

Nora Seed's Literacy as Self-Discovery in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*

Fatimatuzzahroh¹, Much. Koiri²

^{1,2}Program Studi Sastra Inggris Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

E-mail: fatimatuzzahroh.22119@mhs.unesa.ac.id¹

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Abstract: *In the current period, identity crises and the pursuit of existential significance are becoming increasingly complex psychological issues, exacerbated by social media pressures and high productivity expectations. The Midnight Library by Matt Haig has been analyzed using a variety of psychological techniques, but no research has examined how literacy serves as a tool for self-discovery in the book. Using the framework of New Literacy Studies (NLS) and a systematic close-reading methodology, this study examines how literacy operates as a transformative mechanism for identity reconstruction in The Midnight Library. The conceptualization of life as a textual possibility, reflective literacy practices through critical evaluation, cross-discursive identity negotiation, and the protagonist's transition from a passive reader to an active writer of their own existence were the four main themes that emerged from the analysis. These results show how literary works can serve as models for transformational literacy practices that mediate self-formation and advance narrative identity theory and literacy studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media pressure and high productivity expectations increasingly exacerbate identity crises and the search for life's purpose among modern society (Frankl, 2006; Twenge, 2023). This situation often triggers existential regret, where individuals reflect on untaken decisions or missed opportunities, as explained in studies on contemporary psychological dynamics (Roese & Summerville, 2005; Guttman, 2022). In this context, self-discovery becomes a crucial process involving continuous exploration of identity and life's meaning, particularly in the digital era that pressures social conformity (Rogers, 1961; Przybylski et al., 2021).

New Literacy Studies (NLS) views literacy as a socio-cultural practice that is not neutral, but rather influences individuals' interactions with texts as well as their self-interpretation and understanding of the surrounding world (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Street, 2003). This practice is closely tied to identity formation and power relations, where reading functions as a tool for intellectual transformation (Gee, 2015; Lankshear & Knobel, 2022). Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* serves as a perfect illustration, with protagonist Nora Seed exploring various versions of her life through a metaphysical library, thereby profoundly transforming her self-

perception (Haig, 2020; Street, 2021).

Previous studies on this novel have explored psychological aspects such as well-being and resilience from the perspective of positive psychology (Jenitta & Sivakami, 2024), Freudian id-ego-superego dynamics (Sihotang & Mubarak, 2024), the journey from despair to self-acceptance (Kayalvizhi & Kanchana, 2023), and Jungian individuation processes (Mikaeili et al., 2023). Although these analyses are rich, none have specifically examined reading as a social practice that mediates Nora's journey of self-discovery (Barton & Hamilton, 2022; Gee, 2015).

This gap is particularly striking because the novel explicitly depicts literacy as a transformative activity, rather than mere passive information absorption, aligning with the ideological model of NLS (Street, 1984; Lankshear & Knobel, 2022). Prior research has tended to focus on internal psychological dimensions, overlooking the role of literacy as a cultural practice that shapes identity through textual interactions (Kayalvizhi & Kanchana, 2023; Mikaeili et al., 2023).

This study aims to analyze Nora's representation of literacy as a form of self-discovery in *The Midnight Library* and its contribution to the reconstruction of her identity, guided by two research questions: (1) How is Nora's literacy depicted as self-discovery? and (2) How does this process reconstruct her identity? Its urgency lies in understanding how literacy practices can serve as a therapeutic tool in addressing existential crises in the digital era, while its novelty as the first study to comprehensively apply NLS to the novel complements the existing psychological literature (Street, 2003; Gee, 2015).

METHODS

Research Design

Within the framework of New Literacy Studies, this study uses systematic close reading and qualitative textual analysis (Barry, 2009; McKee, 2004). Since the goal of this study is to interpret the representational and symbolic aspects of texts rather than to measure the incidence of a phenomenon, a qualitative technique was selected. This design makes it possible to examine the textual construction of literacy practices and how these constructions produce meanings pertaining to identity and self-discovery.

Data Sources

The primary source of information is Matt Haig's book *The Midnight Library* (Canongate Books, 2020, 288 pages). Textual analysis frameworks by Barry (2009) and McKee (2004); theories of identity by Holland et al. (1998); narrative identity theories by McAdams (2001) and Ricoeur (1992); critical literacy theories by Freire (1970) and Janks (2010); theoretical works on NLS by Barton and Hamilton (2012), Gee (2015), and Street (1984, 2003); and previous studies on this novel by Kayalvizhi and Kanchana (2023), Mikaeili et al. (2023), and Sihotang and Mubarak (2024).

