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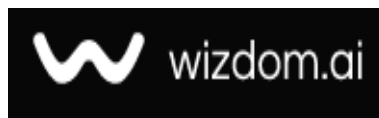
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Existential Anxiety, Freedom, and Authenticity: Rollo May's Reading of Annie Baker's *Infinite Life*

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Abstract

General Background: Existential psychology examines human anxiety, freedom, and authenticity as central aspects of lived experience. **Specific Background:** Annie Baker's *Infinite Life* (2023) portrays five women enduring chronic illness while confronting psychological and existential struggles in a healthcare setting. **Knowledge Gap:** Previous studies have discussed the play broadly but have not analyzed it through Rollo May's existential concepts. **Aims:** This study analyzes the representation of existential anxiety, freedom, and authenticity in the play using Rollo May's theoretical framework. **Results:** The findings show that the characters' suffering reflects anxiety of nothingness, the burden of choice, and the pursuit of authentic existence despite physical limitations; anxiety is depicted not merely as negative but as a constructive force leading to self-awareness, responsibility, and meaning-making. **Novelty:** This study offers a focused existential-psychological reading of *Infinite Life* grounded specifically in May's concepts, highlighting anxiety as a transformative element within contemporary drama. **Implications:** The analysis suggests that confronting existential anxiety enables individuals to move toward authenticity and responsible freedom, contributing to literary criticism and existential psychotherapy discourse.

Highlights:

- Anxiety is presented as a pathway toward self-awareness and meaning
- Character struggles illustrate tension between choice and responsibility
- Suffering functions as a route to genuine self-realization

Keywords: Existential Anxiety, Authenticity, Freedom, Rollo May, *Infinite Life*

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1. Introduction

Annie Baker's play *Infinite Life* is an astonishingly funny representation of the intricacy of suffering, and what it implies to desire in a body that is deteriorating. It was first produced in a co-production between the National Theatre, London, and Atlantic Theater Company, New York in 2023, directed by James Macdonald. In this play, five women all have sicknesses that give them lingering pain; on the other hand, conventional medicine has been powerless to treat. Thus, in order to be treated, they have to stay in an asylum in California. According to Paul Lewis, *Infinite Life* may remind you of *Waiting for Godot* and its days apparently repeating into infinity [1]. Like Beckett's play, there is not much drama but a lot going on beneath the surface and quite a bit of humor. For good measure, there is the doctor in charge of the clinic, and possibly their fates, who is mentioned frequently but never appears.

In this paper, I will use a number of significant existential perceptions outlined by Rollo May to inspect the ways in which mental illness, and society's reactions to mental illness, influence the anxiety, freedom, and authenticity of people with mental illness, affecting the prospects for individuals with mental illness to take part completely in forming the societies in which they live. As May has stated [2], What anxiety means is it's as though the world is knocking at your door, and you need to create, you need to make something, you need to do something. I think anxiety, for people who have found their own heart and their own souls, for them it is a stimulus toward creativity, toward courage. It's what makes us human beings. (p. 70)

What has been said confirms the fact that anxiety can be a conceivable supporting feature for self-awareness and shift by guiding human beings towards freedom and authenticity. In other words, one of the good points of living in an age filled with anxiety is that we are required to become conscious of ourselves. So, anxiety indicates a conflict, and so long as a conflict is around, a productive resolution is imaginable.

2. Statement of the Problem

So far, Baker's *Infinite Life* has been analyzed and reviewed by a number of researchers. However, they have all focused on the general points of the play; thus, there was no research regarding the analysis of the play through Rollo May's concepts. This gap is going to be filled in this paper, and the main focus will be on the notions of anxiety, freedom, and authenticity. What this specific research paper is going to prove is that,

Anxiety has a purpose. Originally the purpose was to protect the existence of the caveman from wild beasts and savage neighbors. Nowadays the occasions for anxiety are very different - we are afraid of losing out in the competition, feeling unwanted, isolated, and ostracized. But the purpose of anxiety is still to protect us from dangers that threaten the same things: our existence or values that we identify with our existence. This normal anxiety of life cannot be avoided except at the price of apathy or the numbing of one's sensibilities and imagination. [2]

Temple and Gall note that all human beings go through life's decisive anxieties of death, segregation, freedom, and purposelessness [3]. Whether there is consciousness or not, these issues affect how human beings intermingle and relate to self, others, and the world. Inability to appreciate these existential anxieties can cause a person to act not genuinely in association with her central morals.

