



Existential Dilemma in *Star Wars: Last Shot* Novel

by Daniel Jose Older

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Abstract

This study investigates the existential dilemmas faced by Han Solo in Daniel José Older's *Star Wars: Last Shot*, with a focus on how his struggles with identity, purpose, and responsibility as a father influence his actions and relationships. The research addresses the following questions: How do Han's existential conflicts manifest in the narrative? In what ways do these struggles impact his relationship with his son, Ben Solo? Using a descriptive qualitative approach, selected passages from the novel are analyzed to identify manifestations of existential conflict, drawing on Matthew Ratcliffe's theory of existential feelings to interpret Han's moods and decision-making. Key findings indicate that Han's lack of role models and emotional distance contribute to repeated mistakes and strained family bonds, particularly with Ben, whose sense of abandonment is illustrated through pivotal scenes. These unresolved issues are shown to play a significant role in Ben's eventual transformation into Kylo Ren. The study underscores the importance of emotional presence and self-awareness in parenting, suggesting that existential dilemmas can have lasting intergenerational effects. Data was collected through close textual analysis of the novel. Limitations include the focus on a single fictional character, indicating the need for comparative studies in other works or real-life contexts.

Keywords: *Existential Dilemma; Existential Feelings; Fatherhood*

Introduction

Existential dilemmas often arise when individuals confront questions about their own identity, purpose, and role within the family. This is especially relevant for modern fathers, who are frequently caught between traditional expectations of being a provider and the growing demand to be emotionally present for their children. Many fathers struggle with uncertainty about what it means to be a "good father," a challenge that can lead to emotional distance, overthinking, and strained relationships within the family.

Contemporary research has examined how these mixed feelings about fatherhood affect both fathers and their families. For example, studies show that when society does not offer clear examples of what a father should be, men might pull away emotionally or feel less involved with their children. Some fathers try to compensate for this by focusing on work, which can lead to less time at home and increased stress. Research also points out that children who do not receive enough emotional support from their fathers are more likely to struggle with behavior, self-esteem, and friendships. This not only highlights the importance of having an emotionally engaged dad, but also reveals how fathers themselves may feel conflicted or uncertain about how to fulfill their roles.

Despite a growing body of research, there remain significant gaps in our understanding. Most studies focus on the general challenges faced by fathers or the negative outcomes for children, with less attention paid to the internal, emotional experiences of fathers as they navigate these dilemmas. There is limited research on how existential anxiety specifically shapes a father's daily life, decision-making, and sense of self, especially within the context of modern literature. Additionally, while the impact of absent or emotionally distant fathers on children has been well documented, less attention has been paid to the psychological processes that lead fathers to withdraw or struggle with their roles in the first place.

Star Wars is a global cultural phenomenon that has profoundly shaped how audiences understand themes of family, identity, and legacy. Across its many films, novels, and related media, Star Wars repeatedly explores the dynamics between parents and children, particularly the influence of fathers on their children's destinies. The franchise's widespread popularity and multigenerational appeal make it a powerful lens for examining how popular culture reflects and shapes societal views of fatherhood and family relationships.

Daniel José Older's novel *Star Wars: Last Shot* centers on Han Solo, now a father to young Ben Solo, as he navigates new responsibilities and unresolved conflicts from his past. The story follows Han and his longtime friend Lando Calrissian as they confront a shared threat, while Han struggles with balancing his identity as a legendary smuggler and his duties as a husband and father. The novel provides a rich narrative context for exploring the complexities of fatherhood, legacy, and personal growth within the Star Wars universe.

This study aims to explore the existential dilemmas faced by Han Solo in *Star Wars: Last Shot*, focusing on how his struggles with identity, purpose, and responsibility as a father influence his actions and relationships. Specifically, the analysis investigates how Han Solo's existential conflicts manifest in the narrative, examines the ways in which these struggles impact his relationship with his son, Ben Solo, and considers how the cultural context of Star Wars enhances our understanding of fatherhood dilemmas.

Using a descriptive qualitative approach, selected passages from the novel are analyzed through the lens of Matthew Ratcliffe's theory of existential feelings. Key findings indicate that Han's lack of role models and emotional distance contribute

to repeated mistakes and strained family bonds, particularly with Ben, whose sense of abandonment is vividly illustrated in pivotal scenes such as Han's absence during family crises and his difficulty expressing affection. These unresolved issues are shown to play a significant role in Ben's eventual transformation into Kylo Ren.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the internal, emotional experiences of fatherhood as depicted in contemporary fiction, using Han Solo's character as a case study. By examining specific moments—such as Han's hesitation to connect with Ben and his internal monologues about fatherhood—the study provides new insights into how existential dilemmas are represented and how they affect both fathers and children across generations.

