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Choosing Selfhood Against the State: Existentialist Resistance in Lauren Oliver's *Delirium*

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Abstract: *Lauren Oliver's dystopian novel Delirium (2011) constructs a society in which the emotion of love has been classified as a disease called amor deliria nervosa and subjected to mandatory surgical cure. This paper examines the novel through the lens of existentialist philosophy, arguing that Delirium dramatises the core existentialist conviction that authentic selfhood is constituted through radical freedom, individual choice, and resistance to systems of bad faith. Drawing on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger, the paper traces the protagonist Lena Haloway's journey from conformist acceptance of a totalising state apparatus to the anguished recognition of her own freedom and the consequent obligation to act. The paper contends that the surgical erasure of love functions in the novel as a metaphor for the annihilation of consciousness itself — the precondition of existentialist subjectivity — while the Invalids and the Wilds represent what Sartre would call the realm of authentic existence beyond the reach of the Other's gaze. The paper further argues that Oliver employs the dystopian form not merely as speculative entertainment but as a philosophical instrument through which contemporary American anxieties about state control, medicalisation of emotion, surveillance, and the suppression of dissent are rendered imaginatively legible.*

Keywords: *Selfhood, existentialist, surgical erasure*

1. Introduction: The Dystopian Imagination and the Existentialist Subject

The dystopian novel has long served as a literary laboratory in which the conditions of human freedom are tested to their limits. From Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) to Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), the genre consistently stages the



confrontation between a totalising social order and the irreducible interiority of the individual. In doing so, dystopian fiction engages, often without explicit philosophical vocabulary, with the central problematic of existentialism: the question of what it means to be a free, self-determining subject in a world that perpetually threatens to reduce the individual to a function, a role, an object. Lauren Oliver's debut trilogy, beginning with *Delirium* (2011), belongs firmly within this tradition, and yet it occupies a distinctive position within contemporary American dystopian fiction by making the suppression of love — the most intimate and constitutive of human emotions — the instrument of social control.

In the imagined near-future America of *Delirium*, the government has reclassified love as a neurological disease, *amor deliria nervosa*, and instituted a mandatory surgical procedure, the Cure, to be administered to all citizens upon their eighteenth birthday. The Cure, performed on the brain, is held to eliminate the dangerous volatility of emotion and to produce compliant, productive, and docile citizens. The society that results is one in which all significant choices — career, spouse, residence — are assigned by the state following a thorough evaluation process. Lena Haloway, the seventeen-year-old protagonist, has grown up believing entirely in this system, shaped in part by the apparent suicide of her mother, whose repeated failures to respond to the Cure have been constructed, in Lena's mind, as proof of love's destructive power. The novel traces Lena's transformation from true believer to fugitive as she falls in love with Alex, an Invalid — a person who has lived uncured in the Wilds beyond the city's fences.

The paper argues that this narrative arc is best understood through the conceptual frameworks of existentialist philosophy. The Cure is not merely a political device but an ontological one: it aims to extinguish the very capacity for authentic selfhood by eliminating the anguish and freedom that, for existentialist thinkers, constitute the condition of being human. Oliver's *Delirium* may thus be read as a sustained meditation on what Sartre called *mauvaise foi* — bad faith — and on the conditions under which it becomes possible, and necessary, to choose oneself against a world that demands surrender of that choice.

2. Theoretical Framework: Key Existentialist Concepts

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, is defined by its insistence that existence precedes essence: human beings are not born with a fixed nature or predetermined purpose but create themselves through their choices and actions in the world. Jean-Paul Sartre, the movement's most systematic exponent, argued in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and the lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism" (1945) that human consciousness — what he termed the *pour-soi* or being-for-itself — is characterized by nothingness, by the capacity to negate any given state of affairs and to project itself toward possibilities not yet realised. This radical freedom is inseparable from anguish: the recognition that there is no external authority — no God, no Nature, no Society — that can relieve the individual of the burden of choosing.

The obverse of authentic freedom in Sartre's thought is bad faith, the attempt to deny one's freedom by treating oneself as a thing, an *en-soi* or being-in-itself, wholly determined by



role, function, or social expectation. Bad faith is not simply deception but a fundamental mode of self-relation in which the individual colludes in the erasure of their own subjectivity. Sartre's waiter who performs the role of waiter so completely that he forgets he is also free to be otherwise is the paradigmatic figure of bad faith. The concept of the Other, developed in the third part of *Being and Nothingness*, is equally important: for Sartre, the gaze of the Other threatens to objectify the self, to fix it in a particular identity, and authentic existence requires both acknowledgement of and resistance to this threat.

