

Escaping Reality: Journey through Nihilism and Narcosis in the novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between nihilism and narcosis and examines how the protagonist's emotions affect her personal life and social expectations. The protagonist's endeavor to abandon life's encumbrance, expressing a negative view on life that diminishes the importance of acquaintances, sense, and even realization. This paper also attempts to understand the ingrained conviction that life is futile and there is an absence of joy and destiny in life. It also underlies the disillusionment in the society with condemnation of the consumer tradition that the world is superficial and commercialized. The main motive for relying on drugs is the way to cope with her inner anguish and the external world. The frame of narcosis exuberates as the medication of self-destruction, it acts as allegorical and realistic means of escape for her. By employing the existentialism theory to analyze the concept relies on the mentality of the protagonist, how a contemporary society commonly places a premium on transitory delight and immediate relief for psychological distress. To illustrate the desire which wants to escape the pressure of anguish, memory, and the need for inspiration. This paper draws the significance for the desire of destruction that stands in an abrupt contrast to conventional ideas of self-discovery or recuperation. This ultimate way of evading distress reflects a profound, even nihilistic need for tranquility in an unrelentingly superficial world.

Keywords: Nihilism, Narcosis, Self-discovery, Existentialism, Distress and Societal Expectations.

Introduction:

My Year of Rest and Relaxation is a darkly comic narrative that chronicles the experiences of an unidentified narrator, an affluent and disenchanted young lady residing in New York City in the year 2000. Following a succession of personal losses and increasing discontent with her affluent yet emotionally desolate existence, she resolves to undertake an unconventional endeavor: to engage in a year-long drug-induced slumber. With the assistance of an unconventional psychiatrist, Dr. Tuttle, and an inexhaustible supply of medications, the narrator withdraws from society in anticipation of a revitalized emergence. The protagonist and narrator of *My Year* describes herself as someone who “looked like a model, had money [she] hadn’t earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so [she] was ‘cultured’” (Moshfegh 13). The novel offers an incisive critique of modern civilization, exploring themes of alienation, privilege, and the human yearning to evade suffering and discover significance in a progressively isolating environment. Disability, understood as the “cognitive and physical conditions that deviate from normative ideas of mental ability and physiological function” (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body* 2)

The Role of Narcosis

The narrator uses drugs to conceal her illnesses, ongoing trauma, and profound unhappiness with life. The deaths of her emotionally distant parents and the collapse of her toxic relationships have plunged her into deep existential despair. Instead of seeking conventional therapy or attempting to rebuild her life, she turns to drugs as an extreme measure to fill the void she feels.

Hibernation becomes her principal coping method, evoking an extreme type of escape. She believes that by resting for an entire year, she will awaken “pure” and rejuvenated, free from the constraints of contemporary life and unencumbered by her past. Events became disconnected and absolute, and, with them, time turned into a void that left the individual alone, with no past nor memories, only “the catastrophic memory failure” (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 20). The protagonist’s drug use highlights her paradoxical relationship with control. While her hibernation is a deliberate plan to reclaim authority over her life by disengaging from reality, her dependence on narcotics plunges her into chaos. Her waking moments are marked by hallucinations,

blackouts, and erratic behavior, reflecting the instability her escapism creates. Anxiety and alienation are prevalent in today's culture, and the protagonist's drug-induced unconsciousness reflects these feelings. Many individuals, like her, use drugs, alcohol, social media, and other diversion to avoid confronting their struggles and the inescapable truth of suicide, just as she utilizes medicine to escape her nervousness and inadequacies.

Nihilism as a Reflection of Modern Society

A fundamental philosophical undercurrent, nihilism influences the protagonist's worldview and life philosophy. Nihilism, roughly defined as the view that existence has no intrinsic meaning, value, or purpose, is reflected in the narrator's indifference, emotional detachment, and rejection of society conventions. An overwhelming feeling of alienation from reality permeates the narrator's spirit. Ignoring her good fortune, youth, and position, she continues to live her life without happiness or purpose. Her perspective on relationships, employment, and the demands of society is one of scorn, since she considers all of these things to be pointless and performative. She hibernates for a year because she doesn't believe life has worth or that she must participate in its structures. In her interactions with others, this nihilism is most apparent. People in her life, like her best friend Reva, her ex-boyfriend Trevor, and her therapist Dr. Tuttle is treated with indifference or contempt, which shows that she thinks relationships are shallow and eventually pointless. As an approach of coping with her nihilistic grief, the narrator sets forth on a journey into drug-induced restlessness. She endeavors to eradicate the ego and responsibilities of existence by retiring from the world, resulting in a symbolic death. There is a prospect that she would emerge "pure" and emancipated from her limitations of existence if she prefers to ignore the needs of life and sleep through time. This seems to be analogous to a rebirth. In their sessions, the psychiatrist embraces the current biomedical discourse that understands mental illness as a brain disorder linked to "genetic vulnerabilities, early childhood illness and adversity, or other traumas" (Jones and Brown)

