



**A STUDY TO ANALYSE THE MOVIE “STRANGER THAN FICTION”
THROUGH A PSYCHOLOGICAL LENS**

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Abstract

Stranger Than Fiction (Forster, 2006) is a comedy-fantasy film that displays existential themes, determinism and free will. The movie centres around the life of Harold Crick, an IRS auditor who lives a highly structured and monotonous life, filled with routines. The study looks at psychological concepts such as determinism versus free will, the search for meaning and the impact of self-awareness on personal growth. Harold's character exemplifies a profound journey of self-discovery and existential reflection. The film's use of metafiction and unnatural narration provides a unique narrative space that externalises Harold's inner psychological state, creating a layered exploration of the human condition. The findings suggest that the film not only reflects deep psychological insights but also serves as a medium for viewers to explore their existential concerns and moral values.

Keywords: Determinism, Free Will, Existentialism, Meaning, Themes.

Aim: To analyse the movie “Stranger Than Fiction” through a psychological lens.

Existentialism

A major influence on the development of humanistic psychology is existential philosophy and the psychotherapy derived from it.

Existentialism stems from the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and stresses the significance of values and meaning in personality. Rollo May stated, "Existentialism is the endeavour to understand man by cutting below the cleavage between subject and object which has bedevilled Western thought and science since shortly after the Renaissance."

Existentialism emphasises as the importance of meaning in one's life and ability to freely choose that meaning. Existentialism stresses the meaning of human existence, freedom of choice and the uniqueness of each individual. For the existentialists, the most important aspects of humans are their personal, subjective interpretations of life and the choices they make in light of those interpretations. Like the romanticists, the existentialists viewed personal experience and feeling as the most valid guides for one's behaviour. Although it is possible to trace the origins of existential philosophy at least as far back as Socrates, who embraced the Delphic dictate “Know thyself” and said, “An unexamined life is not worth living,” one of the first modern existential philosophers was Søren Kierkegaard.

Søren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard rejected Hegel's philosophy because it placed too much emphasis on the logical and the rational and not enough on the irrational, emotional side of human experience.

For the same reason, he rejected science as too mechanistic: he thought it prevented us from viewing humans as choosing beings. According to Kierkegaard, God, who is unlimited and eternal, cannot be explained, understood, or proved logically. He must be taken on faith, and that is a very personal, subjective choice. Christ is both God and man; he is eternal truth existing in finite time; he lived almost 2,000 years ago but also exists presently; and he violates natural law with his miracles. Facts or logic do not remove these paradoxes; they create them. Belief alone can resolve them; subjectivity, not objectivity, is truth.

Stages of Personal Freedom. In *Either/Or* (1843), Kierkegaard offers a stage theory of what he calls personal freedom. Most people reside in the aesthetic stage. At this stage, people seek out many forms of pleasure and excitement. Like a moth to the flame, they do not recognise their ability to choose among the enticements that draw their attention. People operating at this level are hedonistic, and such an existence ultimately leads to boredom and despair.

Next is the ethical stage. People operating at this level accept the responsibility of making choices but use as their guide ethical principles established by others—for example, moral conventions (say, against drinking and dancing) or church dogma.

Kierkegaard referred to the highest level of existence as the religious stage. At this stage, people recognise and accept their responsibility and enter into a unique and personal relationship with God. The nature of this relationship is not determined by convention or by generally accepted moral laws but by the nature of God and by one's self-awareness. People existing on this level are open to possibilities in life that often run contrary to what is generally accepted, and therefore may tend to be seen as nonconformists.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

Nietzsche held that there are two major aspects of human nature: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Apollonian aspect of human nature represents our rational side, our desire for tranquillity, predictability, and orderliness. The Dionysian aspect of human nature represents our irrational side, our attraction to creative chaos and to passionate, dynamic experiences.

In clear anticipation of modern existential psychology, Nietzsche said, “Every man is a unique miracle;” “We are responsible to ourselves for our own existence;” and “Freedom makes us responsible for our characters just as artists are responsible for their creations” (Golomb, 1989). We are, however, only potentially free. Personality is an artist’s creation, but some people are better artists than others. If people use their will to power to mould the ingredients available to them into an authentic, unique personality, they are free. If they live in accordance with moral standards not of their own creation, they are slaves. The difference, then, between freedom and slavery is a matter of choice: “Everyone who wishes to become free must become free through his own endeavour.... Freedom does not fall into any man’s lap as a miraculous gift” (Golomb, 1989)

Will to Power. According to Nietzsche, the answer to our predicament can be found only within ourselves. Humans need to acquire knowledge of themselves and then act on that knowledge. Meaning and morality cannot (or should not) be imposed from the outside; it must be discovered within. Such self-examination reveals that the most basic human motive is the will to power. Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche believed that humans are basically irrational. The will to power can be fully satisfied only if a person acts as he or she feels—that is, acts in such a way as to satisfy all instincts: “The will to power is the primitive motive force out of which

all other motives have been derived” (Sahakian, 1981). Even happiness, which the utilitarians and others claimed to be so important as a motive, is the result of the increase in one’s power: “The only reality is this: The will of every centre of power to become stronger— not self-preservation, but the desire to appropriate, to become master, to become more, to become stronger” (Sahakian, 1981).

Superman. The will to power is the tendency to gain mastery over one’s self and one’s destiny. If given expression, the will to power causes a person to seek new experiences and to ultimately reach his or her full potential. Such individual growth cannot (or should not) be inhibited by conventional morality and thus must go “beyond good and evil.” People approaching their full potential are supermen because standard morality does not govern their lives. The meaning and morality of one’s life come from within oneself. Healthy, strong individuals seek self-expansion by experimenting, by living dangerously. Life consists of an almost infinite number of possibilities, and the healthy person (the superman) explores as many of them as possible. Acting in accordance with the will to power means living a life of becoming more than you were, a life of continual self- renewal. Any viewpoint that promotes herd conformity as opposed to individuality should be actively avoided. Nietzsche believed that repressive civilization is the primary cause of humans’ mental anguish, a belief later shared by Freud. The meaning of life, then, is found within the individual, and the daring, the supermen, will find it there: “Only dare to believe in yourselves—in yourselves and in your entrails! He who does not believe in himself always lies” (Nietzsche, 1883– 1885/1969). In accordance with what would become a canon of existentialism, Nietzsche said, “If you have your why? for life, then you can get along with almost any how?” (1889/1998).

