

EXAMINING OTTO ANDERSON'S EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN THE FILM *A MAN CALLED OTTO*

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Abstract

The examination of existential crisis in film has gained increasing relevance as cinema provides a representational space capable of illuminating complex human struggles with meaning, suffering, and psychological disorientation. In this context, the present study aims to analyze the construction of existential crisis and psychological recovery experienced by the protagonist Otto Anderson in the 2022 film *A Man Called Otto*. Employing a qualitative approach through interpretive textual analysis, this study aims to analyze key scenes, dialogues, and character developments that depict Otto's existential rupture and subsequent transformation. The analysis is guided by Irvin D. Yalom's Existential Psychotherapy, which outlines the four fundamental existential conditions, and Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy, which emphasizes meaning reconstruction through creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. Findings reveal that the film portrays Otto's existential crisis through his encounters with loss, isolation, and diminished purpose, expressed in pervasive despair and withdrawal. The study further demonstrates that Otto's psychological recovery unfolds through the gradual restoration of meaning facilitated by relational connectedness, prosocial engagement, and the capacity to transcend personal suffering. This research highlights the potential of cinematic narratives to serve as interpretive sites for examining meaning-making processes and existential transformation within contemporary human experience.

Keywords: *a man called Otto; existential crisis; film analysis; logotherapy.*

1. Introduction

Film as a medium of visual storytelling has long been recognized as a significant site for examining psychological states and human meaning-making processes (Munawaroh & Guatri, 2023). The 2022 film "A Man Called Otto" is particularly relevant to existential and psychological studies because it foregrounds the lived experience of despair, purposelessness, and emotional disconnection, core dimensions of existential crisis. Through its portrayal of Otto Anderson, a widower struggling with profound loss and identity collapse, the film offers a narrative that mirrors key constructs in existential psychology and thus warrants systematic academic investigation (Almuslina, 2024).

Otto's emotional deterioration following the death of his wife and his involuntary retirement positions him not merely as a grieving individual but as someone experiencing a collapse of meaning structures (Farhat M. F., 2025). His recurring suicidal ideation reflects a deeper disturbance that extends beyond normative grief, signaling a crisis in purpose, agency, and relational belonging (Rayyani & Nugroho, 2025). His rigid behavior, irritability, and social withdrawal may be interpreted as defensive mechanisms rooted in a masculine ideal that valorizes emotional restraint and hyper-independence (Zahra R. A. Q., 2025). These psychological and cultural pressures collectively intensify his existential collapse, demonstrating how individual suffering intersects with broader social expectations.

The concept of existential crisis itself has been defined as a psychological condition characterized by emptiness, disconnection, and a loss of meaning (Deng *et al.*, 2025). Their cross-cultural findings reveal that existential suffering emerges when individuals fail to reconcile internal meaning with external demands a pattern that closely parallels Otto's condition. However, while psychological studies have examined the universality of existential distress, few have connected these theoretical insights directly to cinematic representations of meaninglessness and recovery. This gap highlights the need to analyze how films like *A Man Called Otto* visualize abstract psychological constructs through narrative and character development.

From a broader socio-cultural perspective, Grant G. B. (2017) argues that contemporary Western societies are experiencing an "existential crisis at the peak of individualism," where weakened communal bonds contribute to growing loneliness and purposelessness. Otto's transformation in the film from isolation to renewed relational engagement, reflects this cultural transition toward what Grant identifies as an emerging collective search for purpose. While this context enriches the interpretation of Otto's journey, previous analyses of the film have not systematically linked his psychological transformation to existential theory.

Therefore, this study addresses the research gap by examining how Otto Anderson's existential crisis is represented and reconstructed within the film. Specifically, this study investigates how his experiences of despair, isolation, and disrupted identity illustrate the process of meaning reconstruction as conceptualized in existential psychology. Guided by Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy and Irvin D. Yalom's Existential Psychotherapy, this research aims to analyze how the film portrays Otto's movement from existential collapse toward renewed purpose through relational connection and self-transcendence.