The Intersection of Narcosis and Nihilism

Unfortunately, her journey is exacerbated by her nihilism. While she rejects a sense of meaning, her pursuit of hibernation implies a foundational hope for transformation—an ambiguity that highlights the conflict between her despair and her deep search for purpose. deviation from

simulated normalcy is not pigeonholed into a representation of mental illness as “an exemplary state of extreme consciousness” (Dash 41 qtd. in Holladay 209). Through the narrator’s nihilistic perspective, the novel critiques modern society’s emptiness and superficiality. Her disdain for the art world, consumerism, and conventional notions of success reflects a broader cultural critique. The setting—New York City at the turn of the millennium—provides a backdrop of excess and materialism, emphasizing the alienation many feel in a society driven by image, wealth, and hollow ambition. Her detachment serves as both a personal response to and a reflection of societal nihilism. In a world that prioritizes appearances over substance, the narrator’s apathy and rejection of life’s constructs become a form of protest, albeit a self-destructive one. “It wouldn’t be that bad to die, I thought” (Moshfegh 170); “If, when I woke up in June, life still wasn’t worth the trouble, I would end it” (Moshfegh 260), and produced by the more than a dozen pills she takes a day; she considers herself “a somniac,” “a somnophile” (Moshfegh 46). The nihilism of the protagonist strongly impacts the story, nevertheless it doesn’t dictate it in every way. Interestingly, despite being aware that her hibernation depends on the notion that people are a hopeless endeavor, it yet harbors a glimmer of optimism for restored existence. The dichotomy implies that, irrespective of the repression of one’s hunger for change and significance, there is an innate longing within nihilism.

A potential metamorphosis is being hinted at by her definitive waking towards the story’s decision. Whether she locates purpose or just protection from her pain, her path reveals that even in nihilism, a glimpse and enlightenment are possible, describing the possibility of improvements despite her excruciating misery. Nihilism and narcosis are both connected, encompassing the novel’s critique of current society. The narrator’s reliance on drugs represents society’s desire to avoid existential anxieties and emotional suffering through various forms of sedation, such as substance abuse, consumerism, or digital distraction. While narcosis stems from the narrator’s nihilism, it also serves as a tool for her to deal with her despair. During her year of drug-induced slumber, she has a symbolic death and rebirth. By accepting oblivion and separating herself from the world around her, she paradoxically creates the space required to reassess her life. The Art of Happiness (Moshfegh 180). Like her taste for gum and the gym, they are recycled products of the social, the resurrection of a lost reality in the hyperreal, just another resurrection of “lost

faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 14) as the ones Baudrillard pointed to in his work.

The narrator's perspective of narcosis shifts throughout the narrative. Although nihilism may have controlled a substantial amount of her perspective, her awakening demonstrates that the experience of solitude and detachment has allowed her to emerge with a little shift in her worldview, even if she lacks total clarity and objectivity. This novel, therefore, provides an “alternative perspective on what it means to live with a disability in a culture obsessed with forging equations between physical ability, beauty, and productivity” (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body* 7). Although the protagonist's decision to hibernate is driven by her desire to avoid facing her pain, she is ultimately confronted with her nihilism as she withdraws from existence. She avoids meaning by retreating into slumber; however, it also affords her the opportunity to confront her emotional apathy. Even if she is asleep, the passage of time enables her to process her feelings of hopelessness, even if this can only occur on a subconscious level. Ultimately, her awakening at the conclusion of the novel is a literal and figurative confrontation with her nihilistic view. The fact that she wakes from her self-imposed slumber, despite her initial assumption that existence is pointless, demonstrates that recovery is possible, even in the grip of nihilism. Her awakening suggests a potential change, a shift away from complete despair, even though her metamorphosis is not spectacular or fully realized.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the novel, it's unclear whether the protagonist has found true healing or simply relief from her grief. The ambiguity of her transformation—whether it's one of personal growth or simply the cessation of pain—reflects the complex relationship between nihilism and healing. From the protagonist's journey, we can learn that healing doesn't have to mean a big change. Sometimes, it just means accepting life as it is, even though it has no purpose.

Despite the fact that our heroine does not come out of her hibernation a completely "healed" person, her story demonstrates that there are several paths to recovery, even when one is nihilistic. As a result of her awakening, she is no longer fully ensnared in her despondency, and this portends the possibility of new ways of interacting with life, although in a serene and unsure manner.

The intersection of nihilism and healing in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* reveals the complexity of the human desire for transformation. While the protagonist's nihilistic outlook initially prevents her from seeking traditional forms of healing, her journey of self-imposed hibernation paradoxically opens up the possibility for change.

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