Martin Heidegger

Many, if not most, of the terms and concepts that appear in the writings of current existential psychologists, can be traced to the writings of Heidegger. Heidegger used phenomenology to examine the totality of human existence.

Dasein. Heidegger used the term Dasein to indicate that a person and the world are inseparable. Literally, Dasein means “to be” (sein) “there” (Da), and Heidegger usually described the relationship between a person and the world as “being-in-the-world.” Heidegger’s concept of Dasein is complicated. To be means “to exist,” and to exist is a dynamic process. To exist as a human is to exist unlike anything else. In the process of existing, humans choose, evaluate, accept, reject and expand. Humans are not static; they are always becoming something other than what they were. To exist is to become different; to exist is to change. How a particular person chooses to exist is an individual matter, but for all people, existence is an active process.

Authenticity. It was very significant to Heidegger that humans can ponder the finiteness of their existence. For Heidegger, a prerequisite for living an authentic life is coming to grips with the fact that “I must someday die.” With that realisation dealt with, the person can get busy and exercise his or her freedom to create a meaningful existence, an existence that allows for almost constant personal growth, or becoming. An authentic life is lived with a sense of excitement or even urgency because one realises one’s existence is finite. With the time that one has available, one must explore life’s possibilities and become all that one can become. In general, the speech and behaviour of authentic individuals accurately reflect their inner feelings.

Guilt and Anxiety. Heidegger believed that if we do not exercise our personal freedom, we experience guilt. Because most people do not fully exercise their freedom to choose, they experience at least some guilt. All humans can do to minimise guilt is try to live an authentic life—that is, to recognise and live in accordance with their ability to choose their own existence. Heidegger believed that choosing one's existence rather than conforming to the dictates of society, culture or someone else also takes courage. And in general, living an authentic life by accepting all conditions of existence and making personal choices means that one must experience anxiety. For Heidegger, anxiety is a necessary part of living an authentic life. One reason for this anxiety is that authentic people are always experimenting with life, always taking chances, and always becoming. Entering the unknown causes part of the anxiety associated with an authentic life. Another reason that exercising one's freedom in life causes anxiety is that it makes one responsible for the consequences of those choices. The free individual cannot blame God, parents, circumstances, genes, or anything else for what he or she becomes. One is responsible for one's own life. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand.

Thrownness. Heidegger did, however, place limits on personal freedom. He said that we are thrown into the Da, or there, of our particular life by circumstances beyond our control. This thrownness determines, for example, whether we are male or female, short or tall, attractive or unattractive, rich or poor, American or Russian, the time in human history that we are born, and so on. Thrownness determines the conditions under which we exercise our freedom. According to Heidegger, all humans are free, but the conditions under which that freedom is exercised vary. Thrownness provides the context for one's existence. What Heidegger called thrownness has also been called facticity, referring to the facts that characterise a human existence.

Ludwig Binswanger

Under the influence of Heidegger, Binswanger applied phenomenology to psychiatry, and later he became an existential analyst. Like most existential psychologists, Binswanger emphasised the here-and-now, considering the past or future important only insofar as they manifested themselves in the present. To understand and help a person, according to Binswanger, one must learn how that person views his or her life at the moment along with his or her anxieties, fears, values, thought processes, social relations and personal meanings instead of those notions in general. Each person lives in his or her own private, subjective world, which is not generalisable.

Modes of Existence. Binswanger discussed three different modes of existence to which individuals give meaning through their consciousness. They are the Umwelt (the “around world”), the world of things and events; the Mitwelt (the “with world”), interactions with other humans; and the Eigenwel (the “own world”), a person’s private, inner, subjective experience.

One of Binswanger’s most important concepts was that of Weltanschauung, or world-design that is, how an individual views and embraces the world. It is through the world design that one lives one’s life. Binswanger agreed with Heidegger that thrownness places limits on personal freedom. For Binswanger, the circumstances into which one is thrown determine one’s ground of existence, defined as the conditions under which one exercises one’s personal freedom. Everyone seeks being-beyond-the world, that is, the way in which people try to transform their circumstances by exercising their free will.

Rollo May

Rollo May (1909–1994) introduced existentialism to U.S. psychology through books he edited, *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* (with Angel & Ellenberger, 1958) and *Existential Psychology* (1961). Like many other existential thinkers, May was strongly influenced by Kierkegaard, who had rejected Hegel's belief that an individual's life had meaning only insofar as it related to the totality of things, which Hegel called the Absolute.

Normal and Neurotic Anxiety. May believed, along with the other existentialists, that the most important fact about humans is that they are free. However, freedom does not produce a tranquil life but carries with it responsibility, uncertainty and therefore anxiety. The healthy (authentic) person exercises the freedom to embrace life fully and to approach his or her full potential. Exercising one's freedom means going beyond what one previously was, ignoring the expectations (roles) for one's behaviour that others impose and therefore often acting contrary to traditions, mores or conventions. All this causes anxiety, but it is normal, healthy anxiety because it is conducive to personal growth (becoming). Neurotic anxiety is not conducive to personal growth because it results from the fear of freedom. The person experiencing neurotic anxiety lives his or her life in such a way that reduces or eliminates personal freedom. Such a person conforms to tradition, religious dogma, the expectations of others, or anything else that reduces his or her need to make personal choices. Self-alienation occurs whenever people accept, as their own, values dictated by society rather than those personally attained. Self-alienation results not only in guilt but also in apathy and despair. Obviously, it is not easy being human due to this conflict between anxiety and guilt: "The conflict is between every human being's need to struggle toward enlarged self-awareness,

maturity, freedom and responsibility, and his tendency to remain a child and cling to the protection of parents or parental substitutes” (May, 1953)

The Importance of Myth. According to May, myths provide the major vehicle for providing meaning in life: “Myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence” (1991). In sympathy with May’s conclusion, McAdams and Pals (2006) say, “The process of putting life experience into a meaningful narrative form influences development, coping, and well-being.” Because myth is a type of narrative (story), May’s observation that effective living depends on effective myths is supported by recently developed “narrative therapy.” Narrative therapy examines the stories by which people live and understand their lives and the effectiveness of those stories. May had little patience with those who portray humans as only good or bad. For him, we are potentially both, and therein lies the dilemma of human existence. According to May, myths serve four primary functions: They provide a sense of identity, provide a sense of community, support our moral values, and provide a means of dealing with the mysteries of creation.