Simone de Beauvoir, developing existentialism in a direction more attentive to social power and its structural dimensions, argued in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) that freedom is not merely a personal achievement but is realised only in relation to the freedom of others: "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (Beauvoir 60). This ethical extension of existentialism is crucial for reading *Delirium*, where individual liberation is inextricable from political resistance. For Beauvoir, those who accept oppression — who embrace the role of the "serious man" who derives identity from fixed values given by society — are complicit in their own unfreedom, and political action is demanded by the very logic of authentic existence.

Albert Camus, while resisting the label of existentialist, contributes through his concept of the absurd — the confrontation between human consciousness's demand for meaning and the universe's silence — a framework for understanding the protagonist's relationship to a society that offers false meaning in place of genuine freedom. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus argues that the proper response to the absurd is not philosophical suicide — the adoption of a totalising ideology that papers over the absurd — but revolt: the lucid, passionate embrace of life without illusion. *Oliver's Wilds*, where the uncured live outside the grid of authorised meaning, can be read as Camus's space of revolt made spatially concrete.

Martin Heidegger's concept of authenticity, developed in *Being and Time* (1927), offers a further dimension. For Heidegger, *das Man* — the anonymous "they" of everyday social life — absorbs the individual into a world of average intelligibility in which genuine selfhood is dissolved. Authentic existence requires the individual's confrontation with their own finitude, with the anxiety of being-toward-death, as the condition under which the irreplaceability and urgency of one's own existence is brought into view. In *Delirium*, the threat of the Cure — effectively a kind of death of selfhood — functions as the existentialist confrontation with finitude that precipitates Lena's awakening.

3. Bad Faith and the Architecture of Consent: Lena Before the Cure

At the novel's opening, Lena Haloway is, in Sartrean terms, a figure of exemplary bad faith. She has so thoroughly internalised the state's ideology that she does not experience it as ideology at all: it is simply the texture of reality, the natural order of things. Oliver carefully establishes the mechanisms by which bad faith is produced and sustained in this society. The state controls not only overt political institutions but the entire apparatus of symbolic reproduction: the *Book of Shhh*, a sacred text that serves as a conflation of religious scripture



and legal code; the Evaluators who assess citizens for suitable placement; the regulated curriculum through which children learn to fear and pathologise their own emotional lives.

Lena's narration in the novel's early chapters is saturated with the language of the official ideology, which she has absorbed so completely that she sometimes produces its formulations with an affecting earnestness that reads as ironic to the reader while remaining sincere for her. She describes love as a disease with recognisable symptoms — racing heart, loss of appetite, difficulty concentrating — and looks forward to the Cure as a release from the possibility of such suffering. Her self-policing is evident in moments when she feels an unwanted attraction or pleasure and immediately censors herself, rehearsing the official categories through which such feelings must be classified as symptoms of illness.

This is precisely what Sartre means by bad faith: Lena treats her own freedom — her capacity to feel, to choose, to resist — as if it were a symptom, a malfunction, something to be corrected rather than exercised. The state has successfully induced citizens to discipline themselves from within, rendering external coercion largely unnecessary. This mechanism anticipates what Michel Foucault would later theorise as the internalisation of the panoptical gaze: surveillance becomes most effective when it is invisible, when the subject has become their own overseer. Oliver dramatises this through Lena's constant self-monitoring, her anxiety about being seen to feel, her performance of normality for the benefit of evaluators and neighbours and even herself.

Yet Oliver is careful to plant, from the beginning, signs that Lena's bad faith is unstable, that the freedom she has denied is not extinguished but suppressed. Her illicit love of running, the way her body escapes social control in the physical act of movement; her ambivalent relationship with her friend Hana, who is already beginning to chafe against the system's constraints; her deep, unresolved grief for her mother — all of these function as what Sartre would call the anguish that bad faith cannot wholly suppress. Anguish, for Sartre, is not a psychological state but an ontological one: it is the experience of one's own freedom, felt as burden rather than liberation, which breaks through the structures of denial that bad faith constructs. These early moments of anguish in Lena's experience prepare the reader for the transformative encounter with Alex.

4. The Encounter with the Other: Alex and the Recognition of Freedom

Sartre's analysis of the encounter with the Other in *Being and Nothingness* is complex and in some respects pessimistic: the Other threatens to reduce the self to an object through the objectifying power of the gaze. But Sartre also acknowledges that the Other can, under certain circumstances, serve as the occasion for the self's recognition of its own freedom. The encounter with someone who is visibly free — who exists outside the structures of bad faith that constitute everyday social existence — can produce a shock of recognition that is itself existentially transformative. This is the function Alex performs in *Delirium*.