Data Collection

Textually rich passages that best exemplify literacy-mediated self-discovery were chosen through purposeful sampling. The selection criteria were as follows: (a) scenes where Nora interacts with other life stories; (b) identity negotiation moments brought on by reading activities; (c) discussions about meaning-making between Nora and Mrs. Elm; and (d) situations where Nora's relationship with her own life story changes noticeably.

Twenty-three significant sections, including Nora's first experience with the library (pp. 35-50), her investigation of parallel lives (pp. 80-250), and her final shift into authorial agency (pp. 285-

288), were chosen for in-depth examination. Each passage was selected because it provides significant textual evidence for at least one of the four analytical dimensions of the NLS framework.

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows a systematic four-stage process, adapted from Barton and Hamilton (2012), Gee (2015), McKee (2004), and Barry (2009):

1. Stage 1: Identification of Literacy Events: Each selected passage is coded to pinpoint instances of visible literacy events in which writing or reading is essential to communication and meaning-making (Barton & Hamilton, 2012).
2. Stage 2: Analysis of Literacy Practices: The extracts are examined to reveal broader cultural trends in Nora's literacy practices, such as the values and beliefs that shape her reading habits and changes in her interaction with the text over the course of the story.
3. Stage 3: Discourse Analysis: Using Gee's (2015) paradigm, each other's existence is evaluated as a separate discourse, and Nora's distinctive ways of thinking, assessing, and positioning oneself within or against each discourse are investigated.
4. Stage 4: Symbolic and Narrative Analysis: Following Barry (2009) and McKee (2004), symbolic configurations, spatial metaphors, narrative development, and dialogic structures are analyzed based on their contribution to the representation of literacy as an identity-forming practice in the novel.

Trustworthiness

Analytical rigor is established through three procedures. First, theoretical triangulation integrates the NLS framework, textual analysis, and narrative identity theory to examine the data from various analytical perspectives, thereby reducing interpretive bias. Second, readers can assess the analysis's reliability because thick description provides substantial textual evidence to support each interpretive claim. Third, by openly recognizing the researcher's interpretive function and firmly establishing interpretations in systematic theoretical application, reflexivity is preserved throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Life as Text: The Library as a Space of Literacy

According to *The Midnight Library*, life is a text that can be read, understood, and changed. Literacy is viewed as a sociocultural activity that influences identity formation under the NLS paradigm (Street, 2003; Barton & Hamilton, 2012). The library functions as what Barton and Hamilton (2012) call a "literacy event": a space where meaning-making occurs through the acts of reading and interpreting textual possibilities.

The novel's central metaphor explicitly establishes this equivalence. The depiction of books as portals to alternative identities, where Nora is told that every book represents "an opportunity to try out another life you could live" (Haig, 2020, p. 31), constructs the act of reading as a literacy event in the sense defined by Barton and Hamilton (2012). This depiction aligns with Gee's (2015) assertion that identity is enacted through engagement with various Discourses, thereby positioning reading as ontologically equivalent to life itself. The visual depiction of an abundance of books, "shelf after shelf" and "countless books" (Haig, 2020, p. 34) further reinforces this symbolism: identity is not something fixed, but is always open to reinterpretation, reflecting Street's (2003) ideological model of literacy as a situated practice that shapes identity, rather than merely a neutral decoding.

Table 1. Textual Representations of Life in *The Midnight Library*

Textual Elements	Quotations	Page	The Role of Literacy
The Library as a Space of Possibility	"Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived."	31	Viewing life as a text that can be read and interpreted
Endless narratives	"The books were everywhere... shelves upon shelves... an infinite number of books"	34	Representing the diversity and fluidity of identity
Books as Portals	"She pulled a book from the shelf."	45	Reading as a literal entry into an alternative discourse
The Equivalence of Life and Text	"Opening a book was like opening a door to a new life."	52	Establishing ontological equivalence between text and lived experience

The library's spatial symbolism deserves special attention. As a liminal space situated between life and death, the library represents a field of consciousness where regret meets possibility. This spatial layer serves an important narrative function: it provides a safe framework for exploring identity, allowing Nora to inhabit different selves without incurring existential risk. The library is thus not merely a metaphor but an architectural embodiment of an ideological model of literacy, a space in which text and identity are understood as mutually constitutive.

Reflective Literacy Practices: Reading as Critical Evaluation

Nora's engagement with alternative lives gradually evolves into what Freire (1970) terms "critical consciousness," the ability to perceive contradictions between external reality and internal experience, and to act upon that perception. This development is evident textually throughout the narrative. In her life as an Olympic swimmer, for example, Nora realized that "she had been a champion swimmer... and yet she hadn't been happy" (Haig, 2020, p. 89). This insight is analytically significant: it shows that Nora has begun to critically evaluate the dominant discourse on achievement, rather than passively accepting it.