2. Literature Review

Existential psychology provides a crucial lens for analyzing Otto Anderson's psychological deterioration and recovery because it directly addresses the human struggle with meaning, suffering, and isolation, the core tensions depicted in *A Man Called Otto*. This theoretical domain is particularly relevant to Otto's crisis, as his despair stems from the collapse of his existential structures following personal loss. While Frankl's logotherapy and Yalom's existential psychotherapy serve as conceptual foundations, previous studies applying these frameworks to cinematic narratives remain limited, especially in contemporary analyses (2020-2025). Therefore, this section synthesizes key existential theories and evaluates recent scholarship to establish a coherent analytical framework for interpreting Otto Anderson's crisis in the film.

2.1 Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy

Frankl conceptualizes human existence as driven by the will to meaning, a motivational force that enables individuals to transcend psychological suffering (Frankl, 1957). When this drive is obstructed, individuals experience existential frustration, resulting in an emotional void known as the “existential vacuum” (Nweke, 2022). This condition marked by apathy, disorientation, and purposelessness aligns closely with Otto’s psychological paralysis after his wife’s death.

However, scholars have extended Frankl’s ideas by examining how meaning-making processes manifest in contemporary contexts, including digital and narrative media. These studies emphasize that cinematic characters often embody symbolic struggles for meaning, suggesting that logotherapy offers a productive interpretive tool for film analysis (Monteiro & Carvalhais, 2023).

Frankl proposes three pathways to meaning: creative values, experiential values, and attitudinal values (Nweke, 2022). In this study, these values function as analytical categories for interpreting Otto’s behavioral and relational transformation across key scenes. Thus, rather than summarizing the theory, the present analysis operationalizes Frankl’s constructs to evaluate how meaning reconstruction is cinematically portrayed.

2.2 Irvin D. Yalom's Four Givens of Existence

Yalom identifies four fundamental existential concerns death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness which shape human psychological experience (Kryuchkov, 2018). Contemporary studies expand this view by demonstrating how these existential givens manifest in modern psychological distress, particularly through narratives of grief and loneliness (Farzan *et al.*, 2024). Despite this growing body of work, applications of Yalom’s framework in film studies remain scarce, indicating a research gap that this study seeks to address.

Rather than merely summarizing Yalom’s theory, this research uses the four givens as interpretive indicators for analyzing the film’s depiction of Otto’s despair. For example, Otto’s repeated confrontations with death serve as cinematic triggers for existential anxiety, while his relational withdrawal illustrates isolation as a destructive psychological force. This approach positions Yalom’s model not as a descriptive tool but as a systematic framework guiding the interpretation of existential conflict within specific scenes.

2.3 Existential Crisis in Modern Contexts and Research Novelty

Recent scholarship highlights the increasing relevance of existential crises in modern societies characterized by digital overload, weakened interpersonal bonds, and rising individualism. Youvan D. C. (2024) argues that constant exposure to global suffering without meaningful agency intensifies psychological emptiness among contemporary individuals. Similarly, Vyas K. (2024) emphasizes that existential needs for significance have become more pronounced in environments where collective identity structures deteriorate.

These insights contextualize Otto Anderson’s crisis within broader cultural patterns. His emotional isolation and meaninglessness do not merely reflect personal trauma but symbolize a wider contemporary condition: the struggle to sustain purpose amid societal fragmentation. Therefore, modern research does not merely supplement the theoretical

foundation; it underscores the relevance of analyzing Otto's crisis as part of a broader existential phenomenon in 21st-century life.

Despite the theoretical richness of Frankl and Yalom, most previous analyses apply their frameworks either clinically or separately (Nweke, 2022; Farzan *et al.*, 2024). Few studies integrate both perspectives to analyze narrative media, particularly film. The originality of this study thus lies in combining Frankl's *will to meaning* with Yalom's *four existential givens* as an integrated model for cinematic interpretation.