This paper will discuss the implication of existential notions of May in illuminating the influence of life's anxieties on an individual's real experience. It will emphasize that attention to the client's real experience will give space for the client to deal with his or her existential anxiety toward authenticity. The client, in feeling intensely understood will be able to reply more authentically to the therapeutic affiliation.

3. Significance of the Study

This research is significant because in order to believe in life and the delight of human life, we have to experience the desolation and the anxiety that every human being has to encounter if he lives with any ingenuity at all. In fact, this study reveals that anxiety is indispensable to the human life, and the conflict with it can release us from monotony, improve the compassion, and guarantee the occurrence of pressure that is crucial to maintain human existence.

4. Literature Review

4.1. The Play

Dailey examines the triumph of Pulitzer winning playwright Annie Baker as the first realist female writer who has won one of the theatre's uppermost prizes so far [4]. According to Dailey, in the academic field of theatre, Baker's Pulitzer Prize has a great influence [4]. As a dramatist, Baker is concerned with realism, a genre that is typically praised only when men use it. In fact,

The last time a female playwright gained an important award for writing a play with realism was the late Wendy Wasserstein (1950-2006) with a provocative play named *The Heidi Chronicles* in 1989. (p. 2)

In another article by Moody, it is argued that the American dramatist Annie Baker's newest work, *Infinite Life*, shows us

what it is like to live in anguish [5]. Five women lean on sun-loungers in a health clinic in San Francisco, where they engage in a punishing water-fast to treat their chronic disorders. In order to pass the time, they talk about cancers and colonoscopies, but never permanently venture from cheerfulness. This comedy-drama is a gentle piece of theatre (p. 298).

In another study by De Ambrogi, we read that lingering pain is a harsh condition to describe that "exists in a grey area in medicine where subjectivity and objectivity blend" [6]. This difficult subject forms the central theme of *Infinite Life*, a new play from celebrated US dramatist Annie Baker. A concealed specialist has put them on a treatment of fasting, only relieved by water or juice.

The women are there due to some kind of enduring pain that conventional medicine has not been able to heal them. The fasting makes the women fatigued and nervous; they find it challenging to pay attention to reading and their exchange is asymmetrical and moves in unanticipated routes. *Infinite Life* ponders the convolution of sharing the experience of lingering pain with others and how this issue can excavate a person's seclusion. The characters periodically try to transfer their individual interpretation of their pain, but occasionally they also look to contest about who suffers the most (p. 19).

4.2. The Theory

[Love and Will](#) is the most famous book written by Rollo May, in which he talks about the belief that a consciousness of death is important in life, instead of being in opposition to life [7]. The book discusses

how the modern loss of older principles, whose configurations and stories offered society clarifications of the secrecies of life, forces the current humanity to select between finding meaning inside themselves or concluding that neither oneself, nor life, has significance. (p. 10)

May also claims that the central matter notifying modern Western man's brawls is the inability to recognize the meaning, cause, and vibrant association between affection and determination. In other words, the writer suggests that "love and will" are mutually dependent measures and both affect and engender novel mindfulness within perception. Both include the self-confirmation and self-proclamation of the human beings who allow themselves to affect, and be affected by, another. Their interrelated feature is highlighted by the fact that,

When they are not healthily and adaptively associated with each other they can result in destabilizing each other's efficient manifestation. Although in the past they were steadily appreciated as the key to life's glitches, in our present age of evolution and indecision they have themselves become the most important basis of anxiety we have to deal with. (p. 12)

[The Meaning of Anxiety](#) is another important book by May [2]. It is distinguished for reviewing essential expectations about psychological well-being and proclaims that anxiety in fact helps the growth of a healthy character (p. 90). In *Freedom and Destiny* (1981), as recommended by the title, May refers to the zone of freedom and destiny in this book. He inspects what freedom could propose and likewise, how destiny might enforce restrictions on us, but also how the two are closely dependent on each other. May benefits from on artists and poets and others to clarify what he is saying. He notes,