George Kelly

With his concept of constructive alternativism, Kelly aligned himself squarely with the existentialists. Kelly maintained that people are free to choose the constructs they use in interacting with the world. For example, when meeting a person for the first time, one might construe that person as being “friendly.” If the person’s subsequent behaviour is in accordance with the construct of friendly, then the construct will be useful in anticipating that person’s behaviour. This means that people can view and interpret events in an almost infinite number of ways because construing them is an individual matter. No one needs to be a victim of circumstances or a victim of the past; all are free to view things as they wish. According to

Kelly, it is not common experience that makes people similar; rather, it is how they construe reality. If two people employ more or less the same personal constructs in dealing with the world, then they are similar no matter how dissimilar their past experiences had been. Kelly also said that to truly understand another person, we have to know how that person construes things.

Existentialism as Therapy

People may be thrown into negative circumstances such as poverty, incest, rape, or war, but they need not be devastated by those experiences. Most existentialists accept Nietzsche's proclamation: "*What does not kill me, makes me stronger*" (Nietzsche, 1889/1998). This strength comes from finding meaning even in a negative experience and growing from that meaning. In his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946/1984), psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl (1905–1997) described his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp. One of his major observations was that prisoners who, even under those dire circumstances, found meaning in their lives and something to live for continued to live.

According to Frankl (1946/1984), "*Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning*". By choosing, we change the meanings and values of what we experience. Although physical circumstances may be the same for different people, how those circumstances are embraced, interpreted, valued, symbolised, and responded to is a matter of personal choice. By exercising our freedom, we grow as human beings; and because exercising freedom is an unending process, the developmental process is never completed. Becoming characterises the authentic life, which, in turn, is characterised by anxiety. Not becoming, or remaining stagnant, characterises the inauthentic life—as does guilt—because the person does not attempt to fully manifest his or her human potential.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory explains much of social and clinical psychology in terms of our awareness of our own mortality (Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991). Awareness of death in an animal with an inherent proclivity for self-preservation gives rise to an ever-present potential for existential terror. This potential for terror is managed by an anxiety-buffering system consisting of cultural worldviews, self-esteem and close interpersonal relationships. Cultural worldviews are shared beliefs about reality that provide answers to basic questions about life, standards for valued behaviour and the promise of literal or symbolic immortality to those who live up to these standards. Literal immortality beliefs provide hope that life will continue after physical death, as exemplified by afterlife concepts such as heaven, reincarnation or joining with ancestral spirits. Symbolic immortality comes from contributing to something greater than oneself that will continue long after one has died, such as a family, nation or the memories of others. Self-esteem is a sense of personal value that results from believing that one is living up to the standards of one's cultural worldview. Close relationships provide consensual validation of one's worldviews and self-esteem needed to maintain confidence in them, as well as providing security in their own right (Mikulincer et al., 2003). TMT posits that people manage the potential for anxiety inherent in awareness of the inevitability of death by maintaining faith in their cultural worldviews, self-esteem and close relationships. These anxiety-buffering systems mitigate existential terror by imparting a sense that one is a person of value living in a meaningful world. Research has supported a network of converging hypotheses derived from TMT. This research shows that (1) reminders of death (mortality salience) increase commitment to one's worldview, self-esteem and relationships and increase defence of these entities when threatened; (2) bolstering self-esteem, worldview or relationships makes one less prone to anxiety and anxiety-related behaviour in response to

threats; (3) threats to worldview, self-esteem and relationships increase the accessibility of death-related thoughts and (4) self-esteem striving, cultural worldview defence or affirming close relationships in response to mortality salience reduce death thought accessibility and the need for further terror management defences; this suggests that the three components of the anxiety buffer are psychologically interchangeable (Hart et al., 2005).

Logotherapy

Victor Frankl maintains that the modern individual suffers from "existential neurosis," stemming from the inability to find meaning in life. Frankl's therapeutic method, called logotherapy, is designed to help the individual to develop a more authentic system of values and to accept the responsibility to make choices. Frankl had been a psychoanalyst associated with Freud and Adler. After his experience in the war, he would reinvent his clinical approach, calling it logotherapy, which he described as a phenomenological analysis of how people come to find meaning. Victor Frankl suggested that human behaviour is guided by striving towards specific goals. He did not agree with the earlier hedonistic theories. He suggested that human beings are not motivated to reduce a state of drive. He specifically disagreed with Sigmund Freud's theory of individuals reducing the id impulses, being guided by the pleasure principle. Frankl suggested that instead of reducing drive and being pushed by internal discomfort, individuals are actually pulled towards a future state. According to Frankl, one of the goals that people are striving towards is having meaning in life, referred to as will to meaning. Frankl categorised meaning in life in three different ways. The first type of meaning according to Frankl, is the meaning derived from one's accomplishments, and what one gives to the world. This also includes creative endeavours and works of art. Frankl suggested that the work that a person does, gives meaning to life. The second type of meaning is derived from the different experiences with the world. These can include having scenic experiences, enjoying nature and

the experiences associated with feelings of love. The third type of meaning is the meaning that comes from the individual's approach to suffering and the things that cannot be changed. This type of meaning is related to the experiences that Frankl had when he was at the Nazi concentration camp.

Determinism

The concept of determinism is discussed by various psychologists and philosophers. It is inspired by the theories of psychologists like Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) whose psychoanalytic theory embodies psychic determinism, suggesting that unconscious motives, often stemming from childhood, govern behaviour. Freud believed that all behaviour is determined by past experiences stored in the unconscious mind. BF Skinner (1904-1990), a leading figure in behaviourism, advocated for environmental determinism, arguing that free will is an illusion and that all behaviour results from conditioning and environmental influences. His work in operant conditioning demonstrated how behaviour could be shaped and controlled through reinforcement. John Watson (1878-1958) who, as the father of behaviourism also supported a form of environmental determinism, emphasizing that behaviour could be predicted and controlled through the study of observable actions and external stimuli. Philosophers like Baruch Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes who laid the groundwork for deterministic thought long before modern psychology argued that human actions are determined by prior events and causes, often focusing on the natural laws governing the universe. Hence there is no single person who gave this theory. Scientifically oriented psychologists are willing to assume determinism while studying humans. Although all determinists believe that all behaviour is caused, there are different types of determinism.

