets gradually accumulate until Nora begins to view her entire existence as a series of wrong decisions. Rather than seeing herself as someone who has experienced difficulties, she comes to understand herself as someone who has fundamentally failed.

Haig transforms this psychological condition into a literal object through the Book of Regrets. The book gives physical form to Nora’s internal suffering and allows her to confront the accumulated weight of her past.

Each regret represents not only something that happened but also a possibility that Nora believes she lost forever. The Book of Regrets therefore becomes a symbolic representation of the human tendency to construct alternative versions of the self from unrealized choices.

However, Nora’s experiences in the alternative lives gradually expose the limitations of regret. The lives she previously imagined as perfect turn out to be equally complicated. A life with Dan does not provide the happiness she expected. Her successful athletic career involves sacrifice, pressure, and personal loss. A life of fame brings its own emotional difficulties and responsibilities. Her decision to accompany Izzy to Australia does not protect her from tragedy or uncertainty. Even apparently peaceful domestic and family lives contain conflict, responsibility, disappointment, and vulnerability. Through these experiences, Nora discovers that changing one decision does not remove the fundamental complexities of existence.

This becomes one of Haig’s strongest philosophical arguments: the alternative life is often more attractive when it exists only in imagination. When Nora imagines another life, she sees primarily what she believes she has gained by choosing differently. She rarely imagines the difficulties that would accompany that choice. Once she actually experiences these alternative lives, their hidden consequences become visible. The novel consequently exposes regret as a form of selective imagination. Nora compares her real life, with all its known problems, against imagined lives in which she initially sees only their advantages.

Haig’s exploration of regret also resonates with Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas (79) concerning self-overcoming, suffering,



possibility, and the process of becoming oneself. Rather than escaping the self or wishing endlessly for another existence, Nietzschean thought emphasizes transformation and the active creation of oneself. Nora's journey similarly requires her to move beyond defining herself through failure and unrealized possibilities. She gradually understands that she cannot become meaningful by becoming someone else; she must learn to engage with and transform the life she already possesses.

The Midnight Library therefore corrects the imbalance created by regret by allowing Nora to experience the complete consequences of her imagined choices. Her journey demonstrates that no life is perfect and that every possible existence contains both opportunities and limitations. Ultimately, Haig suggests that overcoming regret requires accepting that the past cannot be rewritten and that the value of life lies not in discovering a flawless alternative but in recognizing the possibilities that remain within the present.

Search for Meaning:

The most significant philosophical development in Nora Seed's journey concerns the search for meaning. At the beginning of *The Midnight Library*, Nora experiences her existence as empty, insignificant, and devoid of purpose. She believes that the accumulation of her failures, disappointments, and unrealized ambitions has made her life meaningless. Her understanding of meaning is initially dependent upon external achievements and relationships. Because she feels that she is no longer needed by anyone, she concludes that her existence has little or no value. Consequently, she begins to perceive herself as a burden rather than as a

person possessing possibilities and intrinsic worth.

However, the novel gradually challenges this assumption by presenting meaning not as a perfect condition that already exists somewhere waiting to be discovered, but as something that can be created through living. Nora's experiences in the Midnight Library demonstrate that no alternative life can provide permanent certainty, complete happiness, or freedom from suffering. Every possible existence contains its own difficulties and responsibilities. Meaning therefore cannot depend upon finding a flawless version of life. Instead, it emerges through engagement with experience, relationships, choices, responsibility, and the willingness to remain open to possibility.

One of the most significant alternative lives Nora experiences is her life as a glaciologist. In this existence, she studies the natural environment and finds herself surrounded by the vastness and power of the Arctic landscape. The geographical setting is symbolically important because it places Nora in an environment that is enormously larger than her personal concerns. Her individual regrets, disappointments, and anxieties appear less overwhelming when confronted with the scale of the natural world.

The encounter with the polar bear becomes a particularly significant existential moment. Faced with an immediate threat to her physical existence, Nora is suddenly confronted with her vulnerability and mortality. Paradoxically, the possibility of death awakens within her an intense desire to survive. Instead of wishing to escape existence, she instinctively struggles to preserve it. This moment reveals a fundamental transformation in her



consciousness: she begins to recognize the value of life not because she has solved all her problems, but because she has rediscovered her desire to live.

Nature therefore functions as a corrective to Nora's inward-looking despair. Her earlier consciousness is dominated by self-analysis, regret, and hypothetical alternatives. The Arctic experience shifts her attention from the imagined past towards immediate physical existence. She becomes aware of her body, her vulnerability, and her instinctive connection with life. The experience demonstrates that meaning can emerge through direct engagement with the world rather than through endless intellectual comparison between different possibilities.