Alex is an Invalid: born in the Wilds to parents who escaped the Cure, he has grown up outside the state's ideological apparatus entirely. His freedom is not achieved through philosophical reflection but is, in a sense, his natural condition — he has never been subjected to the machinery of bad faith that has shaped Lena. When Lena encounters him, initially at the Evaluations and subsequently through a series of increasingly risky meetings, his very presence constitutes a challenge to the reality she has taken for granted. He does not speak the language of the official ideology; he does not perform the rituals of regulated citizenship; he moves through the city with an ease that signals his non-belonging to its symbolic order.

Oliver uses the experience of falling in love with Alex as the vehicle through which Lena's bad faith begins to crack. But the novel is philosophically sophisticated enough to make clear that what the experience of love provides is not simply a new content for Lena's consciousness — a pleasant feeling in place of a prescribed one — but a new form of consciousness itself: one in which she becomes aware, for the first time, of the radical contingency of the world she has taken to be natural and necessary. The epigraphs Oliver places at the beginning of each chapter, drawn from the Book of Shhh and from other texts of the imagined society, perform a crucial function here: by consistently juxtaposing the official language of the ideology with the lived experience the chapter will narrate, they make visible the gap between the social construction of reality and the reality of individual experience. This gap is precisely the space of freedom that existentialist philosophy identifies as the condition of authentic selfhood.

Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity are relevant here as well. For Beauvoir, authentic love — as opposed to the narcissistic or possessive forms she analyses in *The Second Sex* — involves the genuine recognition of the other as a free subject and the desire for the expansion of their freedom alongside one's own. Lena's love for Alex is, in this sense, educative: it is through the genuine recognition of his freedom that she begins to recognise her own. The novel insists, with a care that distinguishes it from simpler romance narratives, that love here is not a refuge from political reality but the very faculty through which political reality is for the first time genuinely perceived.

5. The Wilds as Existential Space: Authentic Existence and the Limits of Bad Faith

The Wilds — the unclaimed territory beyond Portland's fences, where the Invalids live — function in *Delirium* not merely as a plot device but as an existential and philosophical space. They represent the realm beyond the reach of the state's ideological apparatus, the territory where the machinery of bad faith has not penetrated and where authentic existence is, in principle, possible. Oliver describes the Wilds in terms that deliberately contrast with the regulated, surveilled, colour-coded space of the city: they are wild in the literal sense, disordered, unpredictable, full of beauty and danger in equal measure.

This spatial opposition maps onto the existentialist distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence. The city, with its prescribed paths, monitored spaces, and sanctioned



emotions, is Heidegger's world of *das Man* — the anonymous they-world in which average everyday existence dissolves the individual into a collective, interchangeable identity. The Wilds, by contrast, correspond to what Heidegger calls the moment of authenticity: the space beyond the they-world in which the individual confronts their own finitude and, through that confrontation, wins back the possibility of genuine selfhood. Alex's accounts of life in the Wilds are significant in this context: they describe not a utopia but a genuinely difficult existence, one that demands constant resourcefulness, courage, and solidarity — precisely the virtues of authentic existence as existentialism conceives it.

Camus's notion of revolt is also illuminating here. The Invalids in the Wilds have not simply escaped the state; they have constituted themselves as a community of resistance, and their existence is defined by this act of refusal. Their lives have the quality of Camus's absurd hero: lived fully and passionately in the face of a system that denies them recognition, without the consolation of any guaranteed future. The resistance network that Alex reveals to Lena — the underground society of the uncured — corresponds structurally to Camus's image of revolt as a collective enterprise: individual rebellion that recognises its solidarity with all those who resist oppression.

The novel's treatment of death in relation to the Wilds is particularly significant from an existentialist perspective. Heidegger argues that it is the confrontation with one's own being-toward-death — the recognition that one's existence is finite, irreplaceable, and undeferrable — that breaks the spell of *das Man* and makes authentic existence possible. In *Delirium*, the threat of death is omnipresent for anyone who resists the system: the Invalids risk capture, imprisonment, or execution; Lena's mother, whose story gradually unfolds across the narrative, has been subjected to repeated brutal procedures that constitute a prolonged assault on her selfhood. Oliver uses these threats not as melodramatic intensifiers but as philosophical occasions: it is precisely because the stakes are absolute that Lena's choice, when it finally comes, carries existential weight.