Biological determinism emphasises the importance of physiological conditions or genetic predispositions in the explanation of behaviour. For example, evolutionary psychologists claim that much human behaviour, as well as that of nonhuman animals, reflects dispositions inherited from our long evolutionary past.

Environmental determinism stresses the importance of environmental stimuli as determinants of behaviour. The following illustrates the type of determinism that places the cause of human behaviour in the environment: Behaviour theory emphasises that environmental events play a key role in determining human behaviour. The source of action lies not inside the person, but in the environment. By developing a full understanding of how environmental events influence behaviour, we will arrive at a complete understanding of behaviour. It is this feature of behaviour theory- its emphasis on environmental events as the determinants of human action- which most clearly sets it apart from other approaches to human nature.... If behaviour theory succeeds, our customary inclination to hold people responsible for their actions, and look inside them to their wishes, desires, goals, intentions, and so on, for explanations of their actions, will be replaced by an entirely different orientation ... one in which responsibility for action is sought in environmental events. (Schwartz and Lacey, 1982)

Sociocultural determinism is a form of environmental determinism, but rather than emphasising the physical stimuli that cause behaviour, it emphasises the cultural or societal rules, regulations, customs, and beliefs that govern human behaviour. For example, Erikson (1977) referred to culture as “a version of human existence.” To a large extent, what is considered desirable, undesirable, normal, and abnormal is culturally determined; thus, culture acts as a powerful determinant of behaviour.

Physical Determinism- One thing common in biological, environmental and sociocultural determinism is that the determinants of behaviour they emphasise are directly measurable. Genes, environmental stimuli and cultural customs are all accessible and quantifiable and thus represent forms of physical determinism.

Psychical determinism stresses the importance of mental events of which we are conscious and those, like Freud, stress the importance of mental events of which we are not conscious. It emphasises the importance of cognitive and emotional experience in their explanation of human behaviour. According to it, the most important determinants of human behaviour are subjective and include a person's beliefs, emotions, sensations, perceptions, ideas, values, and goals.

Hard Determinism- William James (1884/1956) defined it as the causes of human behaviour that are thought to function in an automatic, mechanistic manner and thus render the notion of personal responsibility meaningless.

Soft Determinism is defined by him as the cognitive processes such as intentions, motives, beliefs and values that intervene between experience and behaviour. The soft determinist sees human behaviour as resulting from thoughtful deliberation of the options available in a given situation. Because rational processes manifest themselves prior to actions, the person bears responsibility for those actions.

Free Will

In the nineteenth century, according to historians of science (1988) and philosopher Ian Hacking (1990), there was a "rise in statistical thinking" and an "erosion of determinism.

Before James, most philosophers, especially those with theological training, held a dualist view of free will, in which freedom was God's gift to humanity, a gift that operated in a mind outside the physical universe. Hobbes (1999) said, "The cause of the will is not the will itself, but something else not in his own disposing." He said, "Voluntary actions have all of them necessary causes and therefore are necessitated." For Hobbes, talk of free agents was nonsense- if free means uncaused and random.

In relation to James's ideo-motor theory of behaviour which says an idea of a certain action causes that action to occur, the will functions, then, by selecting one from among many ideas of action we are interested in doing. By fiat, the will expends energy to hold the idea of interest in consciousness, thus inhibiting other ideas: "Effort of attention is thus the essential phenomenon of will" (James, 1892/1985). It is by controlling our ideas of behaviour that we control our actual behaviour. Because ideas cause behaviour, it is important to attend to those ideas that result in behaviour deemed desirable under the circumstances: "The terminus of the psychological process in volition, the point to which the will is directly applied, is always an idea" (James, 1892/1985). A Journal entry of April 1870 made it clear that James made a conscious decision to believe in free will, along with accepting Renouvier's phenomenology of the will.

Some psychologists completely reject science as a way of studying humans. These psychologists usually work within either a humanistic or an existential paradigm. They believe that the most important causes of behaviour are self-generated. For this group, behaviour is freely chosen and thus independent of physical or psychical causes. This belief in free will is contrary to the assumption of determinism and therefore the endeavours of these psychologists are non-scientific. Such a position is also known as nondeterminism. For the non-determinists, because the individual freely chooses courses of action, he or she alone is responsible for them.

The Two-Stage Model of William James

The genius of the Jamesian picture of free will is that indeterministic chance is the source for what James calls “ambiguous possibilities” and “alternative futures.” The chance generation of such alternative possibilities for action does not in any way limit his choice to one of them. Chance is not the direct cause of actions. James makes it clear that it is his choice that “grants consent” to one of them. James enunciate clearly a two-stage decision process, with chance in a present time of random alternatives, leading to a choice which grants consent to one possibility and transforms an equivocal ambiguous future

into an unalterable and simple past. He describes a temporal sequence of undetermined alternative possibilities followed by an adequately determined choice where chance is no longer a factor. James’s two-stage model effectively separates chance (the indeterministic free element) from choice (an arguably determinate decision that follows causally from one’s character, values and especially feelings and desires at the moment of decision). In *The Principles of Psychology*, James asked where the alternative possibilities for action come from? From past experiences, he says, initially involuntary and random. From observing the experiences of others, also the results of chance, we build up a stock of possibilities in our memory. In 1880 James had suggested a strong similarity between genetic evolution and the evolution of ideas “*A remarkable parallel, which I think has never been noticed, obtains between the facts of social evolution on the one hand, and of zoölogical evolution as expounded by Mr. Darwin on the other*” (James, 1880).

Evolution of Behavioural Freedom to Free Will

Robert J. Richards says that the key to understanding how James applied the Darwinian perspective to the mental realm is to see it as “two different sources: spontaneous variations, which do not mirror their causes; and a selection by external circumstances.”⁷⁴ James’s two-stage model is clear in his description of the “inner” and “outer” steps. Richards says that “James insisted that ‘the variation or inner relation does not ‘correspond’ with its cause...the outward relation has a perfectly definite function: to take the variation once made and preserve or destroy it.’” (James, n.d.)

