



Anxiety and Self-Actualization in Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*: A Psychoanalytic and Humanistic Approach

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Abstract

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This study aims to analyze the anxiety disorder experienced by the main character in the novel *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell. The novel describes the journey of an introverted teenager named Cath who faces various challenges in college life, social relationships, and the process of self-discovery. The main focus of this research is how the symptoms of anxiety disorder are displayed in Cath's character and how environmental factors and past experiences affect her psychological condition. This study uses a literary psychology approach with anxiety disorder theory as the main foundation. The method used is descriptive qualitative analysis, with data collection techniques through in-depth reading and identification of anxiety signs in the narrative. The results show that Cath experiences various symptoms of anxiety disorder, such as excessive fear in social situations, a tendency to avoid interactions, and a negative mindset that affects her confidence. In addition, the novel also shows how support from family, friends, and writing activities can help Cath in dealing with her anxiety. This study contributes to the study of literary psychology and mental health studies in adolescent literature, by highlighting how anxiety disorders are represented in works of fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the subject of mental health has gained significant attention not only in psychological and medical discourse but also in the realm of literature. One of the most common and disruptive psychological conditions explored both in real life and fictional narratives is anxiety disorder. This disorder affects millions of people worldwide and is especially prevalent among adolescents and young adults—a demographic often reflected in young adult (YA) fiction. Novels that portray characters struggling with mental health challenges offer valuable insights into internal emotional struggles and the ways individuals cope with psychological distress. As such, literature serves as a mirror to society's growing concern about mental health and emotional well-being, particularly in transitional stages of life such as adolescence and early adulthood.

Anxiety disorder is defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) as "excessive fear or anxiety that is difficult to control and often leads to avoidance behavior." Under typical circumstances, anxiety is a natural emotional response to perceived danger. However, for individuals with anxiety disorders, these reactions occur excessively, sometimes without identifiable causes, and interfere with daily functioning. Anxiety disorders can take various forms, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms may include heart palpitations, shortness of breath, restlessness, and difficulty concentrating. According to Barlow (2002), anxiety is a "future-oriented mood state in which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events," indicating its pervasive impact on emotional and behavioral responses.

Literature has long served as a medium for exploring psychological complexity. According to Taylor (1981), novels are extended narratives that delve into human morality, behavior, and internal conflict. One such work is Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013), a YA novel that has received critical acclaim for its honest portrayal of mental health issues, identity, and self-discovery. The protagonist, Cath Avery, is a college freshman who struggles with social anxiety, family instability, and the pressures of entering adulthood. Her experience presents a compelling case for examining how anxiety is both portrayed and managed in YA fiction.

Several previous studies have applied psychological frameworks to analyze characters in contemporary novels. Sari (2024) examined *Convenience Store Woman* using Freud's psychoanalysis to explore anxiety and defense mechanisms. Yuniarti (2017) studied *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, identifying cognitive and behavioral symptoms of anxiety stemming from childhood trauma. Similarly, Darmadali explored bullying-related anxiety in *Finding Audrey* through Freud's theory and conflict theory. While all these studies successfully apply psychological theories to understand mental health in literature, none have specifically focused on *Fangirl* or examined Cath's anxiety through a dual-theoretical lens.

This article fills that gap by analyzing anxiety disorder in Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory (1926) and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970). Freud's theory enables a deeper understanding of Cath's inner conflict, while Maslow's framework contextualizes her psychological growth and need for self-actualization. By combining these perspectives, the study offers a more layered interpretation of Cath's behavior and emotional development.

The contribution of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, blending literary analysis with clinical psychology to examine how fictional narratives portray mental health challenges. It also provides insight into the emotional landscape of contemporary youth as reflected in YA literature. This study is intended not only to deepen the understanding of character construction and psychological realism in fiction but also to contribute to the ongoing discourse on mental health awareness through literature.

