

Healing the Self: Mental Health and Existential Recovery in the Select Works of Don DeLillo

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the coping mechanisms of existential beings during moments of crisis, focusing on the works of Don DeLillo, *Zero K*, *The Body Artist*, and *Falling Man*. Grounded in existential philosophy, psychology, and psychiatry, the study analyzes how DeLillo's characters navigate crises of meaning, death, and isolation, revealing core existential traits both during and after their experiences. Drawing on theories from Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Frankl, and Yalom, the research demonstrates that these characters confront alienation, death, and absurdity by embracing authenticity, rebellion, and self-transformation. Through close reading and thematic analysis, the paper argues that DeLillo's characters use suffering and trauma as catalysts for existential growth, reflecting the human capacity to find meaning and transformation in moments of profound disorientation. The study bridges literature and the humanities, illustrating how the existential crises depicted in DeLillo's works resonate with universal themes of coping, identity, and survival in the face of the absurd. It will also propose the C.A.R.E model as a healing way to overcome crisis.

1. Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary literature, existential crises emerge as pivotal turning points for characters navigating the complexities of life, death, and the search for meaning. In Don DeLillo's novels *Zero K*, *The Body Artist*, and *Falling Man*, individuals grapple with profound metaphysical challenges that strip away the familiar, thrusting them into states of disorientation and existential reckoning. This paper examines how these characters confront their crises, revealing the intricate coping mechanisms that arise during and after these tumultuous experiences. Through the lenses of existential philosophy, psychology, and psychiatry, the analysis will employ the C.A.R.E. model, focusing on Coping, Authenticity, Rebellion, and Evolution, to illuminate the transformative journeys of these characters. Each crisis serves not only as a moment of despair but as a catalyst for self-discovery, prompting themes of authentic living, rebellion against the absurd, acceptance of mortality, and the active creation of personal meaning. By delving into these narratives, we uncover how the characters' struggles reflect universal human experiences, offering insights into the resilience of the human spirit amidst the chaos of existence.

2. Research Framework

The research adopts an interdisciplinary framework, combining existential philosophy, psychology, and literature to examine how Don DeLillo's characters embody existential personae, as articulated by thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Viktor Frankl. This approach focuses on how the characters navigate crises of meaning and identity in works such as *Zero K*, *The Body Artist*, and *Falling Man*. Existential philosophy, drawing from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, forms the foundation for understanding the crises of meaning, authenticity, and human freedom. These philosophical concepts frame the characters' experiences as they confront the absurdity of existence and the weight of their choices. Existential psychology, through Frankl's *Logotherapy*, May's *Existential Psychology*, and Yalom's *Existential Psychotherapy*, provides insights into how individuals face death, isolation, and the search for meaning. This psychological lens helps to analyze the characters' internal responses and transformations during crises. Literary analysis, meanwhile, illustrates these existential struggles through close readings of DeLillo's novels, focusing on themes like alienation, trauma, and transformation. By integrating philosophy, psychology, and literature, the research offers a nuanced exploration of the characters' existential journeys, revealing how crises are experienced and resolved on both philosophical and psychological levels.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology, emphasizing close reading and thematic analysis of Don DeLillo's works. By analyzing key moments in the texts, the study seeks to uncover how the characters confront existential crises and respond to the pressures of meaning, death, and isolation. Philosophical texts and psychological frameworks serve as secondary sources, providing a lens through which the coping mechanisms demonstrated by the characters can be interpreted. The first step in the methodology involves textual analysis, where *Zero K*, *The Body Artist*, and *Falling Man* are examined in detail. This step focuses on identifying pivotal moments of existential crisis within the narratives and investigating how the characters react to their existential predicaments. Through this close reading, the study highlights the themes of alienation, trauma, and the search for authenticity. Next, the theoretical application integrates existential philosophy and psychology to interpret the characters' actions and transformations. The research draws on existential thinkers like Sartre, Heidegger, and Frankl to analyze the characters' struggles with freedom, meaning, and mortality. Psychological frameworks from Frankl's Logotherapy, Rollo May's existential psychology, and Yalom's existential psychotherapy are applied to explore the characters' mental and emotional responses to crises. Lastly, a comparative approach is employed to compare the coping mechanisms of characters across the three novels. This step reveals recurring patterns and divergences in DeLillo's portrayal of existential crises. By examining similarities and differences in how characters from different works confront their crises, the study seeks to develop a broader understanding of DeLillo's existential themes and the various pathways to recovery and transformation. Furthermore, this study proposes a model called C.A.R.E. to systematically analyze the existential themes present in Don DeLillo's works, focusing on coping mechanisms and characteristics revealed during crises. The model comprises four key components: Coping Mechanisms, which explores how characters navigate trauma and isolation; Authenticity and Responsibility, which examines the characters' journeys toward living authentically amidst existential challenges; Rebellion Against Absurdity, which investigates characters' resistance to the inherent meaninglessness of existence; and Evolution through Crisis, which highlights the transformative effects of crisis on personal identity and growth. By applying this model, I aim to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay of existential themes in DeLillo's novels, offering insights into the human condition as portrayed in the face of trauma and adversity.