Data was collected through close textual analysis of the novel. Limitations include the focus on a single fictional character, suggesting that future research could compare similar themes in other works or real-life contexts to deepen our understanding of existential dilemmas in fatherhood.

Method

The data analysis for this study followed a systematic thematic analysis approach, which involved several key steps to ensure a rigorous and transparent process. First, the researcher became thoroughly familiar with the text of *Star Wars: Last Shot* by reading and re-reading selected passages relevant to Han Solo's experiences as a father. During this familiarization stage, initial impressions and potential patterns were noted. Next, the coding phase began, where segments of the text were labeled with codes that captured significant features related to existential dilemmas, such as moments of self-doubt, expressions of anxiety, or conflicts about identity and purpose.

These codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring patterns, such as "struggles with responsibility," "emotional distance," and "search for meaning." Once coding and categorization were complete, the researcher identified and refined overarching themes that encapsulated the essence of Han Solo's existential struggles. These themes were continually reviewed and revised to ensure they accurately represented the data. Finally, the interpretation phase involved relating these themes back to the research questions and theoretical framework, constructing a narrative that explained how existential dilemmas shaped Han's actions and relationships.

Thematic analysis was conducted using a six-step framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Specific criteria were established to identify "existential dilemmas" in the text. Passages were coded as existential dilemmas if they involved Han Solo confronting fundamental questions about his identity, purpose, or values, experiencing inner conflict about his role as a father, or grappling with feelings of meaninglessness, guilt, or anxiety.

Additionally, scenes depicting Han's struggle to reconcile his past with his current responsibilities, or moments where he expressed uncertainty about the future, were included. These criteria were informed by existential theory, which defines existential dilemmas as conflicts involving personal meaning, identity, and the search for authenticity or belonging.

To minimize bias in the analysis, several strategies were employed. The researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout the process to document assumptions and decision-making, helping to identify and mitigate personal biases. Coding was performed systematically, and the development of themes was guided by clear, objective criteria rather than preconceived notions. Where possible, peer review or consultation with other researchers was used to validate coding decisions and theme development. The use of direct quotes from the text, selected based on their representativeness of broader patterns, further enhanced the transparency and credibility of the findings.

Data saturation was achieved when no new codes or themes emerged from the analysis of additional passages, indicating that the full range of existential dilemmas relevant to the research questions had been captured. The selection of quotes for inclusion in the report followed specific criteria: quotes were chosen for their ability to clearly illustrate identified themes, their succinctness, and their representativeness of the overall data set. Only those excerpts that most effectively conveyed the essence of Han Solo's existential struggles were included, ensuring that the analysis remained focused and authentic to the patterns observed in the text.

By following these detailed procedures, the study ensured a robust and trustworthy analysis of existential dilemmas in *Star Wars: Last Shot*, providing valuable insights into the emotional complexities of fatherhood as depicted in contemporary fiction.

Results & Discussion

Han Solo's Existential Dilemma

Han Solo's existential dilemma in *Star Wars: Last Shot* is rooted in the tension between his adventurous past and his new responsibilities as a father and husband. The novel opens with Han gazing at his sleeping son, Ben, feeling both hope and profound uncertainty about his ability to parent: "Han glanced at the small sleeping form of his son... The boy had seemed to light up the whole world when he'd first arrived: the simple, impossible sliver of hope amid so much death and destruction" (Older, 2018, p. 17). This moment encapsulates Han's struggle to reconcile his identity as a battle-hardened smuggler with the emotional demands of fatherhood. According to Ratcliffe's theory of existential feelings, such moments of vulnerability mark a shift in Han's "sense of reality"—he is no longer just a fighter but is now confronted with the unfamiliar terrain of emotional openness and responsibility.

Han's sense of inadequacy is compounded by the absence of positive role models in his own childhood. Abandoned by his parents and forced to survive alone on Corellia, Han internalizes a belief that he is ill-equipped for fatherhood: "He wasn't meant to be a dad" (Older, 2018, p. 43). This lack of guidance echoes findings in psychological research, which show that fathers without supportive models often feel lost and disconnected from their families (Palkovitz, 2002).

The narrative further explores Han's dilemma as he is torn between his duty to his family and the call to adventure. When faced with a mission from Lando, Han debates whether to stay or go, ultimately rationalizing that remaining at home would not necessarily make him a better father: "She really did understand that he needed to go... but it didn't mean he was suddenly going to be a good father either" (Older, 2018, p. 43). This internal conflict is a recurring theme, reflecting Ratcliffe's notion that existential feelings shape one's sense of possibility and agency. Han's guilt and self-doubt are not easily resolved, and his struggle mirrors broader cultural anxieties about masculinity—specifically, the challenge of balancing traditional roles as protector and provider with the modern expectation of emotional presence (Lamb, 2010).