METHODS

This study employed qualitative data in the form of words, phrases, and dialogue within the novel *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013). The data consisted of narrative passages, character introspection, and interactions pertaining to the main character's experience of anxiety disorder. No numerical data were used, as the objective was to interpret representational patterns of psychological distress in literary text.

The primary data source is Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*, a 445-page young adult novel published in 2013 by St. Martin's Press. The focus was on passages depicting Cath Avery's anxiety—especially her social withdrawal, inner dialogue, and coping mechanisms—as interpreted through Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory (1926) and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970). *Fangirl* provides a rich narrative reflecting contemporary adolescent struggles with identity, mental health, and self-actualization.

The researcher read *Fangirl* multiple times to ensure a deep understanding of its narrative and psychological dimensions. During close readings, pertinent words, phrases, and scenes were identified—those explicitly or implicitly representing anxiety symptoms (e.g., fear, avoidance, restlessness). Relevant quotations were extracted systematically and categorized in alignment with key research questions. All quotations were organized into thematic clusters corresponding to anxiety manifestations and coping processes.

Analysis followed a theoretical-driven coding process guided by Freud's psychoanalysis and Maslow's hierarchy. First, anxiety-related passages were contextualized and narrated in relation to the plot. Next, the way Cath's anxiety manifests (e.g. defense mechanisms, avoidance) was interpreted using Freudian concepts. Then, her motivational progression from physiological or safety needs toward self-actualization was analyzed via Maslow's framework. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing these dual perspectives and generating insights about literary representation of anxiety and character growth.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Anxiety Disorder Potrayed in *Fangirl* using Sigmund Freud's Theory

According to Freud (1926), anxiety is an unpleasant affective state accompanied by sensations of tension and fear, and acts as a danger signal for the ego. Freud associated anxiety with conflict in the human subconscious. In this study, it was found that there are several types of social anxiety disorder experienced by the characters in the novel. These findings are found in the dialog and various narrative elements that support the novel. The result found three types in this novel: Realistic Anxiety, Neorotic Anxiety, and Moral Anxiety.

1.1 Realistic Anxiety

In Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*, realistic anxiety occurs when Cath feels fear or anxiety

about something that has a basis in reality, rather than an irrational fear or subconscious impulse. This anxiety arises when there is a real threat to her well-being, whether academically, socially or emotionally. Freud's (1926) realistic anxiety theory states that this anxiety arises in response to real threats or dangerous external situations. In the context of the novel Fangirl, Cath experiences various forms of anxiety that fit this concept, especially in facing a new environment on campus. As seen in this quotation:

“She tried to think of a way to say everything she was thinking—about the cafeteria and the upperclassmen and the noisy girls next door and how everything about college was wrong so far.” (Rowell, 2013, p. 67)

Cath felt anxiety about having to adapt to a campus full of new people, new rules and expectations that she didn't yet understand. In keeping with realistic anxiety, this is not an irrational fear, but rather a response to change that does require adjustment. Freud argued that realistic anxiety often arises when a person faces uncertainty or unfamiliar situations. Cath doesn't know how to deal with new environments, such as how to interact in the cafeteria or deal with upperclassmen, which makes her feel threatened. In Freud's theory, individuals often use defense mechanisms to deal with anxiety, and Cath avoided the canteen and preferred to stay in her room because she felt uncomfortable in her new environment. This is a form of avoidance, one of the ways the ego protects itself from anxiety. Other quotes also show the realistic anxiety that occurs in novel:

“Cath had been avoiding the dining hall since she got here. She didn't know where she was supposed to sit. She didn't know where she was supposed to look. She didn't want to accidentally make eye contact with someone across the room and have to pretend she was waving at someone behind them.” (Rowell, 2013, p. 69)

This quote illustrates the social anxiety Cath experiences in everyday situations on campus, especially in environments that require her to interact with other people. Cath avoided the cafeteria from the moment she arrived on campus because she felt she didn't know what to do in these social situations. She worried about small things, such as where to sit or how to behave, which shows overthinking - a common characteristic of people with social anxiety. Her fear of accidental eye contact suggests that she is uncomfortable with engaging in social interactions that she did not plan for. She even thinks too far, imagining scenarios where she has to pretend to wave his hand to avoid awkward situations. Realistic anxiety occurs when a person feels anxious about a real threat, such as a new environment full of strangers. Cath feels unprepared to deal with the social dynamics of the campus, so she uses the defense mechanism of avoidance by not going to the canteen.