Existential Healing Amidst Crisis

In Don DeLillo's novels, exploring coping mechanisms during crises reveals profound insights into the human condition. In *The Body Artist*, Lauren Hartke's experience of deep isolation following her husband's suicide exemplifies the existential crisis of alienation. Her struggle mirrors Sartre's notion of abandonment and Heidegger's concept of "being towards death" as she confronts the void left by her husband's absence. This alienation not only highlights her disoriented sense of self but also serves as a poignant reminder of the inherent loneliness that accompanies profound loss (Gullick, 2019). Similarly, in *Zero K*, the protagonist grapples with the unsettling idea of freezing bodies for future resurrection, prompting critical questions about the meaning of death and the implications of eternal life. The evolution of his perspective embodies Frankl's concept of "tragic optimism," (McCroskey, 2022).

It suggests that confronting death directly is essential to grasping life's significance. This acknowledgment is not merely an intellectual exercise but a vital step toward accepting and understanding one's existence. The theme of trauma and survival is prominently featured in *Falling Man*, where characters face the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The shock and disorientation experienced by these characters are reflective of the collective trauma that pervades society in the wake of such catastrophic events. Drawing on Yalom's existential psychotherapy, we see how these characters confront their existential isolation and fear, ultimately embarking on a quest for meaning in a world forever altered by violence. This coping mechanism underscores the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming adversity. As the characters navigate their crises, they reveal essential characteristics that shape their identities and existential journeys. A profound need for authenticity emerges, highlighting an existential responsibility to live truthfully. For instance, Lauren's gradual acceptance of her grief in *The Body Artist* signifies her movement toward authenticity, emphasizing Sartre's idea that individuals must confront the "anguish" of their freedom (Vorobeva, 2022).

In contrast, characters in *Zero K* rebel against the absurdity of existence, echoing Camus' notion of the "Absurd Hero" (Rahim, 2023). Their questioning of technological promises of immortality reflects a deep-seated challenge to the belief that eternal life equates to meaning. This rebellion signifies a crucial step in their existential journeys, as they seek to define their existence in a seemingly indifferent universe. Furthermore, the

crises faced by the characters serve as catalysts for transformation. In *Falling Man*, Keith's struggle with post-traumatic stress and existential disorientation illustrates how crises can lead to profound metamorphosis. Despite the despair and nihilism that accompany such experiences, the crises ultimately propel characters toward new understandings of personal identity and collective belonging. This transformation aligns with Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch," representing the evolved self who overcomes despair through self-discovery and resilience (Friedrich, 2005). Collectively, these discussions illuminate how DeLillo's characters confront their crises, revealing essential truths about authenticity, rebellion, and transformation in the face of existential challenges (Sciarrini, 2023).

C.A.R.E Model

The C.A.R.E. model provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the existential themes present in Don DeLillo's novels, focusing on coping mechanisms and characteristics revealed during crises. This model comprises four key components, such as Coping Mechanisms, Authenticity and Responsibility, Rebellion Against Absurdity, and Evolution through Crisis. Each component is illustrated through the characters and themes in DeLillo's works, supported by evidence from secondary sources.