What, then, is the nature of freedom? It is the essence of freedom precisely that its nature is not given. Its function is to change its nature, to become something different from what it is at any given moment. Freedom is the possibility of development, of enhancement of one's life; or the possibility of withdrawing, shutting oneself up, denying and stultifying one's growth. (p. 5)

In fact, Rollo states that freedom is more than a standard itself; it is compulsory to our capability to value. Minus freedom there is no value worthy of the name. In this time of the breakdown of concern for civic weal and private integrity,

In this time of the demise of values, our recovery-if we are to achieve it must be based on our coming to terms with this source of all values: freedom. (p. 6)

This is the cause why freedom is very significant as an objective of psychotherapy, for whatsoever values the client cultivates will be constructed upon his experience of independence, sense of individual authority and potentials, all of which are grounded on the freedom he wishes to attain in treatment.

Result and Discussion

5. Theor etical Framework

Rollo May as the selected theoretician in this research has a collection of thoughtful and insightful written works, which form the basis for existential psychotherapy. His perceptive discussions of the cultural, philosophical, and psychological quandaries of the modern human being raise themes of which psychotherapists must be regarded as mindful and address in our practices [8].

As stated by Ratner [8], May considered the modern age as an era of anxiety; however he also "normalized anxiety as encountered in living any life. However, not knowing who one really is, not being able to engage in life from the depths of one's being, inevitably creates conflicts that surface in psychotherapy" (p. 252). Actual psychoanalysts have to do their own inner work, inhabiting a therapeutic presence in their meeting with clients, assisting them to cope with the "*daimon*" with

which they struggle. May declares concisely, "A life is at stake" (p. 252).

This American existentialist psychologist presented the notion of "human existence" as established in existential psychology to the United States. May describes the self as the "I" as experienced by the human being. He considers the self as a vibrant unit, completely alive with potentialities. He attempts to comprehend the individual as he actually is and as he is linked with life. He recognizes human beings as "becoming."

Thus, May embodies an all-inclusive methodology in psychology to apprehend human beings below the surface for knowing who he is. The human being is a multifaceted creature of the world, and can replicate, set goals, make free choices and learn to take action as a free person [9]. So, What this theory offers is:

"its understanding of man as being. It holds that drives or dynamisms, by whatever name one calls them, can be understood only in the context of the structure of the existence of the person we are dealing with. The distinctive character of existential analysis is, thus, that it is concerned with ontology, the science of being, and with Dasein, the existence of this particular being sitting opposite the psychotherapist." [10]

Amid the existential concepts that have become relevant for this study, the three intersected conceptions of freedom, choice, and responsibility play a significant role. Freedom, in this context, is recognized as the capability to intentionally select between different (behavioral) potentials; responsibility is a direct result of freedom.

May emphasizes that destiny causes some restrictions to this autonomy [11]. In fact, freedom is a precondition for responsibility, meaning that if humans are permitted to select, they are accountable for the decisions they make [12]. Also, this research discusses that values as argued by May, arise from a bold procedure of compulsion to self-selected axes of valuation. This procedure necessitates self-consciousness, responsibility, encounter with anxiety, and takes freedom. Actually, values are entrenched in the shared levels of human civilization and emblematically embodied in myths [13]. Furthermore,

Authenticity is a concept related to personality in the fields of psychology, existential psychotherapy, existentialist philosophy, and aesthetics. In existentialism, authenticity is the extent to which a person's actions are consistent with their values and wishes, in spite of exterior burdens to societal conformism. [11]

For May, authenticity is basically about the audacity to sustain one's own existence and individuality [11]. May also suggests that self-alienation can function as a defense mechanism against the existential anxiety that rises from challenging the intrinsic doubts of life. When people feel overcome by the burden of their own existence, they may withdraw into a state of self-alienation by getting aloof from their true approaches, desires, and identities. May similarly discusses how the demands of community roles and habitual routines can lead to the disintegration of the self. In a society that often values conformism and efficiency over individuality, individuals may find themselves implementing manifold roles [14].