1.2 Neurotic Anxiety

Psychoanalysis is the belief that human behavior is influenced by the subconscious, according to Sigmund Freud (cited in Boeree, 2017). The unconscious mind is made up of undesirable thoughts, feelings, urges, pain, anxiety, and traumas. When something triggers traumatic memories that are stored in the subconscious, it can cause issues in the conscious mind, which can then impact a person's behavior. As Cath shows in the following quote:

“They'd even gone to therapy together after their mom left.

Which seem weird, now that Cath thought about it. Especially considering, how differently they'd reacted -Wren acting out, Cath acting in.” (Rowell, 2013, p. 149)

The quote shows that the main character Cath in Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* comes from a broken home. Her parents separated when she was only ten years old. Her mother left her, her twin sister, and also her father. She hates her mother for leaving them. The separation of her parents caused traumatic feelings for Cath and it affected her mentally. This quote also illustrates how Cath and Wren, the twin sisters in Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*, reacted differently to their mother's passing. Although they went through therapy together, Cath realized that they dealt with the trauma in very different ways-Wren "acting out" (reacting in expressive and possibly destructive ways, such as misbehaving or seeking attention), while Cath "acting in" (shutting down, withdrawing from the outside world, and keeping her emotions inside). This quote shows the character differences between Cath and Wren and how they deal with grief in contrasting ways, even though they grew up together as twins.

Those with anxiety disorders will show physical symptoms such as muscle tension, sweating, inability to think, sleep disturbances, and restlessness. Other people can see these symptoms because people with anxiety disorders show them physically which will make them clearly visible to others. The description is written in the novel as follows:

"She just needed to settle her nerves. To take the anxiety she felt like black static behind her eyes and an extra heart in her throat, and shove it all back down to her stomach where it belonged - where she could at least tie it into a nice knot and work around it." (Rowell, 2013, p. 243)

Cath felt trapped in her own mind, as if she was too conscious of her every move and could not interact spontaneously. Cath felt the need to "rehearsing every word" before speaking, which shows the overthinking typical of neurotic anxiety. According to Freud (1926), this happens when the superego is too dominant, making one feel that they must always be "right" in their actions. This quote also illustrates how Cath's anxiety is not just a simple nervousness, but a deep fear of her social environment. Cath chooses to avoid interactions rather than face her anxieties and fears. Freud (1926) explains that individuals with neurotic anxiety often use defense mechanisms such as withdrawal from anxiety-provoking situations, where avoidance feels safer than trying and failing, to reduce psychological distress.

"Cath pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She didn't want to go to the dining hall. She didn't want to figure out where to sit or what to say. She didn't want to make small talk with strangers or worry about chewing too loudly. She just wanted to stay in her room, in her bed, where everything was predictable and safe. But staying in her room meant being alone. And being alone meant being stuck in her own head, where the anxiety never stopped buzzing. It was exhausting, either way." (Rowell, 2013, p. 251)

Cath was not only anxious about social situations but also about small things like "chewing too loudly." This shows the overthinking that is typical of neurotic anxiety. Freud (1926) explained that the ego of a person with neurotic anxiety is often in great tension between the id (wanting comfort and security) and the superego (realizing that self-isolation is unhealthy).