Her reflective capacity deepened through subsequent experiences, reaching its peak in the recognition of patterns, which Gee (2015) terms "meta-knowledge," the ability to reflect on one's own discursive position. The awareness that emerges repeatedly across various life stories (Haig, 2020, p. 142) represents this meta-awareness: Nora no longer evaluates each life story according to its internal criteria of success, but rather to whether it allows for authentic self-expression. This shift from first-order evaluation to second-order reflection marks a qualitative development in her literacy practice.

Table 2. Stages of Reflective Literacy Practice

Stage	Literacy Activities	Textual Evidence	Page	The Development of Critical Thinking
Preliminary Reading	Passive consumption of alternative narratives	"She had been a champion swimmer... and yet she hadn't been happy."	89	Recognizing that external achievements do not guarantee meaning
Critical Evaluation	Questioning the dominant discourse of success	Recognizing that fame and achievements feel hollow without authenticity	76–118	Developing an awareness of discursive positions and their effects

Meta-Reflection	Conscious comparison across various life narratives	A recurring pattern of dissatisfaction across various discourses	142	Metaknowledge: the capacity to reflect on one's own discursive position
Synthesis	Integration of perspectives toward a coherent understanding	An understanding of what constitutes authentic meaning	200	A shift toward authorial agency and self-determination

Freire's concept of conscientiare (1970) is best illustrated by Nora's transition from passive consumption to critical appraisal. She initially embraced every life discourse according to her own standards, blindly embracing the ideals and goals it offered. But over time, she gained the ability to recognize the conflict between interior perceptions of purpose and external indicators of accomplishment. She was able to recognize similarities in a variety of life situations thanks to her critical literacy practice, which helped her develop a synthesized view of what authentic self-expression is, a necessary condition for the authorial agency she eventually gained.

Cross-Discourse Identity Negotiation

Drawing on Gee's (2015) conceptualization of Discourse (capital D), each alternative life in the novel can be understood as a distinct system of values, a unique configuration of ways of thinking, acting, judging, and believing. Nora's engagement with these Discourses is marked by varying degrees of harmony and dissonance. In her life as a rock star, he experienced a discourse dissonance: although he possessed the external markers of celebrity success, he realized that "something felt wrong" (Haig, 2020, p. 76), revealing a fundamental mismatch between the identity he was performing and her authentic self. In contrast, her life in academia produced a stronger sense of harmony: "It felt meaningful. It felt important" (Haig, 2020, p. 118), although even here, a sense of completeness remained elusive.

This pattern of negotiation exemplifies the concept of "positional identity" (Holland et al., 1998), the way individuals position themselves within and in relation to "figured worlds" of meaning. Every alternative life constitutes such a "figured world," with recognizable characters, valued practices, and achievable outcomes. Nora's journey involves learning to recognize her position within each "figured world" and, ultimately, rejecting externally imposed positions in favor of a reflectively chosen identity. The culmination of this process is her acceptance of her true life: "It was real. And maybe that was enough" (Haig, 2020). Crucially, this acceptance is not an act of resignation, but rather the result of an active process of comparative evaluation: Nora has arrived at this affirmation through her journey across various Discourses. This recognition embodies what Gee (2015) calls "affinity identity," an identification based on shared practices and authentic experiences, rather than on externally imposed categories.

Table 3. Negotiation of Identity Across Different Discourse Communities

Alternative Lifestyles (Discourse)	Values	Textual Evidence	Page	Nora's Position
The Life of a Rock Star	Fame, celebrity, public validation	"She was Nora Seed, rock star... But something felt wrong."	76	Discourse Dissonance: External success without internal alignment
The Life of an Olympian	Achievement, competition, excellence	"She had been a champion swimmer..."	89	Partial Alignment: Achievements are

		and yet she hadn't been happy."		recognized but insufficient
The Life of a Scientist	Purpose, contribution, knowledge	"It felt meaningful. It felt important."	118	Strong Alignment: Goal-based values resonate deeply
The Life of a Glaciologist	Expertise, environmental stewardship	Meaningful research on glaciers in remote areas	165	Purpose-driven work but lacking relational connections
The Life of an Indigenous Person	Authenticity, connection, reality	"It was real. And maybe that was enough."	276	Full Acceptance: Affinity identity achieved through authenticity

This analysis reveals that identity is not found as a pre-existing essence, but is enacted differently across contexts and actively negotiated through engagement with competing discourses. This finding supports Street’s (2003) claim that literacy, here understood as the practice of reading and inhabiting textual life, is always embedded in power relations and identity formation, never neutral or context-free.

