



## Review Article

# A Critical Discourse Study of The Midnight Library

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## ABSTRACT



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Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* uses a very familiar, personal story to unpack the relationship between decisions, regret, and existential well-being. This research utilizes a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to analyze the linguistic and thematic structures embedded in the text. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework investigates the process of language formation and meaning construction that affects identity, intimacy, and the social meaning of pleasure and success, unpacking how these collective and transmitted authoritarian social norms inhibit individual agency. Analyzing *The Midnight Library* in this light elucidates the discursive techniques that make it a tangible discussion on life's potential, constraints, and quest for purpose. The following research questions are addressed in this paper:

1. Does Haig use words and metaphors in *The Midnight Library* to create and challenge norms about pleasure, fortune, and personal fulfillment?
2. What mental health stigmas are under examination and criticism in *The Midnight Library*, and how do these criticisms relate to broader social discourses?
3. How do the narrative and linguistic patterns of the novel encapsulate the tension between broader societal forces and individuals' free will as it pertains to Nora Seed's evolution?

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## 1. Introduction

Learning about discourse analysis and understanding the relationships between language, identities, and society are some of the most important things. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a specific approach that focuses on the link between language, power, and ideology and how texts are used to validate, challenge, and/or resist hegemonic social systems. Fiction is an essential medium within this framework, through which philosophers, social psychologists, and sociocultural theorists argue for imaging biological, human-behavioral, and social turn processes. Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) is the novel that invites such an analysis as it explores regret, mental health, existential questioning, and alternative realities in its narrative structure. This exploration of *The Midnight Library* is vital to understanding critical discourse analysis, a widely utilized lens that shows how language constructs meaning and how the novel discourse shapes broader conversations on mental well-being, human agency, and our society.

*The Midnight Library* follows Nora Seed, a depressed and remorseful woman in a magical library between life and death. This library allows her to live alternate versions of her life, where she gets to explore the innumerable possibilities that might have been had she chosen differently. The novel poses basic questions concerning self-worth, individual duty, and satisfaction by providing an inventive and thought-provoking story. The philosophical underpinnings of the text are in existentialism and

self-determination theory, making it a rich site for discourse analysis. By following the protagonist on her journey, the novel engages key discourses in society around mental health, decision-making, and what success looks like, which are open to critical interpretation.

Critical discourse analysis is a methodology developed by theorists including (but not limited to) Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, through which we can investigate how language in *The Midnight Library* serves to produce or resist hegemonic ideologies around mental health and life choices. Metaphor, repetition, and intertextuality are linguistic devices that shape the reader's understanding of Nora's experience in the novel. In addition, the text also engages with popular discourses of psychology, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) concepts, and how people think about the "multiverse" as a way to cope with [feeling] regret. This research takes up Haig's novel through these linguistic and conceptual strategies to explore how it reinforces or subverts current trajectories of understanding modality about recovery and the notion of self and self-actualization.

Moreover, the present study will analyze how *The Midnight Library* mirrors society's view on success and failure. The novel probes societal expectations around milestones through Nora's journey, presenting alternate realities in which happiness isn't necessarily aligned with standard markers of success, like career advancement, money, or fame. This study becomes a critical

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analysis of discourse by examining the language in the novel and revealing its capacity to create societal demands for what life is and if the text provides an alternative counter-discourse to the widespread cultural narrative that life is about personal accomplishment.

This study is essential in its innovative interdisciplinarity that connects literary analysis with insights from psychology, philosophy, and discourse studies. At a moment when mental health is becoming an ever more present idea in popular conversation, *The Midnight Library* presents itself as a powerful fictional meditation on these subjects. Our findings will add to literary scholarship by showing how a systematic approach to critical discourse analysis can be used to study contemporary fiction and, more broadly, how we talk about our individual and shared struggles can alter how we see them. By exploring the textual makeup of the novel in detail, this study is guided by the importance of understanding how *The Midnight Library* participates in and impacts contemporary discourses on mental well-being and health or - viewed through the lens of the philosophical concept of the liminal - what it means to live in the in-betweens of regret, empathy, and the human condition.

## 2. Approach: The CDA Framework by Fairclough

Critical Discourse Analysis offers a powerful method for analyzing how language mirrors social reality and contributes to social change. Fairclough's dimensional model consists of three components:

**Properties:** Textual analysis studies language elements such as metaphor, lexicon, and story structure.

**Author Study:** Crystallizing a writer or medium's impact on literature through exploration of their work.

**Social Practice:** Exploring the text's relationship to broader cultural and social contexts.

Applying this paradigm to *The Midnight Library* when its so-called meta-discourse (the discursive practices through which the novel makes meaning) is only beginning to emerge helps us understand its meaning-making and interaction with social discourses.

## 3. Textual Analysis, Thematic Analysis and Language

### 3.1. The Metaphor of the Library

*The Midnight Library* is one of the significant metaphors — it represents the space between life and death. Nora's existential crisis is reflected in the feeling of boundlessness created by Haig through his evocative imagery when he writes, "the shelves stretched endlessly in all directions" (Haig, 2020, p. 15). This metaphor reinforces the idea that our life consists of unlimited possibilities, but it is narrowed by our choices.

### 3.2. Remorse and Salvation

There is some regretful language that takes us back to Nora's desperation. What's the point?" and similar sentiments highlight how her feelings of inadequacy run through this narrative. And "I wasted my life" (Haig, 2020, p. 23). But as the episode progresses, the tone shifts to one of self-discovery and hope. Nora learns to see her regrets as opportunities for self-growth in the library, which takes on an atoning shape.

