



Existential Anxiety and Character Transformation: A Comparative Study of Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Camus

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of existential anxiety in shaping the psychological and moral dilemmas of protagonists in *Crime and Punishment*, *Nausea*, and *The Stranger*. Through a comparative analysis, it examines how Raskolnikov, Roquentin, and Meursault navigate alienation, absurdity, and freedom, revealing distinct responses to their existential crises. While Raskolnikov wrestles with guilt and redemption, Roquentin experiences self-awareness and nausea, and Meursault embraces emotional detachment and the absurd. Drawing from existential philosophy—particularly the works of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus—this study highlights how moral conflict, self-reflection, and psychological transformation drive character development. By integrating literary analysis and philosophical inquiry, the paper contributes to discussions on existential choice, identity, and meaning in literature. It fills a critical gap by focusing on character evolution through existential anxiety, offering new insights into how literature reflects human psychological struggles.

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Introduction

Existential anxiety, a core concept within existentialist philosophy, emerges from the individual's confrontation with freedom, meaninglessness, and mortality. In literature, it plays a pivotal role in shaping character development, particularly in existentialist narratives. This paper investigates how existential anxiety influences the psychological trajectories of three iconic literary characters: Raskolnikov from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Roquentin from Sartre's *Nausea*, and Meursault from Camus' *The Stranger*. Each character faces a crisis of meaning that prompts deep self-reflection and transformation. Through a comparative lens, the study seeks to understand how their experiences of alienation, moral conflict, and absurdity embody distinct philosophical paradigms and psychological outcomes.

Theoretical Framework:

The analysis is grounded in existentialist philosophy, beginning with Søren Kierkegaard, who conceptualized anxiety as the "dizziness of freedom." In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Kierkegaard describes anxiety as a response to the limitless possibilities that freedom offers, placing the burden of self-definition squarely on the individual. This concept is especially pertinent to Raskolnikov, whose internal conflict stems from his attempt to transcend conventional morality. Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) introduces the notion of "being-toward-death," wherein anxiety emerges from the awareness of mortality and the demand for authentic existence. This framework resonates with Meursault's eventual acceptance of death as a defining reality. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), identifies existential anxiety as the realization that existence lacks inherent meaning. His protagonist Roquentin embodies this through his overwhelming experience of nausea—a visceral reaction to the absurdity of life. Lastly, Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) presents the absurd as the clash between the human search for meaning and a silent, indifferent universe. Meursault's emotional detachment and final embrace of absurdity reflect Camus' philosophy of rebellion without appeal to external meaning.

Literature Review:

A robust body of scholarship has explored existential themes across these texts. Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* interprets Raskolnikov's moral anxiety through the lens of religious and ethical conflict, noting how his intellectual pursuit of a Nietzschean superman identity ultimately collapses under the weight of guilt and conscience (Frank 473–88). Michel Contat's *Sartre and the*



Literary Imagination investigates how Sartre's philosophical tenets—particularly radical freedom and bad faith—manifest in Roquentin's crisis. Roquentin's experience of nausea destabilizes his sense of reality and self, forcing a confrontation with existence's lack of inherent meaning (Contat 127–45). Ronald Aronson, in *Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, examines Meursault's indifference to societal norms as a form of rebellion against imposed meaning. The absurd trial and Meursault's confrontation with death serve as key moments of existential clarity (Aronson 102–25). In psychological terms, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* argues that existential anxiety stems from a deep fear of mortality, an idea that resonates across all three characters, whether in Raskolnikov's moral suffering, Roquentin's ontological crisis, or Meursault's serene acceptance of death (Becker 30–53). Thomas Flynn's *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* underscores the significance of existential anxiety as a defining motif across diverse existentialist narratives, highlighting the interplay between individual psychology and philosophical abstraction (Flynn 78–89).

Research Gap and Rationale:

Despite the wealth of scholarship on existentialist literature, notable gaps remain. Few studies provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of existential anxiety across Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Camus. Most focus on individual texts or authors, limiting broader insights into character evolution. While psychological interpretations of existential anxiety (like Becker's) offer valuable perspectives, they are often isolated from literary analysis. This study integrates these disciplines, offering a more holistic view. Furthermore, existentialist literature is frequently read as portraying static philosophical positions; this paper argues instead that existential anxiety serves as a dynamic force that transforms characters over time. Scholars also tend to separate moral existentialism (Dostoevsky) from absurdist existentialism (Camus) without recognizing their shared focus on freedom, alienation, and human responsibility. By bridging these divides, this study enriches the understanding of existentialism as a multifaceted and evolving literary tradition.

Character Analysis and Transformation:

Raskolnikov's act of murder in *Crime and Punishment* triggers a deep moral and psychological crisis. Initially convinced of his superiority and the righteousness of his transgression, Raskolnikov gradually succumbs to overwhelming guilt and inner torment. His isolation and breakdown reveal existential anxiety as a moral reckoning, culminating in his eventual redemption through suffering and spiritual awakening. Roquentin, in *Nausea*, experiences existential disgust not through a singular act, but through



the cumulative realization of life's arbitrariness. His sense of alienation intensifies as he becomes estranged from time, objects, and his own identity. Yet this crisis leads to a philosophical breakthrough—meaning is not given but must be created. Roquentin finds solace in the possibility of art, a self-fashioned response to existential nausea. Meursault, in *The Stranger*, represents a starkly different trajectory. His detachment from societal norms, emotional indifference, and passive acceptance of events illustrate Camus' absurd hero. Unlike Raskolnikov or Roquentin, Meursault seeks no justification or transformation—his existential anxiety culminates in serene acceptance of life's meaninglessness and an embrace of death as liberation.

Comparative Discussion:

Existential anxiety functions as a narrative driver in all three texts, shaping plot and character arcs. Raskolnikov's anxiety manifests through ethical conflict and leads to moral regeneration. Roquentin's anxiety becomes ontological, rooted in his awareness of being and time, ultimately resolved through artistic imagination. Meursault's anxiety is subtler but profound, culminating in his confrontation with absurdity and death. Their differing responses underscore key philosophical distinctions: Dostoevsky emphasizes moral struggle and spiritual salvation; Sartre focuses on freedom, responsibility, and the necessity of self-creation; Camus embraces the futility of meaning and the power of lucid acceptance. These divergences reveal how existentialist thought accommodates a range of emotional and intellectual responses to the human condition. Psychologically, the texts illustrate different coping mechanisms for existential dread—guilt and redemption, nausea and artistic creation, or detachment and absurd rebellion. Literarily, they showcase how anxiety is not merely a theme but a transformative force that reshapes characters, driving them toward self-awareness, crisis, or transcendence.

Conclusion and Future Research:

This study demonstrates that existential anxiety plays a vital role in character transformation across existentialist literature. Through guilt (Raskolnikov), self-awareness (Roquentin), and acceptance of absurdity (Meursault), these characters illustrate the profound impact of philosophical and psychological tension on identity and narrative structure. By blending literary analysis with existential and psychological theory, this paper offers a multidimensional understanding of how anxiety shapes human experience in fiction. Future research could extend this approach to contemporary or non-Western literature, exploring how existential themes evolve in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, examining the intersection between existential anxiety and mental health may reveal new insights into how



literature mirrors and informs psychological realities. Including figures like Kafka and Beckett could further broaden the comparative scope, illuminating the universal yet variable nature of existential anxiety across time and space.

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