3. Research Method

This chapter outlines the methodological procedures employed to examine the existential crisis of Otto Anderson in *A Man Called Otto*. It explains the research design, data collection techniques, and analytical procedures used to ensure methodological rigor and interpretive depth. Each subsection is connected through a consistent emphasis on qualitative textual analysis as the primary method.

3.1 Research Design

To provide a clear foundation for how this study approaches the film, this subsection explains the qualitative framework that guides the interpretation of existential elements within the narrative.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive textual analysis design, which is appropriate for analyzing films as cultural and psychological texts. As Brondolo (2021) notes, interpretive analysis enables researchers to uncover latent meanings embedded in narrative, dialogue, and visual composition. This approach is particularly suitable for examining existential themes because such phenomena—meaning, despair, freedom, and responsibility—are not measurable through quantitative variables but must be interpreted through symbolic and narrative structures.

The object of this study is the 2022 film *A Man Called Otto*. The film was selected based on three criteria:

- (1) its explicit portrayal of an elderly protagonist experiencing an existential crisis;
- (2) its narrative emphasis on grief, meaninglessness, and interpersonal reconnection, elements that align with existential psychology; and
- (3) its contemporary relevance, allowing analysis of modern expressions of existential distress within popular cinema.

Treating the film as a complex cinematic text, this study examines not only plot events but also cinematographic cues, emotional expression, and dialogic nuances that contribute to Otto's existential transformation. Thus, the research design provides a coherent methodological foundation linking existential theory, filmic representation, and interpretive analysis.

3.2 Data Collection

Before outlining how the data were analyzed, this subsection describes the structured procedures used to ensure that all relevant filmic elements were accurately captured and documented.

To ensure systematic and comprehensive data acquisition, the data collection procedure followed several structured stages. First, the film was viewed five times in full,

involving both initial holistic viewing and subsequent focused viewing sessions. This repeated and active viewing ensured familiarity with narrative progression, recurring motifs, and emotional dynamics, thus enhancing analytical rigor (Allsop *et al.*, 2022).

Second, relevant data were extracted in the form of explicit scenes, key dialogues, symbolic actions, and emotionally significant moments that depict Otto Anderson's existential crisis and recovery. A total of 42 scenes and 68 dialogue excerpts were documented. Each data point was transcribed verbatim and accompanied by descriptive annotations addressing visual framing, character expression, sound, and contextual significance.

To maintain consistency and reliability, the researcher employed a coding sheet with preliminary thematic categories derived from Frankl's and Yalom's frameworks (e.g., *death anxiety, isolation, loss of meaning, attitudinal values*). The coding process also incorporated reflexive memo-writing to track interpretive decisions. Additionally, supporting materials such as published scripts, film reviews, and scholarly commentaries were consulted to enhance data triangulation, ensuring that the interpretation did not rely solely on subjective impressions.

3.3 Data Analysis

To clarify how the collected data were transformed into interpretive findings, this subsection details the step-by-step analytic procedures used throughout the study.

The data analysis followed a multi-phase interpretive procedure, integrating theoretical coding, comparative reading, and thematic synthesis. This section describes the analytic steps rather than the theories themselves to avoid repeating the literature review.

1. Phase 1 Open Coding. All collected scenes and dialogues were coded using existential categories derived from both Frankl and Yalom. Codes included *despair, purposelessness, isolation, death confrontation, freedom avoidance, and attitudinal shifts*. This phase allowed the researcher to identify recurrent representations of Otto's existential condition (Elliot, 2018).
2. Phase 2 Theoretical Categorization. In this phase, the initial codes were organized into two structured frameworks:
 - Frankl's Logotherapy, focusing on manifestations of the existential vacuum, the will to meaning, and the three value pathways (creative, experiential, attitudinal).
 - Yalom's Four Givens, used to classify Otto's narrative moments related to death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.
3. Phase 3 Comparative Existential Reading. The term "comparative" refers to the cross-examination of filmic data through both frameworks, not a comparison between films. Scenes were analyzed to determine how Frankl's and Yalom's concepts converged or diverged in explaining Otto's crisis. This enabled a layered interpretation, showing how different existential theories illuminate different aspects of the same narrative event.
4. Phase 4 Thematic Synthesis. Findings from both frameworks were synthesized to produce higher-order themes such as *rediscovered meaning through relational bonds* and *transformative confrontation with mortality*. This synthesis allowed the study to answer the research questions holistically.