### 3.3. Agency and Modal Verbs

Haig often plays with the idea of possibility versus reality, using modal verbs such as "could," "should," and "might." These quasi-linguistic subset choices invite readers to question deterministic understandings of success and happiness by showcasing the unpredictability and mutability of life trajectories.

## 4. Discoursal Practices of Production and Reception

### 4.1. Reader engagement and authorial intent

The novel's subjects are partly drawn from Haig's experiences of mental health challenges, which lends realism to its depictions of sadness and existential dread. The book uses Nora's journey as a lens to examine the readers' lives.

### 4.2 Intertextuality

The book alludes to literary and philosophical classics, such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. These intertextual elements, which situate the story within broader discourses of existentialism and the human condition, add dimension to the story.

### 4.3. Public Opinion and Criticism

Praise has been given to the emotional punch and simplicity of *The Midnight Library*. But some critics argue that its ending, which rests on a formulaic "happy ending" that couldn't accurately depict real-life ills, simplifies complex issues like mental health.

## 5. The Screen: Critiques and Ideologies of Society

### 5.1. The Search for Contentment

In challenging the conventional notions of pleasure and success — often privileging outward achievements over internal well-being — the book asks us to think differently. By exploring some alternative possible lives — as a glaciologist, an Olympic swimmer, or a rock star — Nora makes clear how accomplishment can lose meaning when severed from an individual sense of purpose.

### 5.2. Stigma and Mental Health

By depicting depression as an illness to be understood and managed, not feared, Haig's story helps debunk stigmas surrounding mental health itself. Unlike a society that tends to brush aside people who grapple with mental illness, the library becomes a compassionate space for contemplation and healing."

### 5.3. Community vs Individualism

The novel celebrates individual agency while recognizing the importance of connection and community. Nora finds that relationships and even the ordinary moments make a meaningful life: "Even the mundane is miraculous" (Haig, 2020, p. 284).

## 6. Using Discursive Techniques to Develop Characters

### 6.1. The Discursive Construct of Nora Seed

Nora embodies the midlife human struggle, balancing self-interest with social pressures. Her character arc shows the transformational power of rewriting one's story, embarking on a new journey from alienation to self-acceptance.

### 6.2. Catalyst-Supporting Characters

Discursive actors like Mrs. Elm, the librarian, help Nora with her existential investigation. Socratic questioning is often at play in their exchanges to make Nora — and readers — examine her assumptions and choices closely.

### 6.3. Reader Alignment & Narration

Haig's third-person, restricted point of view evokes empathy and involvement by putting readers inside Nora's shoes. The use of this storytelling technique pulls readers right into Nora's inner conflicts and makes her journey feel very intimate and approachable. Examining Worldviews and power relations

### 7.1. Consumerism and Capitalism

The book also aims at capitalist ideologies that frame success as prizing wealth and social status. Nora's dual life as a rich rock star calls into question the notion that validation comes from outside and reveals the emptiness of fame.

### 7.2. Expectations by Gender

Across all this, *The Midnight Library* gently interrogates gendered expectations, mainly the pressure society puts on women to succeed at each of the roles it assigns to us. Nora's issues reflect the struggles women face when trying to balance their careers, relationships, and self-worth within a patriarchal culture.

### 7.3 Limits and Penalties for Future Conduct

While *The Midnight Library* provides valuable information, its reliance on a linear resolution could simplify the complexities of existential crises and mental health. Future studies may also explore alternative narrative frameworks, which better account for the nonlinear nature of human development. It also allows for cross-cultural analyses of the book and how its subjects resonate with different readers.

## 8. Conclusion and Discussion

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* is not just a magical and profound self-discovery novel; it is a reflection of society's belief system, personal struggles, and a yearning we all have: a search for meaning. From the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) viewpoint, the novel provides insight into how stuff like language, metaphor, narration style, etc., make readers interpret complex concepts such as regret, agency, and satisfaction. The library is an arresting metaphor for human potential — and limitation — that invites readers to question the stories they tell themselves about their lives.

Such sentiment expresses Haig's comments against the norms of society that link fulfillment with external achievements. Nora Seed's exploration of alternate lives shows the hollowness of accomplishment lacking inherent meaning. Her transformation is a reminder to embrace imperfection and find beauty and joy in the mundane. Additionally, the literature tackles stigmas about mental health, providing a sympathetic portrait of depression as a treatable condition rather than an insurmountable barrier.

From a gendered lens, that is what the story starts congealing conversations around: women's societal pressures to succeed in various aspects of their lives. Nora's journey embodies the ultimate critique of the flourishing of our times, which is based on a preoccupation with work and external markers of success at the cost of internal holistic well-being. My extensive critique of the *Midnight Library's* perspective on gender, mental health, and cultural structures makes it a worthwhile read for audience members and researchers.

Though the story eventually succeeds in evoking empathy and contemplation, it simplifies some nuances of mental health and existential questions with a tidy ending. Many of life's challenges, as shown to us in real life, rarely follow the story's neat, linear, redemptive arc. This facilitates the potential for further studies to explore alternate narrative strategies and more profound critiques of social ideologies depicted in contemporary literature.

Ultimately, *The Midnight Library* serves as a vehicle to encourage the reader to critically evaluate their lives, reconsider the weight of regret, and celebrate their choices' potential. It draws attention to the mechanics of narrative agency in fiction and the narratives we create about ourselves daily. The novel's intellectual exploration and emotional intimacy intertwine, making it the rewriting machine of a 21st-century classic.

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