Coping Mechanisms

The first element of the C.A.R.E. model examines the various coping mechanisms employed by characters when faced with crises. In *The Body Artist*, Lauren Hartke's profound isolation following her husband's suicide exemplifies the theme of alienation. Her existential crisis mirrors Sartre's notion of abandonment, reflecting his discomfort with passivity and refusal to surrender to bodily sensations, which he viewed as a suspension of active engagement with the world. For Sartre, true existence meant constant activity and responsibility, aligning with his existential idea of *pour-soi* (being for itself), where individuals transcend themselves through their choices. "Abandon," as a form of letting go or indulging in bodily pleasure, conflicted with his ideal of meaningful action and control, making it morally unacceptable in his philosophy (de Lacoste, 1998). Lauren's experience, as she grapples with her grief, illustrates the struggle to reconcile personal loss with the search for identity. Critic David Cowart notes that Lauren's alienation "reflects the larger existential void faced by individuals in the modern world" (Cowart, 2012). In *Zero K*, the protagonist contemplates the cryogenic freezing of bodies for future resurrection, raising profound questions about death and eternal life. His journey reflects Viktor Frankl's idea of "tragic optimism," where facing death is essential for understanding life's meaning (Frankl, 2006). The protagonist's evolving perspective "reveals a fundamental shift from evasion to acceptance of mortality" (Pozorski, 2016). His skepticism of technological immortality reflects Camus' notion of the absurd, leading him to reassess the meaning of life in the present rather than seeking an impossible future through technology. *Falling Man* delves into the trauma of surviving the 9/11 attacks, where characters confront existential isolation and fear. Drawing on Yalom's existential psychotherapy, which focuses on human anxieties of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, the novel explores how trauma leads to a quest for meaning in the aftermath of collective violence (Yalom, 1980). Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the 9/11 attacks, exemplifies the disorientation and fragmentation following such catastrophic events. His post-traumatic stress disorder becomes a means for DeLillo to explore the disruption of identity and the quest for meaning. Critic Haslam notes that "the characters' struggles reflect the pervasive sense of disorientation that accompanies such catastrophic events" (Haslam, 2024).

Each of these novels illustrates different coping mechanisms when characters face existential crises. Whether through alienation, acceptance of mortality, or grappling with trauma, DeLillo's characters are forced to confront their deepest fears about existence. By placing these crises at the center of his narratives, DeLillo invites readers to reflect on the human condition and the ways individuals make sense of their lives in a world that often seems devoid of meaning. The C.A.R.E. model captures the essence of these existential struggles and offers a framework for understanding how DeLillo's characters cope with, resist, and ultimately transform through their crises.

Authenticity and Responsibility

The second component of the C.A.R.E. model highlights the need for authenticity and responsibility revealed during crises. Characters in DeLillo's novels grapple with the necessity of living authentically amidst existential anguish. In *The Body Artist*, Lauren's journey toward authenticity unfolds as she learns to accept her grief rather than deny it, a confrontation with Sartre's idea of anguish and the responsibility of making choices. Lauren's evolution represents a profound struggle for authenticity in the face of overwhelming loss (Pope, 2016). In *Zero*

K, characters resist the promise of immortality through technology, reflecting a deeper existential challenge. Their questioning of technological advancements signifies a need to find meaning in the present rather than in future promises.