From Reader to Writer: Reconstructing Identity Through Authorship

The novel’s climactic transformation occurs when Nora shifts from reading possibilities to actively choosing a life, a transition from a consumer of texts to a producer of meaning. This shift crystallizes narratively in her realization that “she just had to want to be alive” (Haig, 2020, p. 267). In Freire’s terms, this represents a movement from passivity toward agency, from being an object of circumstances to becoming the active subject of her own history (Freire, 1970). The final affirmation “I am alive” (Haig, 2020, p. 288) marks the completion of this transition. This affirmation's grammatical structure is just as important from an analytical standpoint as its content: the change from passive constructions and third-person narration to a first-person declarative statement affirms author Nora's agency over her own story.

Table 4. Transformation from Reader to Writer of Identity

Phase	Role	literacy practices	Textual Markers	Page	Level of Agency
Beginning	Passive Reader	Consuming pre-written life narratives without criticism	"She pulled a book from the shelf."	45	Low
Middle	Critical Reader	Evaluating and comparing narratives based on internal criteria	Recurring dissatisfaction despite external success	142	Medium
Transition	Reflective Reader	Recognizing patterns; developing meta-awareness	Understanding what constitutes authentic meaning	200	High
Climax	Active Writer	Choosing and crafting one’s own existence	"She just had to want to be alive."	267	Very High
Resolution	Author of Life	Living as a conscious act of narrative creation	"I am alive."	288	Complete

Ricoeur's (1992) theory of narrative identity, which holds that our stories about ourselves shape who we are, is embodied in Nora's metamorphosis. Nora exemplifies the idea that identity is an ongoing textual practice that needs to be actively formed rather than a fixed essence waiting to be revealed by shifting from reading predetermined tales to creating her own reality. By showing that the shift from reader to writer from a positioned subject to a reflecting agent constitutes a basic mechanism of literacy-mediated identity reconstruction, this discovery broadens the scope of NLS theory.

Synthesis: Literacy, Identity, and Existential Agency

The Midnight Library is a broad metaphor for using reading activities to develop one's identity. Through four different analytical dimensions, the novel shows how the self is created by critical reflection, interaction with different discourses, and, finally, authorial agency.

Table 5. Comprehensive Analysis of Literacy and Identity Construction

findings	NLS Framework	Key Evidence	The Process of Identity	Theoretical Contributions
Life as Text	Literacy as a social practice	The library metaphor: books without limits	Introduction to identity flexibility	Identity is constructed through text and discourse
Critical Reading	Reflective literacy practices	Various reflections on life	Development of metacognition	The author's agency emerges through ongoing criticism
Discourse Navigation	The imagined world; positional identity	Rock stars, scientists, authentic living	Positional negotiation	Identity is mediated by discourse; it is never fixed
From Reader to Writer	Authorship and reflective agency	The affirmation "I am alive."	Achievement of self-agency	Existential literacy enables the reconstruction of identity

Importantly, all four dimensions are mutually reinforcing aspects of a single literacy process rather than just sequential stages. Nora's ability to navigate various discourses (Dimension 3) leads to a meta-awareness that ultimately enables her to be an author (Dimension 4); her capacity for critical analysis (Dimension 2) is based on her initial recognition that life is a text (Dimension 1). An integrative reading of the novel's literacy practices expands the NLS framework and offers readers a reflective space to reflect on their own identity-construction processes by demonstrating how literary texts can both represent and model the transformative literacy practices they describe.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that literacy in *The Midnight Library* functions as a transformative socio-cultural practice under the New Literacy Studies framework, enabling Nora's journey from passive reader to active author of her identity. Key findings highlight four interconnected dimensions: the library as a metaphorical space where life equates to interpretable text; reflective reading fostering critical consciousness and meta-awareness; cross-discourse negotiation revealing identity as fluid and positional; and the climactic shift to authorship, where Nora reconstructs her self through existential agency. These processes align with Street's ideological literacy model, Gee's Discourse theory, and Freire's conscientização, demonstrating how textual engagement mediates identity

reconstruction amid modern existential crises.

While this qualitative textual analysis provides rich interpretive depth, limitations include its focus on a single novel, potentially limiting generalizability, and reliance on researcher interpretation despite triangulation efforts. Future research could apply NLS to diverse literary genres or empirical reader-response studies to validate these mechanisms in real-world contexts. Practically, the findings urge educators and therapists to promote reflective literacy practices as therapeutic tools for identity exploration in digital-era counseling, empowering individuals to navigate regret and conformity through critical reading and narrative authorship.

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