Importantly, Nora's problems do not simply disappear. Her circumstances remain complex, but her relationship to those circumstances changes. She begins to understand that existence is larger than the collection of regrets occupying her mind. Her life cannot be measured solely by what she has achieved or failed to achieve. The glaciologist experience therefore becomes a crucial stage in her movement towards existential awareness.

Ultimately, Haig suggests that the search for meaning is not a quest for one final answer. Meaning develops through the act of living itself—through experiencing the world, forming connections, making choices, accepting uncertainty, and remaining receptive to future possibilities. Nora's awakening demonstrates that life need not be perfect to be meaningful; it needs to be experienced, valued, and continually lived.

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* also resonates with the philosophical ideas of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, particularly his

understanding of happiness, pleasure, simplicity, friendship, and freedom from unnecessary fear. Epicurean philosophy does not define happiness primarily through wealth, fame, extraordinary achievement, or the accumulation of material possessions. Instead, it emphasizes a life characterized by moderation, meaningful relationships, tranquillity, and freedom from excessive anxiety. These ideas become relevant to Nora Seed's gradual realization that a meaningful existence does not require extraordinary success or the achievement of every imagined ambition.

At the beginning of the novel, Nora evaluates her life largely through the standards of success and failure. She regrets opportunities she has lost and choices she believes have prevented her from becoming a happier or more accomplished person. Her dissatisfaction is intensified by her tendency to compare her actual life with idealized alternatives. She assumes that happiness exists somewhere in another version of herself and that she can find it only by correcting the decisions of her past. Consequently, she fails to recognize the ordinary possibilities for happiness that remain available within her present existence.

The Midnight Library initially appears to provide the perfect solution to this problem. It gives Nora access to countless alternative lives and allows her to test the consequences of different choices. However, the more lives she experiences, the more confused she becomes. Each apparently desirable existence contains unexpected difficulties, responsibilities, losses, and limitations. Her experiences gradually undermine the assumption that there is a single perfect life capable of eliminating suffering and uncertainty.



Nora's transformation begins when she stops searching for a perfect alternative and starts recognizing the possibilities contained within her actual existence. This represents a gradual movement in her consciousness:

Regret → Possibility → Confusion → Recognition → Acceptance → Choice → Hope

This sequence also provides an important structural pattern for understanding Nora's existential development. At the beginning, she is dominated by the past. Her consciousness is filled with memories, missed opportunities, and regrets about decisions that cannot be changed. After entering the Midnight Library, her attention shifts towards alternative futures. She becomes fascinated by the lives she might have lived and initially believes that one of them will provide the happiness she has been seeking. Yet her repeated encounters with alternative realities produce confusion and eventually recognition. She begins to understand that no possible life can guarantee permanent happiness.

This recognition leads to acceptance. Nora gradually accepts that an imperfect life can nevertheless contain value and possibility. Acceptance does not mean passive resignation or surrender. Rather, it enables her to exercise choice consciously and to participate actively in shaping her future. Once she accepts uncertainty, she becomes capable of experiencing hope.

The movement from regret to hope is therefore central to Haig's existential argument. The novel's conclusion does not lead Nora towards the discovery of a perfect alternative life. Instead, it brings her back to her imperfect but real existence. Haig ultimately suggests that happiness and meaning are not necessarily found in extraordinary achievement but can

emerge through relationships, ordinary experiences, freedom from unnecessary fear, and an active willingness to live. Nora's return to the present thus becomes an affirmation of life itself: the meaningful life is not the life in which every possibility has been fulfilled, but the life in which one learns to value the possibilities that remain.

Conclusion:

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* can be read as a significant contemporary exploration of existential anxiety and the human search for meaning. Through Nora Seed's extraordinary movement between life and death, Haig dramatizes fundamental existential questions concerning freedom, choice, regret, identity, mortality, possibility, responsibility, and the meaning of existence. The novel also resonates with the philosophical concerns of thinkers such as Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly their reflections on anxiety, freedom, suffering, possibility, self-creation, and the individual's responsibility to confront existence.

Nora's existential anxiety emerges primarily from her belief that she has chosen the wrong life. She interprets her disappointments and failures as evidence that a better version of herself exists somewhere beyond her actual circumstances. Consequently, she becomes trapped in continuous comparisons between her real existence and imaginary alternatives. The Midnight Library initially appears to provide a solution to this anxiety. If countless possible lives are available, Nora assumes that she will eventually discover the one existence capable of providing lasting happiness and fulfilment.



The Midnight Library functions as an existential laboratory in which Nora Seed is given an extraordinary opportunity to examine the relationship between choice, possibility, regret, and meaning. Rather than simply imagining that another life would solve her problems, Nora is able to enter different versions of her existence and experience their consequences directly. The library therefore transforms an abstract philosophical question—*Would I be happier if I had chosen differently?*—into a lived psychological experience. Through these alternative lives, Nora discovers that changing external circumstances does not automatically eliminate anxiety, disappointment, responsibility, or suffering.

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