EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS IN LITERARY STUDIES

Iustin SFÂRIAC

Abstract

The article "Existential Analysis in Literary Studies" proposes a new instrument of research to the Romanian scientific community in the field of literary studies: the existentialist analysis. A psycho-therapeutic method created by Viktor Frankl to complement the psycho-analytical approach of Freud and Adler, the existentialist analysis presents a series of aspects relevant to literary criticism, aspects which are pointed out in the article. The evolution of the existentialist analysis is also presented, from its appearance to the present developments due to the Vienna school and particularly to Alfried Längle.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, literary studies have witnessed a virtual disappearance of structuralist and post-structuralist approaches while new historicist, feminist and race studies have continued to thrive. Nonetheless, a careful observer cannot help noticing that they fail to address the most important concerns of the present: the feeling of alienation of modern man and the impossibility of communication. In order to understand the essence of these problems it is important to trace them back to their historical roots and to point out their relation to the complex phenomenon of modernity.

Born in the political, economic and cultural ferment of the seventeenth century, modernity brought about a radical reversal in the relationship between individual and society. The most important change consisted in a shift of focus, from the needs and interests of society to those of the individual being. This shift of focus, with its emphasis on the self-realization and freedom of the individual self in an ever increasingly secularized world, has brought important benefits; nonetheless, as communitarian thinker Philip Selznick points out, greater individual freedom, increased equality of opportunity, efficiency, accountability, and the rule of law have been obtained only at the price of "cultural attenuation" and "some loosening of social bonds" (1992: 6 ff.). Thus, there has been a "movement away from densely textured structures of meaning," like a shared mythology or time-honored customs, to "more abstract forms of expression and relatedness," like being a private individual in a liberal democracy or market economy. This movement "may contribute to civilization—to technical excellence and an impersonal morality—but not to the mainsprings of culture and identity." The price to be paid for "cultural attenuation" becomes clearer with the passage of time. As Selznick puts it, "modernity, especially in its early stages, is marked by an enlargement of individual autonomy, competence, and self-assertion. In time, however, a strong, resourceful self confronts a weakened cultural context; still later, selfhood itself becomes problematic" (1992: 6 ff.). In premodern or traditional societies people commonly see themselves in a taken-for-granted manner as participants in a meaningful order, social as well as cosmic, whose ground rules have been established by the unchallenged authority of religion and have been developed by the (yet) unchallenged authority of society. Modernity, however, paints a new picture of the relationship between individual and society: autonomous

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)

individuals who see themselves as having largely cut their ties to tradition and external authority pursue their desires and private interests however they see fit. Instead of placing the accent on belonging and responsibility to a wider social, moral, and cosmic order, individuals now tend to view themselves as quite separate from each other and the world, with the world and others to a great extent are seen as providing opportunities, raw materials, or constraints in regard to individual purposes and projects.

It has been suggested (Bell 1978: xv ff.) that the direct pursuit of personal security and happiness seems to increasingly dissolve the capacity to respect and cherish others.

Under these circumstances, it seems important to us to point out the ways in which liberal individualism has contributed to the alienation of modern man by shaping the very core of many diverse modern ideologies or moral outlooks. Richardson, et al.(1999) argue that utilitarianism, Kantian or deontological ethical viewpoints, Romantic thought and existentialism (and even many contemporary postmodern or social constructionist viewpoints) share key liberal individualist tenets such as viewing the human self or agent as greatly decontextualized from community and traditions. These approaches lean toward a decidedly liberationist or emancipatory coloring, resulting in a tendency to promote freedom at the price of emotional isolation or emptiness and incurring difficulty in clarifying what ethical obligation is all about in a post-traditional world.

Modern writers are painfully aware of the isolation (emotional but also intellectual) deriving from the ever thinner bonds between individual and society. From such a Romantic author as Herman Melville to postmodern novelists as John Barth or Saul Bellow, the alienation and solitude of modern man became a major theme, their respective heroes seeing themselves confronted with the purposelessness of a life marred by the atomization of the self and the impossibility of communication. Such is their predicament that they often contemplate suicide.

Under these circumstances, a critical approach is needed to address the extremely sensitive issue of the meaninglessness of life and of the impossibility of communication. It is the purpose of this paper to argue that existential analysis is particularly fit to deal with the above mentioned problem.

Originally, existential analysis was intended by its founder, Victor Frankl, to complement existing forms of psychotherapy and deal with the one aspect they ignored: the quest for meaning (Frankl 1986, 11f). Existential analysis was understood as an analytical procedure that enabled the individual to discover the concrete meaning of his or her personal existence (Frankl 1985, 156f).