6. Discussion

6. 1. Existential Anxiety and Fear

Infinite Life as the subject of this analysis revolves around five female characters, who are struggling in different ways. Mandell has stated that Baker is an expert in showing that there is something astonishing and unusual beyond the ordinary happenings in the lives of commonplace people [15]. Her plays, long and slow with numerous moments of silence, have always necessitated patience, but we are often pleased with our attention. The New York productions of Annie Baker's plays have been regarded as vehicles for brilliantly gifted players, revealing what is going on emotionally, mentally, and thematically with the minutest and most detailed signals and expressions.

It seems that all the six characters are just sitting and resting and talking on lounges in a courtyard. They are all fasting, and hope to defeat the chronic conditions each has that cause great and incessant agony. Bit by bit, we understand that the pain has started to control their lives in many ways. Slowly, the play suggests a tension between life's infinite yearnings and the boundaries of the body.

Sofi is the first character that we see. She must deal with more than pain. Her marriage is troubled, and she keeps asking her husband to answer her texts, e-mails, and messages. She also calls another person with a totally different tone that is seductive, playful, and sexual. She is reading a thick book named *Daniel Deronda* by George Eliot. Then Eileen shows up. She is also suffering. She walks slowly, nearly staggering. Later in the play as her pain deteriorates, she has to use a cane. Eileen is friendly, and greets Sofi warmly.

Next, Elaine and Ginnie arrive with their own stories and agonies. Yvette is the last woman who enters with a list of sicknesses, operations, physical challenges, and the many and numerous drugs she is taking. Also, Nelson is the only man that often appears when the others are nowhere in sight. He is relaxed, maybe from his general fasting or after the weed he smokes as a relief.

The women share their experiences, which makes them get close and concerned for each other. What is more thought-provoking is that these characters undergo this route together, and no one questions what is happening in the therapy of the pain. The concept of existential anxiety plays an important role in Baker's play, too. May has attempted to make a difference

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between anxiety and fear, and believes that even though these two feelings are sometimes identified, there is indication that they are different "even on the level of physiological reactions, such as gastrointestinal activities" [2]. Popovic says [16],

Trying to explain this difference, May connects anxiety with a threat to the basic, fundamental values of an individual, and fear with a threat to more peripheral values. However, this distinction does not seem satisfactory because one can feel anxiety and fear in connection with the same matter. What makes a difference is not values involved, but an element of uncertainty (in case of anxiety) and an actual danger (in case of fear). While fear has a clear object (an imminent threat), anxiety does not, it is linked to uncertainty, which often provokes insecurity. (p. 32)

In one scene, Sofi says, "I wake up every day and wonder if this is all there is. I feel like I'm waiting for something to happen, but I don't even know what that something is. It's like there's this weight on my chest, and I can't shake it off. I'm not afraid of dying, but I'm terrified of never really living" [17]. This excerpt demonstrates how the characters deal with existential anxiety by accentuating the indecision and diffidence that go with their experiences. It is in accordance with May's division between anxiety and fear, which emphasizes the internal conflict the characters go through as they wrestle with their identities and cravings. According To May [2],

Anxiety implies not only an attempted arrival of the bottled-up but also an attempt on the part of the total personality toward a re-establishment of unison, synchronization, cohesion, and health. (p.107)

Eileen states, "I feel like I'm falling apart, but maybe that's what it takes to put myself back together. Every time I confront this pain, I'm forced to think about who I really am and what I want. It's exhausting, but maybe it's the only way to find some kind of peace" [17]. This statement echoes the characters' conflict with their pain and the way it forces them to search for a grander understanding of themselves, supporting May's view of anxiety as a force that leads the individual toward entirety and health.

It is palpable in the characters' suffering from chronic pain and emotional disarticulation. These physical and mental conditions can be regarded as symbols for some bigger existential quandaries endured by modern human beings. May's declaration that anxiety might bring about superior self-awareness is noticeable all over the play, as the characters grapple with their dreads of nothingness and the existential emptiness that supplements their pain.