Four evolutionary levels between the lowest and highest forms of selection can be distinguished. The sources of spontaneous variation are the same on all four levels. They are driven by noise and errors in the biological system, some of which result from quantum indeterminacy:

- **Instinctive Selection.** For organisms with only genetically inherited behaviours.
- **Learned Selection.** For organisms that remember their past to guide their future.
- **Predictive Selection.** For animals with foresight who anticipate consequences.
- **Reflective and Normative Selection.** For humans who can think twice, then think again about the thought, evaluating it in the light of personal and societal values.

Blessing (2005) mentions “The meaning of life is the most urgent of questions,” said the existentialist thinker Albert Camus. And no less a philosopher than Woody Allen has wondered: “How is it possible to find meaning in a finite world, given my waist and shirt size?” “Movies and the Meaning of Life” looks at popular and cult movies, examining their assumptions and insights on meaning-of-life questions: What is reality and how can I know it?

(The Truman Show, Contact, Waking Life); How do I find myself and my true identity? (Fight Club, Being John Malkovich, Boys Don't Cry, Memento); How do I find meaning from my interactions with others? (Pulp Fiction, Shadowlands, Chasing Amy); What is the chief purpose in life? (American Beauty, Life is Beautiful, The Shawshank Redemption); and How ought I live my life? (Pleasantville, Spiderman, Minority Report, Groundhog Day).

Cooper (2022) explains that at the heart of this volume is the assertion that Sartrean existentialism, most prominent in the 1940s, particularly in France, is still relevant as a way of interpreting the world today. The film, by reflecting philosophical concerns in the actions and choices of characters continues and extends a tradition in which art exemplifies the understanding of existentialist philosophy. In a scholarly yet accessible style, the contributors exploit the rich interplay between Sartre's philosophy, plays and novels, and a number of contemporary films including No Country for Old Men, Lost in Translation and The Truman Show, with film-makers including the Dardenne brothers, Michael Haneke, and Mike Leigh. This volume will be of interest to students who are coming to Sartre's work for the first time and to those who would like to read films within an existentialist perspective

Dwivedi (2023) seek to analyse the film Stranger Than Fiction (2006) and its fascinating depiction of Death as a cataclysmic event that initiates a tremendous metamorphosis. Through an in-depth analysis of the film this paper investigates how the fatal announcement of his death forces Harold to recognise the truth of his existence. The paper further explores the multifaceted dimensions of death, traversing far beyond the idea of a biological demise. Beyond the specific themes discussed above, the paper will also study how the cinematic medium employs the element of voiceover/ narration to facilitate the encounter between Harold and Death in a novel fashion. I will draw upon narrative theories of Roland Barthes and Paul Ricoeur to argue how the site of this unique encounter lies in the

psychological realm, and brings incredible alterations in Harold Crick's inner life, which though not visible externally can be brought to the forefront in the filmic medium through narratorial intervention. Ultimately this paper will attempt to locate the heroism of Harold Crick in a mundane world that refuses to understand his predicament.

Li et al. (2021) write that space is one of the important dimensions of film narrative strategy, and the space narrative of film has received more and more attention from narratologists. The film "Stranger Than Fiction" uses unnatural narration to convey the themes of love, death and life to the audience through the presentation of unnatural narrative space. This paper discusses the unnatural spaces narration of Stranger Than Fiction from the perspective of external materialisation of the inner psychological state, fantasy narrative space and ontological transcription. The use of these three unnatural space narrative methods not only helps the film to better shape its plot, highlight its themes and interpret its connotations but also enhances the film its own sense of fun and level, provoking people to rethink life, emotions and moral values.

Rawlins (2015) explores how the film "Stranger Than Fiction" demonstrates Bakhtin's ideas about authoring one's life through ethical responsiveness and co-authoring with others. His essay explores how characters' actions in the film Stranger Than Fiction demonstrate the ethics and aesthetics of authoring our own and others' lives as developed in Mikhail Bakhtin's "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." Our lives are open events requiring response and co-authoring from others with different worldviews to achieve consummation of our own becoming. I probe how the film dramatises our indebtedness to others, our answerability, and the necessity of making choices as ongoing tasks embraced in the face of death. I close with implications for the ethical and aesthetic demands of everyday communication and writing qualitative research.

Rationale

The movie "Stranger Than Fiction" (Forster, 2006) directed by Marc Forster revolves around the life of Harold Crick which portrays complex psychological themes, contributing to various fields such as media psychology, education and therapy. It presents an intricate narrative that weaves together various psychological themes, such as existentialism, the search for meaning, fate versus free will, identity, self-discovery and the impact of narrative on reality. A psychological analysis of the film allows for an in-depth exploration of these themes and their relevance to psychological theories and real-life human experiences. Understanding how these themes are portrayed in the film can provide valuable insights into the human psyche and the ways in which people navigate their lives. The study provides insights into how people cope with their perceived lack of control over their lives, their struggles for autonomy and their pursuit of happiness and fulfilment.

Summary

"Stranger Than Fiction" (Forster, 2006) is a 2006 comedy-fantasy film directed by Marc Forster that tells the story of Harold Crick, an IRS auditor who lives a highly structured and monotonous life. Harold's life consists of routines: he counts every step, brushes his teeth with the same number of strokes, and follows the same daily schedule. One day, Harold starts to hear a mysterious voice narrating his every action and thought. This omniscient narrator, unbeknownst to him, is Karen Eiffel, a reclusive and eccentric author currently struggling with writer's block as she finishes her latest novel. As Harold hears the narration, he realises the voice is predicting his imminent death, saying, "Little did he know that this simple, seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death." Panicked and desperate to understand what's happening, Harold seeks help from a literary professor, Jules Hilbert, who suggests that

Harold determine what kind of story he's in—a comedy or a tragedy. As Harold starts to break away from his rigid routines, he meets and falls in love with Ana Pascal, a lively and rebellious baker whom he's auditing. This relationship brings colour and joy into Harold's previously drab life. Meanwhile, Karen struggles to find a meaningful way to kill off her character, Harold. When Harold finally meets Karen and realises she is writing his life story, he reads her manuscript and comes to terms with the idea that his death will bring about a profound and beautiful ending to her story. However, after seeing how Harold has embraced life and love, Karen decides to change the ending and let him live, although this results in a less "perfect" but more humane story. In the end, Harold's brush with death inspires him to live life more fully, appreciating every moment and choosing to live with purpose and love. The film closes on a note of hope, emphasizing the power of choice and the beauty of ordinary life.