1.3 Moral Anxiety

In Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*, moral anxiety can be seen through the anxiety experienced by Cath Avery in several aspects of her life, especially related to responsibility, moral values, and her relationships with others. Freud (1926) says, "Moral Anxiety is a feeling of uneasiness or discomfort that arises when a person feels they have violated-or may be about to violate-their own moral or ethical standards. This anxiety often occurs when there is a conflict between personal values and actions taken, or when one faces a difficult ethical dilemma." As Cath experiences in the following novel:

"You can't just write fanfiction."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not yours." (Rowell, 2013, p. 118)

In this conversation, Cath experiences moral anxiety when her professor rejects fanfiction as a form of original writing. She feels trapped between her love of writing *Carry On* fanfiction (based on Simon Snow's world) and the academic demands of creating original work. This reflects moral anxiety as she feels guilty and confused about whether or not writing fanfiction is academically and ethically legitimate. Cath's professor challenged her to write something original, but Cath feels that writing fanfiction is part of her identity as a writer. She experiences moral anxiety about whether or not what she is doing is ethically and academically correct.

"I don't want to be Wren," Cath said. "I don't want to be like her. I don't want to want to be like her."

"You don't have to be," Levi said. "You just have to be you." (Rowell, 2013, p. 173)

This quote illustrates Cath's identity conflict and anxiety in comparing herself to Wren, her twin sister. Cath fears losing her identity when she sees her twin sister changing, partying and moving away from the way of life they shared before. Her superego judges Wren's actions as wrong, while her id may envy the freedom Wren has. This triggers moral anxiety, as Cath struggles between being herself or developing like the others around her.

2. The Hierarchy of Needs by Abraham Maslow in *Fangirl*

The Hierarchy of Needs theory developed by Maslow (1970) is a psychological theory that explains human motivation based on a hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy of needs occurs because of the natural instincts of humans in fulfilling their needs. This theory states that humans have five levels of needs that must be met in order, starting from the most basic to the higher, such as physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization needs.

2.1 Physiological of Needs

In Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*, there are many moments that reflect basic human needs according to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. In this novel, Cath deals with physiological needs in several ways, although she initially struggles to adjust to her new environment on campus. At the Physiological Needs level, which includes basic needs such as food, sleep, and health, there are several relevant quotes such as the following:

"No, pizza," Wren said. "Sorry Dad. Courtney and I are going to the freshman barbecue tonight." She shot her eyes at Cath. "Cath should go, too."

"Yes pizza,"

Her dad smiled. "Your sister's right Cath. You should go. Meet new people." (Rowell, 2013, p. 4)

This quote shows the personality differences between Wren and Cath. Wren is more social and enthusiastic to mingle with other students, while Cath is more introverted and reluctant to face new social situations. Cath's attitude of rejecting social events and preferring to eat pizza at home reflects her discomfort in new environments and large social interactions. Maslow's theory also emphasizes that after these basic needs are met, humans will try to meet other needs, such as security, social relationships, self-esteem, and self-actualization. In this case, Cath would rather fulfill her physiological needs (eating pizza) than her social needs (interacting with other students at the barbecue).

2.2 Safety of Needs

Safety needs are the second level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which emphasizes the importance of protection and stability in one's life. After physiological needs (such as eating and drinking) are met, individuals will seek security in various aspects of their lives. If security needs are not met, a person may experience stress, anxiety, or instability in their life.

"She felt safe in the world she knew. Simon Snow was a constant. He never let her down. Writing about Simon made her feel safe—like she could create her own world,

where nothing could go too wrong." (Rowell, 2013, p. 144)

This quote highlights that Cath uses the world of fiction as a form of escape from the uncertainty and anxiety of the real world. When her new environment at college felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable, writing fanfiction about Simon Snow became a coping mechanism that helped her feel safe and secure. In Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, the need for security includes physical safety, emotional stability, and predictability in life. Cath feels that Simon Snow's fictional world provides the stability she needs. In real life, she faced social anxiety and major changes, such as living away from her twin brother and having to adjust to a new environment. But by writing about Simon Snow, she felt she had control and predictability that she was comfortable with.