The concept of authenticity and responsibility plays a pivotal role in understanding how DeLillo's characters respond to existential crises, a theme deeply rooted in existential philosophy, particularly in Jean-Paul Sartre's works. Sartre argued that individuals must face their "anguish", and the awareness of their radical freedom to choose, and that living authentically requires accepting the weight of their decisions. DeLillo's characters encounter existential crises that compel them to confront responsibilities and make genuine choices amidst life's absurdity. In *The Body Artist*, Lauren Hartke's journey toward authenticity is central to her narrative. After her husband Rey's suicide, she initially retreats into isolation and denial. However, as the novel progresses, Lauren confronts her grief, moving toward authenticity by accepting her pain as part of her existence. Through her body art performances, she uses her body to express and process her grief, symbolizing her path toward authenticity. Pope observes, that Lauren's evolution represents a profound struggle for authenticity in the face of overwhelming loss (Pope, 2016). By embracing her grief instead of denying it, Lauren illustrates Sartre's idea of living authentically, acknowledging the weight of her choices and existence without resorting to self-deception. Lauren's acceptance of her grief also reflects a confrontation with the absurdity of life, the realization that existence can be suddenly disrupted without reason or meaning. Rather than letting her husband's death paralyze her, she engages with it, finding creative expression through her performances. This mirrors the existential notion that authenticity involves accepting life's ambiguity while still taking responsibility for how one lives. In *Zero K*, DeLillo explores authenticity through the lens of technological advancement and the quest for immortality. Characters are offered the chance to escape death through cryogenic freezing, but the protagonist, Jeffrey Lockhart, grapples with the ethical and existential implications of such a choice. He becomes increasingly skeptical of the notion that eternal life through technology provides any real sense of meaning. His resistance to this technological solution reflects an existential dilemma: does living authentically require accepting death as part of human existence? By rejecting cryogenic preservation, Jeffrey embraces Sartre's existential belief that meaning is created in the present through one's choices and actions, rather than in future promises of salvation. Pozorski notes that this rebellion against immortality "underscores their need to find meaning in the here and now" (Pozorski, 2016).

In *Falling Man*, the theme of authenticity and responsibility emerges in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, where characters grapple with the trauma of survival. Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the attacks, faces an existential crisis as he attempts to rebuild his life. Initially disconnected and disoriented, Keith begins to realize that surviving the attacks imposes a new responsibility upon him. His struggle for authenticity involves re-examining his choices and confronting the broader implications of survival in a world that has changed irreversibly. His journey is not about finding closure but about accepting life's ambiguity while still making responsible choices. As with Sartre's concept of authenticity, Keith's struggle reflects the freedom and responsibility that come with being alive, even in the face of life's incomprehensibility (Jean, 2001). Through these characters, DeLillo illustrates the existential challenges of living authentically. Whether through confronting grief, accepting mortality, or dealing with trauma, his characters must embrace responsibility and make meaningful choices in a world that offers little certainty. The C.A.R.E. model captures this essential struggle, offering a framework for understanding how DeLillo's characters navigate their existential crises.

Rebellion Against Absurdity

The third component of the C.A.R.E. model delves into the theme of rebellion against absurdity in DeLillo's works. Characters often confront the meaninglessness of existence, aligning with Camus' concept of the "Absurd Hero." In *Zero K*, the protagonist's skepticism toward technological immortality represents a rebellion against absurdity. The characters challenge the belief that eternal life equates to meaning, demonstrating a desire for significance beyond mere survival. The rebellion against technological promises reflects a broader existential struggle for meaning in a world that often feels indifferent (Aho, 2024). In *Zero K*, DeLillo examines this rebellion through the lens of cryogenic freezing as a means to preserve life until future technologies can restore individuals to consciousness. This concept represents an extreme form of rebellion against death and the finality it imposes on human existence. Yet, Jeffrey Lockhart, the protagonist, remains skeptical of this notion. His resistance to the idea of freezing bodies for future resurrection reflects a deeper rebellion against the absurdity of attempting to evade death, the natural endpoint of life. He perceives the notion that technological immortality could imbue life with greater meaning as hollow, underscoring the existential belief that meaning cannot be