The term "existential analysis" should not be mistaken for existential philosophy. It is true that existential analysis and existentialism share a good deal of common ground; the former, however, has managed to avoid the dead end reached by the latter (Frankl 1986, 17). In contrast with other psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches, existential analysis in its early stages was mainly founded on philosophical thinking. Today, existential analysis deals with the analysis, prevention and therapy of meaning-related problems and especially with the loss of meaning. A short definition might describe it as assistance in the quest for meaning.

The concept of existential analysis has been greatly enlarged since its beginnings and today designates a psychotherapeutic approach that comprises a theory as well as a practical application. Its aim is to empower people to live their lives with inner consent

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)

(Längle 1995). It may be described in short as an analysis of the conditions required for a fulfilled existence, the latter being a life in which the individual experiences fulfillment and meaning.

Existential analysis can furthermore be described as an approach that seeks to enable the person to experience life freely at the spiritual and emotional levels, to arrive at authentic decisions and come at a responsible way of dealing with oneself and one's world (Längle 1995). This orientation reflects Frankl's position that human existence is characterized by freedom, the capacity for decision and responsibility. Furthermore, each of these three steps contains the most important asset of existential analysis, i.e. that of a person's inner consent.

But existential analysis today is not only applied as a psychotherapeutic approach. Because its anthropological breadth and relevance, it is also brought to use in education, in pastoral counseling, in coaching, literary criticism and others.

Origin and Historical Background

When Victor Frankl elaborated existential analysis in the 1930s and 1940s, he was reacting to what he perceived as deficits in depth psychologies. Frankl protested against what he thought of as psychologism and reductionism; he wanted psychotherapy to take into account the human spiritual dimension in theory and in practice (Frankl, 1978, 31, 79). He defined psychologism and reductionism as the attribution of all human behavior exclusively to psychological or other deterministic causes. Frankl intended to add existential analysis to the psychotherapy of his time and not to question the importance of psychodynamics for the psychological development and preservation of life. Instead he sought to overcome the reduction of the individual to psychodynamics by the inclusion of specifically human qualities, i.e. a person's capacity for freedom, responsibility and the search for meaning.

Frankl (1984, 104) saw himself as the advocate of humane aspects of psychotherapy, and he saw the quest for meaning as the most profound, specific and primary human motivation. He saw this search not so much as a psychological than as a spiritual concern. He considered Freud's and Adler's theories and anthropologies as flat. To their two dimensions of body and psyche Frankl sought to add a third dimension which contained the human spiritual or noetic capacities (Frankl 1985, 77).

Frankl's accentuation of the quest or meaning is due, at least in part, to the historical situation of his time. World War I, the German and Austrian defeat, the replacement of the monarchy by a republic and the Great Depression had shaken many secure beliefs and convictions. Numerous people had suffered enormous material, ideological and existential losses and had to redefine their own identities. In philosophy this had led to a concentration on the question of meaning and to the development of existential philosophy.

Apart from the political and economic situation in post-World-War-II Europe, Frankl attributed the widespread sense of meaninglessness to the Darwinist and naturalist concepts of humanity and to the prevailing utilitarian ideas. These had arisen as a consequence of the rapid development of technology and industrialization. In opposition to this view, Frankl saw the person foremost as a being that is characterized by the qualities of freedom, responsibility, and spirituality (Frankl 1985, xxiv). According to this

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)

view a person always decides what he/she is going to be. Thus the individual human being begins at the point where naturalism leaves off. It is especially in extreme situations that the true human nature with its capacity for decision-making becomes manifest and contradicts determinism. Frankl developed this concept in the 1930s and impressively proved it through his own behavior and experiences in German concentration camps in the 1940s, where he was able to survive with the help of his strong will and by clinging to his determination to see his wife again. He describes this in detail in his book *Experiences in a Concentration Camp*, first published in Austria in 1946 (Frankl 1984, 15-100).

Frankl's Theory

As shown above, Frankl's anthropology added a third dimension to the two dimensions used by Freud and Adler. According to him, the three dimensions of human life are a person's body, psyche and mind or spirit (Frankl 1985, 134ff).

The first dimension accounts for human needs, i.e. the bodily functions. Disease, hunger, thirst, cold, heat, sexual deprivation and all kinds of physical privation can impair one's life and vitality deeply and make all other emotions or problems seem unimportant in comparison.

The second dimension is that of the psyche, which, according to the old concept, included everything not physical, thus also everything metaphysical. But Frankl limited the content of the psychological dimension to the forces that express themselves in drives and emotions. These are not subject to free will, but follow their own rules and regularities. All information from the physical and from the spiritual dimension about the world and about their own states enter the psychic dimension, where it is screened and evaluated according to its significance for survival. The psychodynamics process this information close to the physical dimension in the form of affects, moods and emotions and thus serve as a guardian for existence.