"When he wrapped his arms around her, she felt like she could finally breathe. Like she wasn't holding everything together on her own anymore."

"You're safe here," Levi whispered. "I've got you." (Rowell, 2013, p. 229)

This quote highlights the importance of emotional support in creating a sense of security, especially for someone who experiences anxiety or uncertainty in their life. Levi gave Cath a sense of emotional security. With his words and hugs, he showed Cath that she was not alone and did not have to bear everything alone. Cath feels calmer and no longer has to constantly "hold" all the burdens on her own. This reflects that support from others can help a person fulfill their need for security, especially when they feel overwhelmed.

When the need for security begins to be met, one is better equipped to fulfill social needs (love and belonging needs). Levi's hug not only provided safety, but also built a closer relationship between them. This quote shows that the presence and emotional support of someone trusted can provide a sense of security and calmness for individuals who are experiencing anxiety or emotional difficulties, in accordance with Maslow's theory.

2.3 Love Needs

Love needs is the third level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. After physiological needs (eating, drinking, sleeping) and security needs are met, a person will seek meaningful social relationships. If a person does not get love and belonging, they could experience loneliness and feelings of isolation, stress, anxiety, or even depression, difficulty in building healthy social relationships. Conversely, if these needs are met, a person will feel happier, more confident and motivated to reach their potential.

"This is why I can't be with Levi. Because I'm the kind of girl who fantasizes about being trapped in a library overnight – and Levi can't even read." (Rowell, 2013, p. 164). In this quote, Cath doubts her relationship with Levi because she feels that they are too different. Cath is unsure whether Levi can truly understand and accept her for who she is, especially since they have very different interests. She feared that their relationship wouldn't work if they couldn't connect intellectually or share the same interests.

"I like you, Cather. A lot. I've been falling for you all semester." "I don't trust anybody. Not even myself."

"I trust you. And you can trust me. I won't let you go." (Rowell, 2013, p. 221)

In this excerpt, Levi expresses his feelings for Cath honestly, while Cath shows her hesitation in trusting others, even herself. Cath has difficulty in fulfilling this need because of her distrust of others. Levi offers emotional support that can help Cath feel more secure and accepted. This quote shows how Cath is still in the process of building trust and overcoming her fear of deeper relationships. Cath wants to fulfill her need for love and attachment, but her hesitation towards trust is a major obstacle. Levi, on the other hand, tries to show that a secure and loving relationship is possible, so this quote depicts Cath's journey towards fulfilling her emotional needs.

2.4 Esteem Needs

If a person does not get enough reward or recognition, they can experience low self-esteem and lack of confidence, dissatisfaction with themselves, difficulty in making

decisions and facing challenges. Conversely, if these needs are met, a person will be more confident, highly motivated and ready to progress towards self- actualization, the highest level in Maslow's hierarchy.

"I read your story," Professor Piper said. "It was beautiful."

Cath felt her chest tighten. "Really?"

"Yes. You have a unique voice. You should keep writing." (Rowell, 2013, p. 283)

In this citation, Professor Piper recognizes Cath's work, saying that her writing is beautiful and that Cath has a unique writing voice. Cath gets recognition and validation from someone she respects, which strengthens her confidence. The recognition from Professor Piper helped Cath feel more confident in her talent, fulfilling her need for achievement and a sense of competence. This contributed to Cath's personal growth, helping her believe that she was indeed talented and should continue writing. This quote shows that Cath begins to fulfill her esteem needs by gaining external validation that helps her build confidence in her abilities as a writer.

"Our professor asked us to write a scene with an untrustworthy narrator. I wrote something about Simon and Baz.. She didn't get it. She thought it was plagiarism." Cath forced herself to use that word, felt the tar wake up with a twist in her stomach. (Rowell, 2013, p. 110)

In this excerpt, Cath feels disappointed and embarrassed when her professor considers her assignment as plagiarism, even though she only wrote about existing characters (Simon and Baz) with a unique point of view. In Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, esteem needs include self- confidence, achievement, recognition from others, and a sense of competence in a particular field.