Objectives

- To analyse Harold's personality type displayed in the movie.
- To explore existential themes in Harold Crick's journey.
- To investigate the influence of determinism in Harold's life.
- To assess the impact of free will on Harold.

Method

Design

The present study follows a qualitative research case study design using thematic analysis. The film is analysed and discussed in the form of thematic analysis. One film namely, *Stranger Than Fiction* (Forster, 2006), directed by Marc Forster in 2006 serves as the source of

study for the analysis. The study analyses and examines the film stylistically and thematically to collect data, keeping in view the psychological aspect.

Sample

Purposive sampling was used. Some well-crafted, underrated movies were explored and as per the purpose of the study, "Stranger Than Fiction" (Forster, 2006) on YouTube was finalised.

Procedure

After exploration, "Stranger Than Fiction" (Forster, 2006) was chosen for the movie analysis, as it portrays multiple psychological aspects. A number of movies were considered for analysis like Shutter Island, Black Swan, etc., but Stranger Than Fiction was finalised due to the presence of lack of work on it. The movie was seen without interruption to ensure that all the essential points were captured. While watching it, key elements were simultaneously noted. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the themes and characters' experiences, the movie was watched multiple times. After completing the movie, more observations and insights were added. The qualitative observation method was used for the analysis of the movie. A review of the literature was also done. Theme-based analysis was carried out to study various aspects of the movie. A review of the literature was also done.

Analysis

A theme-based analysis using one identified data source.

Results

Result Table

Tabular Representation of Themes

<i>S.No</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Exemplar</i>
1.	Personality type		
Throughout the movie, Harold displays some patterns of behaviour that point towards the presence of some obsessive and compulsive personality traits.			
	Numbers/Counting	In the movie, it has been shown that Harold has a lot to keep up with numbers and wherever he goes or does, he keeps a count of it.	“Harold would brush each of his 32 teeth 76 times. 38 times back and forth, 38 times up and down.” Narrator  “.... And how do you know I’m counting brush strokes?” Harold “Harold quickly calculated the odds of making an ass of himself in ratio to the amount of time he stayed to chaat.” Narrator “He excited the transit authority bus a good 27 blocks, too early and now have to walk.” Narrator

			“Other than numbers, she’s all I think about.” Harold “122 guitars, 732 strings, 257 pickups and 189 volume nob’s....” Narrator 
	Rigidity/Routines/ Inflexibility	Harold has shown to have fixed routines, that is, there is not much variety in the tasks he does and the way he does them.	“Every weekday, for 12 years, Harold would tie his tie in a single Windsor knot instead of the double, thereby saving him up to 43 seconds every morning” Narrator  “Every weekday, for 12 years, Harold would run at a rate of nearly 57 steps per block for 6 blocks nearly missing the 8:17 Faraday Bus” Narrator 

			“And precisely 11:13 every night, Harold will go to bed.” Narrator 
	Orderliness	The movie shows Harold doing everything in a pre-decided order, that is, one particular thing after another.	
	Perfectionism	Harold displays a tendency to do everything as accurately as possible.	“Every weekday, for 12 years, Harold would review 7.134 tax files as a senior agent for the International Revenue Services.” Narrator  “Harold, 89 times 1417.” Colleague “Hundred and twenty-six thousand one hundred thirteen” Harold

			 “It was about finding a guitar that said something about Harold.” Narrator 
	Excessive Devotion to Work	Doing his work so religiously that Harold did not take time out for himself is what Harold was.	“According to your records, you haven’t taken a vacation in a few years.” Dr. Cayly  
2.	Existentialism		

After a point or stage in the movie, Harold is consistently shown to be on a quest to find meaning in his life and take some actions to freely make some life choices that are different from routine choices.

	Search for Meaning/ Identity and Self- discovery	Harold was slowly able to find meaning through his personal experiences, relationships and actions.	“Harold Crick became stronger in who he was, what he wanted and why he was alive. Harold no longer ate alone, he no longer counted brush strokes, he no longer wore neckties and therefore no longer worried about the time he took to put them on. He no longer counted his steps to the bus stop.” Narrator  
	Freedom and Responsibility	Harold started to freely make his own choices and started to sideline that he was not bound by pre-determined paths like fate, narration, etc.	“Flowers. I bought you flowers, Ms Pascal. I want you. I’m doing this because I want you.” Harold

			
	Authentic Living	Upon the acceptance of his mortal life, Harold started to make choices according to his liking, making his living better.	“Harold did that which terrified him before, that which had eluded him Monday through Friday for so many years... Harold Crick lived his life!” Narrator  
	Mortality and Acceptance	Harold understood that life is always mortal. With this acceptance, the thought of death did not worry him.	“Yea I read it all in one read one the bus. It’s lovely. I like the part about the guitars.... No, no, I, I read it and I, I loved it.... And it seems some blown off. I love the book and I think you should finish it.” Harold

			 “I stepped in front of the bus.” Harold “What? Why?” Ana “There was a boy. I had to push him out of the way.” Harold “What?” Ana “I had to keep this boy from getting hit. I didn’t have a choice. I had to.” Harold 
3.	Determinism	Upon hearing the narration, again and again, Harold started to believe that his actions and life are controlled by an external source or what that author writes.	“...Thus, Harold’s watch thrust him into the immitigable path of fate. Little did he know that this simple seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death” Narrator  “... And I’m somehow involved in some sort of story, like I’m a character in my own life.... Like there are other parts of the story that are

			not being told to me, and I need to find out what those other parts are before it's too late.... What if, what I said is true, hypothetically speaking, if I was a part of a story, a narrative, even if it was only in my mind...." Harold  "And you believed her?" Prof. Hilbert "Well, she was right about a few other things" Harold "The last thing to determine conclusively is whether you're in a comedy or a tragedy...." Prof. Hilbert
4.	Free Will	With the awareness of his circumstances, Harold starts to exercise his agency, making choices that reflect his true desires rather than external expectations.	"Isn't there some very clear and established rules about fraternisation" Ana "audit, protocol" Harold "Yea?" Ana "But I don't care." Harold "Why?" Ana "Because I want you." Harold 

“But despite resuscitating his life, reviving his hope and instilling a few wicket callouses, Harold’s journey was still incomplete. And Harold’s wristwatch wasn’t able to let him miss another opportunity.” Narrator



Source: Stranger Than Fiction (Forster, 2006)- Youtube

Discussion

The aim of the study was the Psychosocial analysis of the movie “Stranger Than Fiction” (Forster, 2006). This movie was taken from Youtube. Upon watching the movie, it became apparent that multiple aspects required deep understanding and analysis. The study was conducted based on a theme-based analysis.