Frankl added a third dimension, which he termed "spiritual" in the beginning and later referred to as "noetic", the Greek "nous" signifying "spirit" or "mind" (Frankl 1985, 79). Today, the "personal" dimension is the preferred term. This dimension concerns itself with the processes commonly attributed to the conscience by deciding between true and false, valuable and worthless, free and not free, just and unjust, and responsible and irresponsible. In all of these questions our sensibility and conscience are called forth, and we reveal ourselves as the persons we are. This dimension touches the innermost core of the person, of the individual. This inner person is what makes us truly human and distinguishes us from animals.

It is characteristic of existential analysis to take the person as a whole into account. The person is seen as being intimately connected with his/her values. The experience of fulfillment is not necessarily generated by good physical health and drive satisfaction. Instead, human beings strive for more, sense the need to transcend themselves and to devote themselves to something bigger than their individual lives. This may include service to people or to self-defined aims, because it is only in doing so that one finds existential fulfillment. Frankl said:

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)

> I thereby understand the primordial anthropological fact that being human is being always directed at and pointing to something or someone other than oneself: to a challenge to meet or another human being to encounter, a cause to serve or a person to love. Only to the extent that someone is living out this self-transcendence of human existence, is he truly human or has he become his true self. He becomes so, not by concerning himself with his self's actualization, but by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward. (Frankl 1979, 35)

As far as motivation is concerned, one experiences needs on the physical level, the search for pleasure on the psychological level and meaning and values on the existential level. These are the dynamics of forces that move human beings. Existential analysis works in the third dimension as an assistance and aid in the quest for meaning. Modern existential analysis adds the ability to engage life fully and to devote oneself to something transcendent as decisive criteria for fulfilled existence and as prerequisites for the quest for meaning. But existential analysis focuses also on the emotions and physical experiences, since the fulfillment of existence can only be achieved by a complete and interactive unity of all dimensions.

Modern Development

Since the 1980s, the Gesellschaft für Logotherapie und Existenzanalyze (Society for Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, GLE) in Vienna and in particular Alfried Längle have conceptualized Frankl's anthropology more systematically and have rendered it more dynamic in order to transform it into a solid basis for psychotherapy. This new concept and theory of existential analysis is referred to as "general existential analysis."

Since 1986, Alfried Längle has been working to place Frankl's three-dimensional anthropology into an existential perspective. As a result of these developments, even more stress has been laid on the human capacity for decision-making and on the sense of duty, which accompanies the awareness of being human. Längle's elaboration is not only concerned with the nature of the three dimensions, their relations with each other and the differences in their functioning, but also with the tension they may create when in potential conflict with each other. In such cases the human capacity for decision-making is challenged, and one is faced with possible failure and suffering. These questions create dynamics, and to exist means to respond to these questions and to find the right balance at each of these three levels. The tensions exist between:

- Health vs. disease on the physical level,
- Pleasure vs. aversion on the psychological level,
- Fulfillment vs. void or faith vs. despair on the spiritual level

An important factor for the further elaboration of existential analysis was the theoretical assertion that personal fulfillment and meaningfulness are predicated upon additional,

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)

existential conditions. Fulfillment can only be achieved if the underlying existential foundation is solid. Therefore, Alfried Längle developed a model between 1982 and 1992 describing the four fundamental conditions required for a successful and satisfying existence (Längle 2000). This model now forms, in addition to Frankl's three-dimensional concept of human nature, a part of the general existential analysis.

The requisites for a fulfilled existence are called the four existential fundamental motivations (Längle 1995). All four are concerned with existential questions and are located in Frankl's noetic dimension. The quest for meaning is situated within the fourth motivation, but builds on three underlying, preceding, existential motivations. The preceding motivations concern our need for a sense of sufficient support and safety, the search for the value of life and the assertion of our individuality and autonomy. The four fundamental motivations form the cornerstones of human existence in its full sense and may be described in short as follows.