6. The Body, Medicine, and the Medicalisation of Consciousness

One of the novel's most philosophically suggestive dimensions is its sustained engagement with what might be called the politics of medicalisation. The Cure is not presented as a crude instrument of torture — it is a medical procedure, performed by doctors, endorsed by scientists, justified by an elaborate body of official research that documents the dangers of *amor deliria nervosa*. The society of *Delirium* has not abolished medicine; it has colonised it entirely, turning the discourse of health and pathology into the primary instrument of ideological control. Love is not forbidden — it is sick. The citizen who resists the Cure is not a rebel — they are a patient who refuses treatment.

This represents a sophisticated engagement with what Michel Foucault analysed, in *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), as the historical process by which medicine came to serve as a technology of normalisation and social control. But



Oliver's novel is also legible in purely existentialist terms. For Sartre, the attempt to reduce human consciousness to a biological or psychological substrate — to treat the *pour-soi* as if it were simply a complicated *en-soi*, a mechanism operating according to deterministic laws — is not merely a philosophical error but a form of bad faith enacted at the social level: a collective conspiracy to deny the radical freedom of consciousness by recoding it as pathology.

The Cure, in this reading, is the institutionalisation of bad faith. It does not produce citizens who genuinely believe in the state's values; it produces citizens who are incapable of questioning them, because the very faculty of questioning — which requires the anguish of freedom — has been surgically suppressed. Those who have received the Cure are, in a precise Sartrean sense, no longer subjects: they are objects, beings whose existence is exhausted by their facticity, by what they are given to be. The horror Oliver generates around the Cure is thus not primarily physical but ontological: it is the horror of a human being reduced to a thing.

Beauvoir's analysis of oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is relevant here. Beauvoir distinguishes between forms of unfreedom that are imposed from without — by poverty, by physical coercion — and forms that operate by corrupting the very faculty of freedom itself, by producing individuals who cannot even conceive of their own liberation. The Cure belongs to this second, more radical form of oppression. It does not merely constrain what Lena can do; it aims to eliminate what she is — a free, self-determining consciousness capable of recognising and resisting the conditions of her own unfreedom.

7. Radical Choice and the Ethics of Resistance

The climax of *Delirium* turns on a moment of radical choice in Sartre's sense: a choice made without the support of prior values, without the guarantee of a good outcome, in full awareness of the risk involved and the absence of any external authority that could validate the decision. When Lena ultimately chooses to flee Portland with Alex rather than submit to the Cure, she is performing what Sartre calls the foundational act of authentic existence: the moment in which the individual, recognising that they cannot not choose, takes responsibility for the direction of their own life.

Oliver is careful not to sentimentalise this choice. Lena does not choose freedom because it is easy or because she is confident of success; she chooses it in full awareness that she may be sacrificing her remaining family connections, her safety, her future as the state has prescribed it, and possibly her life. The novel registers the weight of these losses with genuine seriousness: Lena's grief for Grace, the small niece she is leaving behind; her conflicted love for her aunt and uncle, who have shaped her within the terms of the ideology even as they have cared for her genuinely; her anguish at the betrayal of her friend Hana. These are not obstacles to be overcome but constitutive elements of the choice itself.

This is what distinguishes Oliver's treatment from simpler narratives of teenage rebellion. The choice Lena makes is not against her society in the name of an obvious



alternative good; it is a choice made in the condition of genuine existentialist anguish, in which she has no guarantees and no stable ground beneath her feet. Sartre's famous formulation — that we are "condemned to be free" — captures the quality of this moment: freedom is not a gift but an obligation, not a liberation from anxiety but the very source of it. Lena chooses not because choosing feels good but because she has recognised that she cannot, in good faith, refuse to choose.

Beauvoir's emphasis on the social dimension of freedom enriches this reading. Lena's choice is not merely personal; it is implicitly political. In choosing to join the resistance, she is choosing not just for herself but for the principle of freedom — affirming, in Beauvoir's terms, that the liberation of consciousness is not a private achievement but a social one, dependent on and contributing to the liberation of others. The novel ends before this political dimension is fully developed — that work is left for the sequels — but the groundwork is clearly laid in Lena's decision.

8. Lena's Mother and the Theme of Radical Freedom

One of the novel's most powerful existentialist threads concerns Lena's mother, Annabel, whose story is gradually revealed across the narrative. Annabel has been subjected to the Cure multiple times, in response to her persistent failure to lose the capacity for love. The official account, which Lena has internalised, is that her mother's eventual suicide is proof of love's destructive power. The novel progressively destabilises this account, suggesting that what the repeated procedures failed to extinguish was not a disease but the irreducible freedom of a particular consciousness — a self that refused, even under sustained assault, to be reduced to a compliant object.