derived from simply extending life. As Jeffrey grapples with his father's decision to undergo cryogenic preservation, he realizes that the pursuit of eternal life strips existence of its urgency and significance. It is not the endlessness of life that matters but how one lives within the boundaries of mortality. This sentiment mirrors Camus' Myth of Sisyphus, where the recognition of life's futility is met not with surrender but with rebellion, a conscious decision to find meaning in the finite nature of human life (2018). For Jeffrey, meaning must be sought in the present, with all its uncertainties and limitations. The rebellion extends beyond the absurdity of immortality; it challenges the idea that life's value comes solely from its prolongation. In *The Body Artist*, Lauren Hartke's experience of alienation following her husband's suicide illustrates a similar theme. Lauren confronts the void left by her husband's death, symbolizing the ultimate absurdity of existence, how life can be irrevocably disrupted by forces beyond human control, leaving no clear meaning in its wake. Rather than succumb to despair, Lauren engages in a methodical rebellion against the meaninglessness she faces. Her body art becomes a means to explore and express her identity in the aftermath of trauma. This rebellion is subtle and introspective, manifesting in her engagement with time, memory, and the physical body, which she manipulates in her performances to resist the absurdity of her situation. By inhabiting her grief and using her body as a medium of expression, she asserts her existence in an indifferent universe, where meaning must be created rather than discovered.

The theme of rebellion against absurdity is perhaps most pronounced in *Falling Man*, where characters deal with the trauma and existential shock of surviving the 9/11 attacks. The attacks themselves represent an embodiment of absurdity, the rupture of everyday life by incomprehensible violence. In the face of this absurdity, the characters struggle to rebuild their sense of identity and meaning. Keith Neudecker, the central character, experiences profound disorientation and detachment from his previous life after surviving the collapse of the Twin Towers. The trauma leaves him in existential limbo, where familiar structures of meaning seem to have collapsed along with the towers. However, Keith's struggle to reintegrate into his life is a form of rebellion against the absurdity of the event. Rather than succumb to nihilism, he embarks on a slow, painful journey toward personal reinvention, seeking new connections and understandings of himself in a world that feels incomprehensible. Through Keith's post-traumatic experiences, DeLillo explores how individuals rebel against the absurdity of massive, senseless violence. Yalom's existential psychotherapy, which addresses how individuals confront existential isolation and fear in the face of death, provides a framework for understanding Keith's rebellion (Yalom, 1980). He does not find immediate solace or meaning, but the act of continuing, of searching for a way forward, represents a defiant stance against the absurdity of his circumstances. Keith embodies the persistence of the absurd hero, who keeps pushing against the boundaries of existence despite the lack of inherent meaning.

Evolution through Crisis

Finally, the C.A.R.E. model emphasizes the transformation of self through crisis, illustrating how existential challenges catalyze personal growth. In *Falling Man*, Keith's battle with post-traumatic stress disorder exemplifies how crises can lead to profound metamorphosis. Despite experiencing despair, his journey reflects a quest for new understandings of personal identity and belonging. This evolution aligns with Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch," representing the evolved self who transcends nihilism (Friedrich, 2005). Keith's transformation serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the aftermath of trauma" (Harms, 2015). By applying the C.A.R.E. model to DeLillo's novels, we understand how characters navigate crises, revealing essential truths about authenticity, rebellion, and transformation in the face of existential challenges. The Evolution through Crisis component delves into how crises act as catalysts for personal transformation, allowing characters in DeLillo's works to evolve through their encounters with existential challenges. This transformation often involves a profound shift in identity, perspective, and meaning, as characters navigate the aftermath of trauma, loss, or disorientation. DeLillo's characters exemplify how crises, whether involving personal trauma, societal disintegration, or encounters with death, serve as moments of existential reckoning, pushing them toward deeper self-awareness and, in some cases, transformation. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo vividly portrays the transformative impact of crisis through Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the 9/11 attacks. Witnessing the collapse of the Twin Towers leaves him in a state of existential disorientation, with his PTSD symbolizing a rupture in his sense of self. Initially, Keith drifts through life in a fog of numbness and detachment, unable to reconnect with his former self or with others, including his estranged wife, Lianne. His crisis forces him to reexamine his identity, purpose, and place in the world. As the novel progresses, Keith begins a slow and painful journey toward personal transformation. The crisis of survival catalyzes his metamorphosis, compelling him to confront the meaning of his existence (Frankl, 2006). While initially retreating into a world of isolation, poker

games, and disconnection, his eventual return to Lianne and his son suggests a desire to rebuild his identity and find new meaning in his relationships. His trauma acts as a crucible for evolution, where the scars of 9/11 reshape how he perceives himself and the world around him. Keith's transformation can be understood through Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch."