To establish trustworthiness, the study employed credibility strategies through repeated analysis, confirmability through reflexive notes, and transferability by clearly documenting analytic procedures. Although the study analyzes publicly available film material, ethical considerations were observed by respecting intellectual property, refraining from unauthorized distribution of copyrighted content, and ensuring accurate representation of all sources cited.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Result

The qualitative analysis of *A Man Called Otto* identifies three core narrative findings:

- (1) Otto's psychological decline following the loss of his wife and career, characterized by suicidal ideation, irritability, and social withdrawal;
- (2) the emergence of relational catalysts particularly Marisol and her family, that gradually interrupt his destructive patterns;
- (3) the development of renewed meaning through purposeful action, re-engagement with community life, and emotional transformation.

Several key scenes support these findings, including Otto's first suicide attempt where he states "I have nothing to do anymore", the flashback sequence of his accident with Sonya, his reluctant help toward neighbors, and the final scene depicting his emotional reintegration within the community. These scenes function as empirical anchors for applying Yalom's and Frankl's theoretical frameworks in the subsequent discussion (Menzies & Menzies, 2024).

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Confrontation with Death and Existential Isolation

Death emerges as the dominant existential given shaping Otto's crisis, manifested both in the loss of his wife, Sonya, and in his obsessive preoccupation with his own mortality. Otto's repeated suicide attempts through hanging, carbon monoxide poisoning, and the use of a firearm illustrate an intensified form of Yalom's "death anxiety" (Farzan *et al.*, 2024). In one suicide scene, Otto whispers to his late wife, "Sorry Sonya... I can't do this without you", revealing his belief that life has become uninhabitable without her presence.

This trajectory reflects the process described by Heidenreich *et al.* (2021), who argue that death anxiety can gradually shift toward existential acceptance when individuals confront mortality directly rather than avoiding it. Otto's repeated encounters with death, though initially destructive, eventually open the psychological space necessary for an acceptance-oriented reorientation of his life.

Sonya's death fractures Otto's foundational worldview and plunges him into profound existential isolation, heightening his awareness of his fundamental separateness. In Yalom's terms, this isolation emerges not merely as loneliness but as an ontological rift in which Otto perceives himself as cut off from the shared fabric of human existence. Early scenes of Otto patrolling the neighborhood and admonishing residents are therefore not genuine forms of social engagement; instead, they represent defensive responses to this isolation, functioning as coping mechanisms aligned with Rayyani and Nugroho's (2025) description of control-seeking behaviors. By imposing rigid order on his surroundings, Otto

attempts to regain psychological stability in a world that now feels foreign and devoid of coherence.

Figure 1

Sonya and Otto had an accident



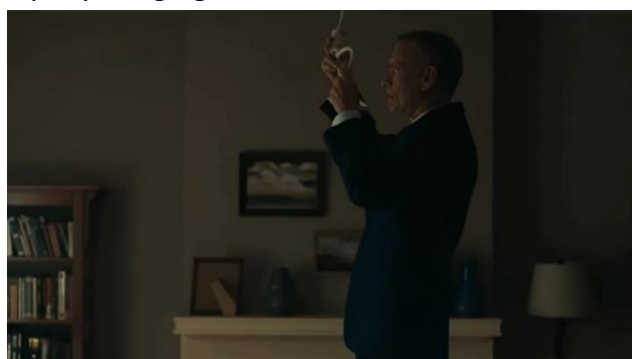
At the same time, Otto's responses also reflect Frankl's notion of the existential vacuum, in which the loss of a meaningful attachment such as Sonya creates an internal void that the individual attempts to fill through habitual or compulsive behaviors. Otto's rigid routines, solitary meals, and refusal of Marisol's early attempts at connection demonstrate his struggle to find meaning beyond his grief. Frankl emphasizes that meaning is rediscovered not through withdrawal but through self-transcendence, the capacity to move beyond the self toward values, relationships, or responsibilities. Otto's inability to engage with others in these early scenes signals that he has not yet reoriented himself toward any meaningful external commitment, reinforcing the convergence between Frankl's and Yalom's viewpoints: existential isolation and loss of meaning operate simultaneously, each deepening the other.