Popovic has also noted that anxiety is perhaps most linked with the consciousness of nothingness [16]. In fact such existentialists as Kierkegaard, Tillich, and May have referred to anxiety as the acknowledgement of nothingness. Many patients like the five female characters in *Infinite Life* in psychotherapy practice sooner or later begin to recognize a void inside themselves, which usually leads to a substantial anxiety.

Furthermore, the uncluttered interchanges and meditative arrangement of the play both augment this tension and enable the spectators to feel the characters' interior fights. For example, Yvette utters, "I just want to be real. I want to feel like I'm actually here" [17]. This line represents the themes of authenticity and the craving for genuine existence, emphasizing May's thoughts regarding freedom and the human condition. It echoes the characters' yearning to confront their existential predicaments while dealing with their interactions, thereby augmenting the viewers' association with their inner clashes.

6.2. Freedom, Choice, and the Problem of Responsibility

As mentioned already, the three interrelated notions of freedom, choice, and responsibility all play a significant part in May's theories. Freedom is discussed as the ability to calculatedly pick between different (behavioral) choices, and responsibility is thus a direct product of freedom. Actually, freedom is a necessity for responsibility; this statement implies that if humans are unrestricted to make choices, they are responsible for the decisions they make in their lives. Rollo May notes [2],

What anxiety means is it's as though the world is knocking at your door, and you need to create, you need to make something, you need to do something. I think anxiety, for people who have found their own heart and their own souls, for them it is a stimulus toward creativity, toward courage. It's what makes us human beings. (p. 70)

This issue indorses the fact that anxiety can be a plausible auxiliary matter for self-awareness and modification by guiding human beings towards freedom and truthfulness. Baker states, "Life is just a series of choices, and every choice feels like a weight on your chest" [17]. This line signifies the burden of responsibility that comes with freedom and the anxiety that ascends from the awareness of one's choices.

So, the liability of choice is a very significant matter that Baker skillfully shows in *Infinite Life*. May claims that freedom is indissolubly associated with the accountability of choice, and this notion is very well demonstrated in the characters' communications. Deurzen-Smith has claimed [18],

The moment one becomes capable of living authentically one needs to find new criteria for deciding on right and wrong. While the old rules have become outdated with the rejection of external authority, one's inner authority requires a compass to travel by if it is to stay on the right track. (p. 56).

This is why one of the most imperative issues in defeating existential anxiety is the recognition of necessity and its fusion with freedom, "I can be free only when I know what is necessary" states the same writer [19]. Ginnie as one of the characters says,

I keep thinking about all the choices I've made, and how each one has led me here. It's like I'm standing at a crossroads, but every path feels wrong. I want to break free from the expectations, but what if I choose wrong? What does it mean to live authentically when every decision feels like a leap into the unknown? [17]

This quotation exemplifies the characters' brawl with the weight of choice and the pursuit of authenticity, just as May has declared that freedom comes with the responsibility of making choices. As noticed, each character has to wrestle with the burden of her selections, which shows the strain between their longings for authentic living and the limitations enforced by their conditions.

Additionally, Baker's representation of existential anxiety is in sharp contrast with the conservative vision of anxiety as exclusively undesirable. In fact, Baker proposes that this anxiety can be transformative by motivating the characters to search for meaning in their lives. Some of existential psychologists emphasize that human beings need meaning in order to endure because one can easily feel lost in a hollow world. The most recurrent reason behind suicide is that the person has no goal to continue [20].

This is exactly what May notes that through anxiety, human beings can attain a higher level of consciousness and clasp their freedom. Sofi says, "I don't know what I'm doing with my life. But maybe that's okay. Maybe it's about finding something worth holding onto" [17]. This extract shows the characters' acknowledgement of their anxiety and their journey toward finding meaning and purpose.

6.3. Authenticity versus Alienation

Authenticity is another important notion in relation to personality in this study. For such scholars as May, authenticity is the degree to which a person's movements rely on their principles and cravings, regardless of the exterior weights imposed on them by social conformism. For May, authenticity is fundamentally about the boldness to endure one's own reality and eccentricity [11].