The objectives were to analyse Harold’s personality type displayed in the movie, to explore existential themes in Harold Crick’s journey, to investigate the influence of determinism in Harold’s life and to assess the impact of free will on Harold.

With reference to the table, the first theme that emerged was Personality Traits. The first sub-theme that emerged includes numbers or counting. Harold has a constant tendency to

count or play with numbers. This unfolds in the way the narrator describes him: *“Harold Crick was a man of infinite numbers, endless calculations and remarkably few words. His favourite word was ‘integer’ and ‘mathematics’ was the belief system he ascribed to.”* From waking up in the morning to going to sleep, he keeps a count of everything. For e.g., while brushing in the morning, he counts the number of brush strokes *“Harold would brush each of his 32 teeth 76 times. 38 times back and forth, 38 times up and down”*, while washing his dishes, he keeps a count of the cutlery and utensils *“1 bowl, 1 spoon, 2 forks and 3 cups”*, while buying himself a guitar, he makes a count there as well *“122 guitars, 732 strings, 257 pickups and 189 volume knobs...”* He himself admitted that he thinks about numbers a lot – *“Other than numbers, she’s all I think about.”* A second sub-theme that emerged is Rigidity. Harold has been shown to be inflexible in his daily tasks. He has certain routines that he follows daily. This is seen in the way Harold ties his tie while going to work *“Every weekday, for twelve years, Harold would tie his tie in a single Windsor knot instead of the double, thereby saving him up to 43 seconds every morning.”* Even his fixed travel routine, *“Every weekday, for twelve years, Harold would run at a rate of nearly 57 steps per block for 6 blocks nearly missing the 8:17 Faraday Bus”* highlights the same. As per a study, nonclinical cases of OCPD showed significant cognitive inflexibility coupled with executive planning deficits, whereas decision-making remained intact (Fineberg, 2015). The next sub-theme that emerged is Orderliness. This unfolds in the facet when Harold makes a decision. His next action is determined according to his previous action, that is, according to what he has already done. For e.g., in the movie, when Harold is on break and wakes up from his sofa, he thinks of the sequence of actions to be taken and decides according to it. It seemed that he peed not because he felt an urge to, but because it was next in his tasks. A fourth sub-theme that emerged is Perfectionism. With perfectionism, people feel the urge to do everything as accurately as possible. Similar was the case with Harold. It was evident when the narrator explained, *“Every weekday, for 12 years, Harold*

would review 7.134 tax files as a senior agent for the International Revenue Services.” He was even well-versed in his calculations. It is portrayed when one of his colleagues asked for a multiplication- “*Harold, 89 times 1417?*” and he immediately replied “*Hundred and twenty-six thousand one hundred thirteen.*” A last sub-theme that emerged in this is Excessive Devotion to Work. Harold was truly devoted to his work. Most of his time used to go to his work. He has devoted so much time that he has not taken a vacation in a long time. One of the doctors he consulted mentions, “*According to your records, you haven’t taken a vacation in a few years.*” Such people tend to be devoted to work to the exclusion of leisure activities and may have difficulty relaxing or doing anything just for fun (Widiger & Frances, 1994). Similar is for Harold who lived his life in solitude, having no one to walk home with or to eat with.

The above traits point out that Harold may have an obsessive-compulsive personality. His life is structured around time and order, demonstrating a need for control and perfection in his everyday tasks. These behaviours are consistent with OCPD which is characterised by excessive perfectionism, orderliness and need for control, leading to significant interpersonal difficulties (Pinto et al., 2017). Unlike people with OCD, Harold does not seem particularly distressed by his rigid behaviours early in the film. He perceives them as normal and part of maintaining his structured life, suggesting OCPD, where individuals often believe their perfectionism and control are rational and appropriate (Pinto et al., 2017). Also, Harold’s counting tendencies can be a part of his obsessive-compulsive personality. According to a study, all self-rated OCD symptom dimensions except for contamination and checking were significantly more prominent in participants with OCPD, as were all self-rated dimensions of psychopathology (Starcevic et al., 2013).

The second theme that emerged is Existentialism. It points towards the need for search of meaning in or of one’s life. It strives a person towards discovering one’s true self. For

Harold, it was the narrator's voice that served as a catalyst for his existential crisis. The first sub-theme that emerged is search for meaning. Meaning in/of a person's life is subjective which is discovered and understood through personal experiences, relationships and actions. Similarly, Harold was discovering meaning of his life through his personal experiences, relationships and actions. Where, initially, his life was a portrait of emptiness and defined by numbers and routines, now Harold no longer pursued it. As the narrator explained, "*Harold Crick became stronger in who he was, what he wanted and why he was alive. Harold no longer ate alone, he no longer counted brush strokes, he no longer wore neckties and therefore no longer worried about the time he took to put them on. He no longer counted his steps to the bus stop.*" Therefore, Harold slowly became a better version of himself. Logotherapy, developed by Viktor Frankl, can assist individuals in finding meaning through creative endeavours, experiences and attitudes towards suffering (Schultze & Miller, 2004). A sub-theme that emerged is Freedom. A person is free to make his/her own choices and is not bound by pre-determined paths (fate, divine will, etc.). In the movie, Harold embraces freedom against his rigid work life. He pursues his interests like asking out Ana Pascal, the bakery owner - "*Flowers. I bought you flowers, Ms Pascal. I want you. I'm doing this because I want you.*" Another major interest which Harold pursued was learning a guitar. He always wanted his life to be more musical. However, this freedom comes with responsibility. Existentialism emphasises freedom as a fundamental aspect of human existence, but this freedom comes with inherent challenges and responsibilities (Morrell et al., 2020). What Harold did, he also assumed responsibility of it. Nothing that he did was a compulsive decision. Rather, his decisions were thoughtful. A third sub-theme that emerged is Mortality and Acceptance. One's life is always mortal. Osborne (2016) discusses existential aspects of death anxiety, including the search for meaning and coping with existential isolation. It is this anxiety which makes the individual live a life for almost constant personal growth. Initially, Harold was not ready to die