4.2.2 The Burden of Freedom and the Experience of Meaninglessness

Otto's forced retirement marks a direct confrontation with Yalom's existential given of freedom. His life had previously been structured by clear routines and stable identities his profession as an engineer and his long-standing marriage to Sonya. With the dissolution of both anchors, Otto faces unstructured freedom, resulting in days empty of purpose and direction. This burden of unbounded freedom leads directly to the fourth existential given: meaninglessness. Deprived of his roles as husband and worker, Otto falls into what Frankl identifies as an "existential vacuum" (Nweke, 2022). Otto's lament, "I have nothing to do anymore, reinforces the collapse of his former purpose".

Figure 2

Otto's suicide attempt by hanging



This transition reflects Mickūnas's (2022) argument that existential crisis often occurs "between two life-worlds," as Otto oscillates between his former structured existence and the void of his post-retirement life. His irritability, rigidity, and compulsive behaviors surface as symptomatic expressions of an "emptiness syndrome" (Deng *et al.*, 2025), grounded in his inability to locate stable meaning or self-worth.

Otto's gradual shift from passive resignation to active responsibility aligns with Frankl's notion that freedom is inseparable from responsibility. As Terao and Satoh (2022) explain, individuals find meaning when they consciously respond to life's demands rather than remaining immobilized by loss. Otto's later decisions helping Marisol, supporting Reuben, and re-engaging with his community represent a subtle but significant movement toward responsible action as the foundation for meaning reconstruction.

4.2.3 Otto's Existential Crisis Through Yalom's Framework

Otto's existential vacuum gradually begins to fill as he is compelled to re-engage with the world through purposeful action, demonstrating Frankl's notion of creative values. Marisol's persistent presence functions as a transformative catalyst that interrupts Otto's isolation and pushes him toward relational and practical involvement. During their driving lesson, Marisol confronts Otto directly: "You never listen! You always think you know everything!", a moment that forces him to acknowledge his relational barriers.

At the same time, each of Yalom's existential givens becomes observable in Otto's gradual behavioral shift. His early withdrawal reflects isolation, which begins to loosen as he forms meaningful bonds with Marisol's family. His willingness to teach Marisol and repair household items signals an emerging acceptance of freedom and responsibility, replacing the avoidance and rigidity that previously dominated his routine. Caring for the stray cat demonstrates a subtle confrontation with death, as Otto starts valuing life outside himself after repeatedly attempting to end his own. Finally, meaninglessness initially represented by his purposeless routines begins to dissolve as his actions acquire direction and relational significance. These shifts culminate when Otto uses his engineering expertise to prevent Reuben's eviction, symbolizing his rediscovery of competence and social purpose key steps in mitigating his existential crisis (Binder, 2022).

Figure 3

Otto taught Marisol how to drive



4.2.4 Finding Meaning in Suffering (Attitudinal Values)

The deepest dimension of Otto's recovery unfolds through attitudinal values, which Frankl (1957) identifies as the highest form of meaning when suffering is unavoidable. Otto's transformation becomes evident in how he reframes his relationship with past trauma. Initially, memories of Sonya appear only as sources of grief that reinforce his despair. However, as Otto opens up to Marisol, these memories shift from isolating pain to shared humanity. The scene where he recounts Sonya's miscarriage exemplifies this shift: the memory ceases to be private sorrow and becomes a moment of empathetic connection. Otto evolves from the stance of "I cannot live without her" to a more life-affirming commitment to honoring her memory through his continued existence.