We know that all individuals undergo life's pivotal anxieties such as death, alienation, freedom, and futility. Whether there is realization or not, these problems influence how human beings intermix and relate to self, others, and the world. Powerlessness to appreciate these existential anxieties can make a person behave inauthentically in relationship with their dominant ethics.

In the selected play, all the characters' suffering and anxiety acts not only as a devastating cause but as a means for achieving authenticity. In other words, existential anxiety could open up the opportunity of enhanced "resoluteness," which forms the foundation of authentic selfhood [21] [22]. A quote that represents this idea is, "I think suffering can be a way to find out who you really are. It strips everything away, and you're left with just... you" [17].

Here, the character says that being authentic is in contrast with alienation. It is knowing that they are the agent of their life. Being authentic implies that they interrelate with life in an authoritative and meaningful way. They know who they are, and plan to achieve all features of who they are. They feel into their experience, and become conscious of their authentic needs. They are aware that they have choices in how they react to their desires in association with others. Accordingly, they can fit in and be visible. One related excerpt to this statement is, "I just want to be myself, you know? To really feel what I feel and not hide it from anyone" [17]. This line shows how authenticity stresses the longing to cuddle one's true self without the restraints of alienation.

This feeling is in line with Rollo May's outlooks regarding existential anxiety and authenticity. In fact, the characters' pain leads them to deeper self-understandings and connection with one another, which accentuates that through suffering, they can confront their authentic selves. It also accentuates the view that through confronting their anxieties, they can accomplish a greater comprehension of themselves and their freedom; what is mentioned agrees with Rollo May's perception of anxiety as a facilitator for personal growing and realization. In fact, the characters' progress toward self-acceptance and authenticity epitomizes the probability for personal growth that rises from confronting existential qualms.

May also suggests that self-alienation can function as a defense mechanism against the existential anxiety that rises from challenging the intrinsic doubts of life. When people feel overcome by the burden of their own existence, they may withdraw into a state of self-alienation by getting aloof from their true approaches, desires, and identities. May similarly discusses how the demands of community roles and habitual routines can lead to the disintegration of the self. In a society that often values conformism and efficiency over individuality, individuals may find themselves implementing manifold roles [14].

What Baker as the writer of *Infinite Life* says is that authenticity and alienation are both on a continuum [17]. She believes that we can all identify with being in a place where we are not sure about who we are and what we really want. There is some level of alienation from ourselves. Moreover, she thinks that we can all identify with being in a place where we are clear about what we want, but are unsuccessful in our relations with the world to realize what we want. When this occurs, there is some level of alienation to the world.

In this play, the purpose is to retreat from alienation and move towards authenticity. The characters all believe that whether it is in relationship to themselves or in relationship to the world, it is useful to know their ways they do not associate with themselves or the world. Once they become conscious of that, it is a chance for them to be more authentic.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to analyze *Infinite Life* by Annie Baker in light of Rollo May's existential concepts. It was stated that all the main five female characters were dealing with inner struggles, which echoed their psychological clashes instigated by the anxiety of nothingness, the weight of choice, and the craving to live realistically regardless of the limitations prescribed by pain.

What was found indorses the fact that anxiety can be a plausible subsidiary feature for self-consciousness and change by guiding human beings towards freedom and authenticity. In other words, one of the noble points of living in an era filled with anxiety is that we have to become aware of ourselves. Accordingly, anxiety designates a struggle, and as long as a struggle is around, a creative resolution is conceivable. Thus, anxiety denotes not only an endeavored return of the bottled-up but also an attempt by the whole personality toward a return of harmony, synchronization, balance, and health.

Also, it was found that anxiety can be a supporting means for self-consciousness and shift due to helping human beings to move towards freedom and authenticity. Subsequently, choice is a very substantial theme that Baker competently exemplifies in *Infinite Life*. It is shown that freedom is intimately related to the responsibility of choice, and this view is very well verified in the characters' interactions.

Ultimately, as Baker has shown, all the female characters in *Infinite Life* suffer from life's fundamental anxieties such as sickness and alienation. Whether there is consciousness or not, these problems affect how human beings amalgamate and link with self, others, and the world. However, all the characters' pain and anxiety acts not only as an overwhelming issue but as a tool for achieving authenticity.

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