In existentialist terms, Annabel represents something close to the limit-case of authentic resistance: a consciousness that maintains its own freedom under conditions designed specifically to destroy it. The horror of her situation is that the state has not simply forbidden her to love but has attempted, through medical technology, to eliminate her capacity to do so at the neurological level — to reach into the substance of consciousness itself and reshape it. That she continues to love, continues to resist, even after repeated procedures, suggests that consciousness — the *pour-soi* — is more recalcitrant than the state's ideology of control can accommodate.

This thread in the novel engages with a question that is central to existentialist ethics: what are the limits of the state's power over individual consciousness, and what resources does consciousness have against the systematic assault on its freedom? Oliver does not offer a triumphalist answer. Annabel's resistance comes at an enormous cost — to herself and to her daughter — and the novel does not present her as a straightforwardly heroic figure. But it does insist that her resistance is meaningful, that the freedom she preserves has value even in the absence of any external validation of that value. This is precisely the Sartrean position: freedom creates its own value, and the refusal of bad faith is significant regardless of its consequences.



9. Surveillance, the Panopticon, and the Politics of Visibility

Oliver's imagined society employs an extensive apparatus of surveillance: the Regulators who patrol the streets at night; the anonymous informants who report uncured behaviour to the authorities; the mandatory evaluations that assess citizens' emotional and ideological conformity; the regulated communication systems that minimise unmonitored contact between citizens. The pervasiveness of this surveillance apparatus serves, as Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon suggests, to produce self-surveillance: citizens regulate their own behaviour in response to the possibility, rather than the certainty, of being observed.

This apparatus has a specific existentialist resonance. For Sartre, the experience of shame — the paradigmatic experience of being seen by the Other — reveals the power of the gaze to objectify consciousness, to fix it in a particular identity that it cannot simply choose to abandon. The society of *Delirium* has institutionalised this power of the gaze: the state's surveillance apparatus functions as a permanent, anonymous gaze before which every citizen is perpetually exposed. The result is what Sartre calls seriality: individuals related to one another not as free subjects engaged in genuine intersubjective encounter, but as isolated atoms each occupied with managing their self-presentation before the anonymous collective gaze.

Lena's gradual entry into a world of genuine intersubjective relations — first with Alex, then with the community of the Wilds — represents a movement away from seriality and toward what Sartre, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), calls the fused group: a community of individuals who, through a shared act of resistance, constitute themselves as genuine collective subjects. The resistance network that Alex reveals to Lena has precisely this character: it is not merely a collection of individuals who share an interest in survival, but a community defined by the shared affirmation of freedom against the system that denies it.

10. Conclusion: *Delirium* as Existentialist Allegory for Contemporary America

Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* is, on its surface, a dystopian romance for young adults. But its philosophical depth and its engagement with questions of freedom, authenticity, bad faith, and resistance situate it within a serious literary and philosophical tradition. The novel's power derives not from the outrageousness of its central premise — the surgical elimination of love — but from the exactness with which that premise captures something true about the mechanisms through which modern societies produce conformity and suppress dissent: not through crude coercion alone but through the internalisation of ideology, the medicalisation of resistance, and the systematic colonisation of emotional and intellectual life.

Read through the lens of existentialist philosophy, *Delirium* reveals itself as a sustained meditation on the conditions of authentic selfhood under conditions of systemic oppression. Lena's journey from the bad faith of ideological conformism to the anguished freedom of resistance enacts, in narrative form, the existentialist argument that authentic existence is not a



comfortable state but a demanding one: a perpetual act of self-creation against the pressures of a world that offers the seductive comfort of pre-assigned identity in exchange for the surrender of freedom.

The novel also speaks to distinctively contemporary American anxieties. In a cultural moment characterised by debates about the medicalisation of mental health, the surveillance capacities of the digital state, the management of political dissent, and the ideological construction of normality, Oliver's dystopia feels less like speculation and more like extrapolation. The Cure is an extreme version of tendencies that are already visible in the present: the pharmaceutical management of mood and behaviour, the algorithmic curation of emotional life, the social sanctions against forms of feeling that exceed the bounds of the acceptable.

Existentialism, as a philosophical tradition, arose in response to a similar historical moment: the mid-twentieth century experience of totalitarianism, which demonstrated the capacity of modern states to subordinate individual consciousness entirely to collective ideological projects. The relevance of its concepts to Oliver's dystopia is thus not merely academic: it reflects the continuing urgency of the questions that existentialism posed about the conditions of human freedom. In this sense, *Delirium* belongs to the tradition of American dystopian fiction that uses speculative narrative to pose, with philosophical seriousness, the questions that the present most pressingly requires us to answer: What does it mean to be free? What do we owe to our own freedom, and to the freedom of others? And what are we prepared to risk in order to remain ourselves?

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