By the simple fact of being in the world one is confronted with the following questions:

1. Can I accept my place in this world and the conditions of life that I am subjected to? Do I experience protection and support in the world? Whatever the conditions may be, a decision is asked for, a decision to accept one's reality as it is. This acceptance, in turn, leads to a basic sense of ability.
2. Do I like the fact of my existence and do I sense that my life has sufficient quality? This requires feeling close to people, animals, things, and taking time for establishing and nurturing relationships. All of this is experienced as well as decided upon. It takes the decision to devote time to whatever one feels is precious, to build relationships and to permit closeness. This leads to a sense of liking, to a consent to life.
3. Do I experience myself and my inner world as unique? Do I sense that I have the permission to be myself and to be authentic? These feelings arise from the experiences of having received attention, of having been justified in one's personhood and of having been respected. But one also has to experience these emotions towards oneself. This leads to a sense of one's worth, of authorization, of consent to one's own person.
4. Do I sense my own calling and purpose in the world as an orientation for the meaning of my life? Basically, human beings want to transcend themselves and want their lives to serve a purpose. An openness is required here and an active and decisive engagement in the pursuit of this calling. This leads to a consent to the challenges and opportunities encountered, which, in turn, provides a sense of existential meaning in one's life.

The first fundamental condition or motivation deals with the question whether one is able to be. This sounds easy, but, upon closer reflection, is not. This question concerns the environment, the space of one's life and the conditions in which one lives. In this context, acceptance means to feel that one can survive and breathe under one's conditions. This does not mean that one has to agree with these conditions. It simply means that one is able to recognize these conditions as part of one's reality.

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)

This consent forms the basis of existence, the existential foundation. Support in the world is first of all experienced in one's own body. Everything that inspires confidence and supports a feeling of sufficient safety belongs to this level. It is considered an existential motivation since human beings strongly aspire to be part of the world, to have their place in order to be able to exist.

The second fundamental motivation deals with the question of whether we experience life as good and worthwhile. After all, being here requires life as a person, with its moods and feelings, with its extremes of suffering and joy, and, finally, with our dependence upon relationships. The decision required at this stage is to decide whether one says "yes" or "no" to one's life with its warmth, suffering and its relationships. The answer to this decision is called the fundamental value. But one can only feel affection and warmth in relationships, if one has experienced these oneself earlier in life. We experience the value of our lives where we are in relationship. If our lives are deprived of interaction, we do not experience the fundamental value of life and tend to retreat inwardly and to suffer from the void and cold of an uninhabited life.

The third fundamental motivation deals with the question of whether one can consent to the way one is, whether one can stand by oneself and one's actions and whether one is truly oneself. These questions concern one's world, one's personal identity. Everyone searches for recognition of one's individual way of experiencing, thinking, feeling and acting, as well as for the respect of one's dignity. We need recognition for the way in which we as individuals lead our lives: collective protection of the species alone is not sufficient. We need to find the sense of our own authenticity and to establish our psychological boundaries. We want to be ourselves and to appreciate ourselves for what we are. One's conscience plays an important role here, because self respect is predicated upon the ability to stand behind one's identity, what one does and what one has become. Here one feels one's value.

The fourth fundamental motivation differs from the preceding ones, because it is concerned with questions about the future, and these questions derive their importance from our awareness of our own finality. If our life ends, what purpose will it have served? This fundamental motivation deals with something that still lies in the future and waits to be realized. It is therefore always an open question and the answers may not always be fully realizable. But what is intended here, is a meaningful way of leading one's life, to become active and engaged and to be committed to people, aims or values. In a sense, this is the comprehensive motivation and here one experiences fulfillment. This is where existential analysis works.

The relevance of existential analysis for literary studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century becomes now clearer: focusing on the quest for meaning as the most important motivation of the human being, it is probably the best instrument of exploring the major postmodern "diseases": alienation, frustrated communication, and, last but not least, the lack of meaning, the purposelessness of life.

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)

Works cited

Bell, D. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1978.

Frank, J. *Psychotherapy and the Human Predicament*. New York: Schocken, 1978.

Frankl, Viktor E. *The Unheard Cry for Meaning. Logotherapy*. New York: Simon& Schuster, 1978.

___. *The Search for Meaning. An Introduction to Logotherapy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984.

___. *Psychotherapy and Existentialism. Selected papers on Logotherapy*. New York: New American Library, 1985.

___. *The Doctor and the Soul. From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*. New York: Random House, 1986.

Längle, Alfried, ed. *Wege zum Sinn*. München: Piper, 1985.

____. *Entscheidung zum Sein*. München: Piper, 1988.

____. "Personal Existential Analysis." In *Psychotherapy East and Wes: Integration of Psychotherapies*. Seoul, 1995.

____. *Sinnspuren. Dem Leben antworten*. St.Pölten: NP-Verlag, 2000.

____. "The Art of Involving the Person—Fundamental Existential Motivations as the Structure of the Motivational Process," in *European Psychotherapy* 4, no. 1, 2003.

Richardson, F., A. Rogers, & J. McCarroll. "Toward a Dialogical Self." *American Behavioral Scientist* 41 (1998):496-515.

Selznick, P. *The Moral Commonwealt*h. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

BDD-A3005 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:44 UTC)