so soon. He did not want to knowingly face his death. He was ready to do anything to avoid it, even to change his job. But it was Professor Hilbert who made him realise that a person dies anyway- *“Harold you will die someday, sometime. Heart failure at the bank, chocking on mint, some long drawn-out disease you can track on vacation.... Even if you avoid this death, another will find you. And I guarantee that it won’t be as poetic or meaningful as what is written.”* With this realisation, he accepted the fact of death. Knowing that he can die anytime soon, it did not let Harold to not take bold steps. He continued to see Ana Pascal. He even saved a boy from getting hit by a bus. Hence, he created a meaningful existence for himself. A last sub-theme that emerged is Authentic Living. It means to recognise and live by their ability to choose their own existence. Upon an indication of his death, Harold strived to live more authentically, valuing his experiences and relationships in a way he hadn’t before. The narrator explained, *“Harold did that which terrified him before, that which had eluded him Monday through Friday for so many years... Harold Crick lived his life!”* He started taking time for himself and his interests. He went to see a movie and confessed his feelings to Ana Pascal. He pursued his interest in guitar. He became free from his daily rituals of counting and worry about reaching late to the bus stop. Even Professor Hilbert advised him that – *“... I mean all of it, however long it has left. You know, I mean, how you could... use it to have an adventure... invent something... you could just eat nothing but pancakes if you want.... So just go, make it one you always wanted.”* Authenticity in existentialist philosophy is rooted in the recognition of freedom and the responsibility to shape one's own existence (Greene, 1952). Hence, Harold lived a life he always wanted.

The third theme that merged is Determinism. Determinists view that it is some external stimulus or source that leads to behaviour. They reject the concept of free will. Determinism is the notion that behaviour is determined by cause-and-effect relationships (Frank, 2019). From

the time Harold started to hear the narration of his life, especially the mention of his death, he made a belief that his life is entirely controlled by external forces, that is, the narrator's voice, leaving him with no agency or control over his fate. He started to feel as if he was a part of some story. When Professor Hilbert asked Harold whether he believed the voice or not, he did not deny it. Rather, he said, "*Well, she was right about a few other things.*" Even before that, it was his wristwatch upon which he was dependent. It used to control all his timings, according to which his actions took place. According to Stroessner (1990), belief in determinism is associated with more punitive attitudes and an external locus of control.

The last theme that emerged from our study is Free Will. Free will is a notion that truly supports freedom above everything. It discards the concept of determinism. Supporters of free will say that individuals create meaning through their choices and actions. As per Zhao et al., (2023), belief in free will positively predicts the presence of meaning and the search for meaning in life. The movie explores the struggle between determinism and free will. In the movie, as Harold becomes more aware, he starts to question his living. He then decides to act upon his life. He pursues his interests like bringing flowers for Ana Pascal and expressing his feelings to her by going against fraternisation. He accompanies her to her house and makes a happy conversation with her. It signifies Harold's assertion of free will against a seemingly predetermined fate. Hence, Harold started acting upon his true desires rather than external expectations. The film suggests that while external forces may influence our lives, individuals have the power and choice to respond to them, which shapes their destiny. Maffly-Kipp et al., (2022) say that beliefs in free will facilitate meaning-making and psychological recovery from collective traumas.

Conclusion

Stranger Than Fiction (Forster, 2006) offers a rich psychological exploration of existential themes and the theme of determinism and free will in shaping our lives. Through Harold Crick's journey, the film delves into the complexities of human existence, the tension between fate and free will and the transformative power of self-discovery and authentic living. It challenges viewers to consider their own narratives and the choices they make, ultimately suggesting that even in a seemingly predetermined world, individuals have the power to shape their destinies and find meaning in their lives.

Limitations

This study holds some limitations. The area of study was limited. Only one personality type was focused upon along with the themes of existentialism, determinism and free will. The analysis was done with the help of a movie which may have the potential for misinterpretation of psychological concepts when presented in a fictional context. Hence, relying solely on the movie may lead to an altered understanding of the concepts. The main focus was on the protagonist and not the other characters. Hence, the analysis restricts the complete exploration of the psychological themes. The Indian context was not focused upon, which again limits the full exploration of the themes. The lack of case studies and research on the chosen movie hampers the researchers' ability to draw parallels and make informed interpretations. Hence, insights drawn from this exploration may not universally apply.

Suggestions for Further Research

To make the study richer, some more personality types could be explored. This may include dependent and avoidant personalities as well. A wider coverage of humanistic psychology could be taken to understand the themes of the movie. Also, some real-life documentaries could be taken for a better understanding of the psychological concepts. This would help in making the sources of the study diverse. This will also increase the reliability of the study. The focus could be put upon characters like Karen Eiffel to explore additional psychological themes. This would also expand our area of study. Examples of Indian cases could be added to make the study diverse.

Implications

The study explores and applies various psychological theories, such as type of personality, existentialism, determinism and free will to the characters and storyline of the movie. This can help illustrate and clarify these theories, providing concrete examples that make abstract psychological concepts more accessible and relatable. It bridges the gap between psychology, literature and film studies. It may provide insights into how individuals use narratives to make sense of their lives and construct their identities. The study could provide a basis for using film in therapeutic settings, particularly in existential or logotherapy. By showing how films like "Stranger Than Fiction" (Forster, 2006) reflect psychological struggles and growth, therapists could use such movies to help clients articulate and work through their own experiences of meaning, choice and self-discovery. The study helps to increase awareness and discussions about life's purpose, authenticity and the importance of embracing change.

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