Otto's shift in attitude aligns with broader psychological insights on how individuals reconstruct meaning through suffering. Grant G. B. (2017) argues that contemporary existential crises often stem from a collapse of previously held sources of purpose, and that recovery depends on the individual's ability to reorient suffering into a purposeful direction. Otto's willingness to reinterpret his grief not as an endpoint but as a moral and emotional obligation to honor Sonya's memory illustrates this attitudinal transformation. His grief becomes a catalyst that pushes him toward renewed engagement with others, demonstrating that meaning-making emerges not from the removal of suffering but from a conscious decision to confront it. Otto's developing ability to face pain with intentionality highlights the broader existential principle that suffering gains value when integrated into a framework of purpose.

4.2.5 The Ultimate Meaning Through Relationships (Experiential Values)

Otto's existential reconstruction culminates through experiential values, particularly those anchored in love and relational presence. The narrative explicitly charts Otto's movement from existential isolation, in Yalom's terms, toward Frankl's concept of self-transcendence, where meaning is realized beyond the boundaries of the self.

Figure 4

Otto's friends (Marisol and her husband)



His relationship with Marisol and her family evolves into a new emotional foundation, providing the relational depth necessary for existential renewal. The final scenes depicting Otto as "Abuelo Otto", symbolize his attainment of higher meaning through generativity and

connection. These findings resonate with studies identifying “social concern” (IzzulHaq *et al.*, 2025) and shifts in “relational dynamics” (Anjani & Suastini, 2025) as central to Otto's transformation. Viewed through the lens of logotherapy, Otto's relational integration is not merely behavioral but reflects the fulfillment of the will to meaning through acts of genuine self-transcendence (Frankl, 1957).

4.2.6 The Ultimate Meaning Through Relationships (Experiential Values)

Otto's emotional trajectory illustrates a gradual transition from existential despair toward acceptance, a process that reflects interplay between Yalom's death-centered anxieties and Frankl's emphasis on meaning reconstruction. As Heidenreich *et al.* (2021) observe, individuals confronted with mortality may develop acceptance when they integrate the reality of death into their meaning system rather than resisting it. Otto's eventual willingness to form new bonds and assume responsibility for others demonstrates the logotherapeutic principle that meaning emerges through action, responsibility, and relational presence (Terao & Satoh, 2022). This transition is further illuminated by Vos (2022), whose findings suggest that overcoming existential isolation is a precondition for the reestablishment of psychological coherence. Together, these perspectives help contextualize Otto's transformation within a broader existential framework that bridges both theoretical traditions.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *A Man Called Otto* (2022) effectively addresses the research objective by illustrating how an individual's existential crisis can be understood through Yalom's existential psychotherapy and resolved through Frankl's logotherapy. The analysis shows that Otto Anderson's confrontation with death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness aligns closely with Yalom's four existential givens, while his gradual movement toward purpose reflects Frankl's three pathways to meaning. Rather than merely depicting the character's emotional decline, the film articulates the psychological mechanisms underlying existential suffering, including the emergence of an existential vacuum, the burden of radical freedom, and the isolating effects of grief. Otto's journey ultimately reveals that meaning reconstruction is not the removal of suffering, but the reinterpretation of suffering through agency, relational bonds, and attitudinal transformation.

Beyond its narrative function, the film provides a valuable model for understanding how existential theories operate within contemporary cinematic storytelling. By integrating Frankl's and Yalom's frameworks, this research contributes to expanding the academic discussion on how film can visualize psychological struggles and demonstrate pathways of human resilience. The findings underscore that cinema can serve as a meaningful medium for exploring universal concerns about purpose, mortality, and connection, offering insight relevant not only to film scholars but also to psychological practitioners and future research on grief, identity, and existential recovery.

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