Nietzsche argued that through crisis and suffering, individuals can rise above their circumstances, creating new values and ways of being (May, R., 1983). Keith's journey mirrors this philosophical idea as he moves from nihilism—where life appears meaningless in the wake of the attacks, toward a tentative new understanding of himself and his relationships. His evolution is marked not by the complete resolution of his trauma but by his ability to integrate the crisis into his identity and continue living despite the scars it has left on him. In *The Body Artist*, we see another profound evolution through crisis in Lauren Hartke's response to her husband Rey's suicide. Lauren's isolation following Rey's death thrusts her into an existential crisis, where she grapples with the absurdity of his sudden absence and the void it creates in her life. Initially, she withdraws into a solitary existence, confronting her grief at home. However, as the novel progresses, Lauren undergoes a transformation born out of suffering and existential despair. Her evolution is tied to her artistic practice, where she uses her body as a medium to process grief and confront the void left by Rey. Her performances represent a journey toward self-transcendence, reshaping her understanding of herself about loss. Through her body art, Lauren learns to embrace the impermanence and fragility of life, using her creative expression as a way to confront her mortality. This crisis catalyzes her transformation, pushing her to find new meaning through art and to rebuild her identity in the wake of Rey's death. This transformation can be seen as a form of existential rebirth, where Lauren moves from alienation and despair toward a new sense of purpose and self-awareness.

By confronting her grief and using it as a source of creative expression, she embodies the belief that crisis and suffering can lead to personal growth. Lauren's evolution represents a profound struggle for authenticity in the face of overwhelming loss. In *Zero K*, DeLillo explores the theme of evolution through crisis on a broader philosophical scale. The characters, particularly Jeffrey Lockhart, face an existential crisis as they confront the possibility of technological immortality. The crisis in *Zero K* revolves around the idea that death can be postponed or avoided through cryogenic preservation, raising profound questions about existence and the meaning of life. Jeffrey's father, Ross, embraces the idea of freezing his body in the hope of being revived, while Jeffrey remains skeptical of this technological solution.

For Jeffrey, the crisis is not just about the fear of death but about the implications of living in a world where immortality is possible. His skepticism reflects a deeper existential struggle: if life can be extended indefinitely, what becomes of meaning, purpose, and authenticity? His questioning of the promise of immortality represents his evolution through crisis as he grapples with the absurdity of a life without death. His rejection of cryogenic preservation can be seen as an existential rebellion against the notion that technology can provide ultimate solutions to the human condition. This philosophical crisis pushes Jeffrey toward a deeper understanding of what it means to live authentically. By rejecting the idea of immortality, he chooses to embrace the finite nature of life, accepting that death is an essential part of the human experience. His evolution is marked by a shift from seeking external solutions to existential questions toward finding meaning in the present. The characters' rebellion against the notion of eternal life underscores their need to find meaning in their existence. Jeffrey's journey reflects an evolution through crisis, where he learns to accept the limitations of human existence and the responsibility that comes with living authentically in a world that is often indifferent.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Don DeLillo's works provide a profound exploration of existential crises and the diverse coping mechanisms of individuals grappling with disorientation and meaninglessness. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining existential philosophy, psychology, and literary analysis, DeLillo's characters in *Zero K*, *The Body Artist*, and *Falling Man* illustrate the human capacity to find meaning and transform in the face of crisis. Each character's journey, whether through rebellion against absurdity, embracing responsibility and authenticity, or evolving through suffering reflects the dynamic process of existential growth. By applying the C.A.R.E. model, this study reveals how DeLillo's characters embody the essential human struggle for significance and self-transformation amidst uncertainty, demonstrating the resilience of the human spirit in confronting the challenges of existence. DeLillo's novels, thus, offer rich insights into the complexities of the existential condition and the enduring human quest for meaning.

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