Cath felt her self-esteem was threatened because her work wasn't properly appreciated. She wanted to be recognized as a talented writer, but instead felt doubted and misunderstood. Her feelings of shame and anxiety show that she is still struggling to fulfill her esteem needs, especially in her academic and creative world. This quote illustrates how important validation and recognition from others is in building one's self-esteem, as well as how failure or misunderstanding can shake one's confidence in their field.

2.5 Self Actualization Needs

Self-actualization is the highest level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At this stage, a person has fulfilled their basic needs (physiological, safety), social needs (love and belonging), and esteem needs, so they begin to focus on developing themselves to their full potential. This conditions, revealed in the passage below.

"She looked at the final page of her story and felt something settle inside her. "It was done. It was hers."

"The words were hers. The story was hers. She had done it." "I don't care if anyone reads this," Cath thought. "I don't care if it wins anything. I just want to write it." (Rowell, 2013, p. 280)

This excerpt describes Cath's journey in finding fulfillment and meaning from writing. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization is the highest stage, where a person reaches their full potential and does things because of inner satisfaction, not because of external recognition. Cath has achieved self-actualization in writing-she no longer writes just to get recognition or win competitions, but because writing is part of her. She has found her identity as a writer, and this gives her a deeper satisfaction than just appreciation from others. The freedom to express herself without fear of failure or judgment is a key feature of self-actualization, which Cath achieves in this moment. This quote marks the development of Cath's character, from someone who doubts her own abilities to someone who believes that what she creates has value, enough for herself.

"I'm a writer," Cath whispered to herself, testing the words. They felt right. "I'm a writer."

“I don’t just love writing,” she thought. “I need it. It’s part of who I am.”

“I’ve spent so much time being afraid of failing, but maybe the real failure is never trying.” (Rowell, 2013, p. 312)

This quote shows Cath’s journey of self-discovery as a writer. Cath achieves full self-awareness that writing is an important part of her identity. She no longer writes as a form of escapism, but as a way to express herself authentically. The decision to accept herself as a writer and face challenges reflects the achievement of self-actualization. She is no longer limited by the fear of failure, but instead uses her courage to grow. This quote marks the peak of Cath’s growth as an individual, where she finally accepts who she is and dares to live life according to her calling as a writer.

The awareness that she is still learning, but still moving forward, is the hallmark of an individual who has achieved self-actualization. She does not write for external validation, but because she has something valuable to say to the world. This quote marks Cath’s transformation from someone who was afraid to take risks to an individual who is confident and ready to develop further.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the psychological complexity of Cath, the protagonist in *Fangirl*, through the lens of anxiety disorder, aiming to reveal how mental health struggles are represented in young adult literature. By applying a literary psychology approach, the analysis identified key behavioral symptoms—such as social withdrawal, persistent fear, and cognitive distortions—that align with clinical patterns of anxiety. These findings underscore the nuanced portrayal of adolescent mental health in contemporary fiction, where literature becomes a medium not only for storytelling but also for raising awareness about psychological conditions.

The research highlights the significance of environmental influences, including past trauma and social expectations, in shaping Cath’s emotional responses, while also illustrating the therapeutic potential of interpersonal support and creative expression. Despite its focused scope on a single character and text, the study offers valuable insight into how fiction can reflect and inform real-world mental health discourse, particularly among youth. However, the study is limited by its reliance on a single narrative and subjective interpretation, suggesting the need for broader comparative research across diverse texts and cultural settings. Future studies might investigate representations of anxiety in other literary genres or explore reader responses to such portrayals.

Ultimately, this research affirms the role of literature as a critical space for examining psychological realities, bridging literary analysis with mental health advocacy.

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