Han's existential dilemma extends beyond fatherhood to his role as a husband. He admits, "Maybe he should add being a husband next to being a good father on the list of things Han didn't know what to do" (Older, 2018, p. 98). This recognition highlights the interconnectedness of his struggles and the pervasive sense of inadequacy that defines his self-concept.

The conflict between Han's love for adventure and his attachment to family is poignantly expressed: "The world had almost collapsed around Han once again... he'd loved almost every minute. Except the ones when he really thought he was going to die. But also: He had missed Leia deeply" (Older, 2018, p. 400). Han's oscillation between the thrill of adventure and the comfort of family underscores the complexity of his existential predicament. He feels competent and alive in danger, yet incomplete without his loved ones—a tension that is intensified by the science fiction genre's emphasis on high-stakes action and personal transformation.

Han's guilt is further illustrated when he reflects, "It feels right being out here, but it feels so wrong that it feels right. Then I just want, no, I need to be back with you and Ben... and I feel like nothing I do is right" (Older, 2018, p. 400). This cyclical pattern of longing and dissatisfaction exemplifies Ratcliffe's idea that existential feelings can render familiar roles—father, husband, hero—strange and difficult to inhabit.

Impact of Existential Dilemma on Han Solo

Han's existential struggles have tangible effects on his emotional well-being and his relationships. He is often anxious and uncertain, making repeated mistakes as a parent. For instance, after buying Ben a toy blaster and then taking it away, Han is left feeling inadequate: "He brought Ben a play blaster... took it away and the boy wouldn't stop crying... nothing he did was right" (Older, 2018, p. 42). This sense of failure is compounded by his lack of a paternal model, as Leia gently reminds him: "You didn't exactly have any good models of fatherhood growing up... It takes time." Han's response—"I guess not"—reveals both his awareness of this deficit and his ongoing struggle to overcome it.

The intergenerational impact of Han's existential dilemma is significant. Han's emotional distance and self-doubt contribute to Ben's feelings of abandonment, making him vulnerable to anger and manipulation. This dynamic is consistent with research on father absence, which links emotional unavailability to negative outcomes in children (Lamb, 2010; Palkovitz, 2002). In the broader Star Wars narrative, Ben's sense of rejection ultimately leads him down the path to becoming Kylo Ren, illustrating how unresolved existential struggles can echo across generations.

Throughout the novel, Han's character is marked by both resistance to and gradual acceptance of his new roles. While he never fully resolves his existential anxieties, he demonstrates growth by continuing to try, even in the face of repeated setbacks. Leia's reassurance—"No one knows how to be a parent before they are one... But you try. And when you fail, then you figure out a better way. That's what it is" (Older, 2018, p. 401)—serves as a turning point, validating Han's efforts and fostering a sense of self-acceptance.

Nonetheless, the lasting effects of Han's emotional struggles are evident in Ben's eventual transformation. The narrative suggests that while individual growth is possible, unresolved existential dilemmas can have profound and lasting consequences for future generations.

Comparison with Other Works and Cultural Context

Han's journey resonates with themes found in other literary explorations of fatherhood, such as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, who also grapple with the pressures of providing for and emotionally supporting their families. However, the science fiction setting of Star Wars amplifies these dilemmas, placing them against a backdrop of galactic conflict and shifting moral landscapes. This genre context allows for heightened exploration of existential themes, as characters must navigate not only personal but also cosmic uncertainties.

Star Wars, as a cultural phenomenon, reflects and shapes anxieties about masculinity, fatherhood, and legacy. Han Solo's struggles are emblematic of broader societal questions: What does it mean to be a man, a father, or a hero in a changing world? The franchise's multigenerational appeal underscores the universality of

these questions, inviting audiences to reflect on their own experiences of uncertainty and growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Han Solo's existential dilemma in *Star Wars: Last Shot* is profoundly shaped by his struggle to balance his adventurous past with the new responsibilities of fatherhood and marriage. By applying Matthew Ratcliffe's theory of existential feelings, the analysis reveals how Han's inner moods—such as vulnerability, guilt, and doubt—directly influence his self-perception and his roles within the family. Han's lack of positive role models and discomfort with emotional openness make it difficult for him to adapt, leading to repeated mistakes and a persistent sense of inadequacy as both a father and a husband. These unresolved internal conflicts have a lasting impact not only on Han himself but also on his son, Ben Solo, whose feelings of abandonment and rejection ultimately make him vulnerable to anger and manipulation, culminating in his transformation into Kylo Ren. This highlights how a parent's unresolved existential struggles can profoundly affect the next generation.

This research contributes to literary criticism by demonstrating how existential theory can deepen our understanding of character psychology in popular fiction, particularly within the science fiction genre. It also bridges literary analysis and existential psychology, showing how fictional narratives can illuminate real psychological phenomena such as identity crisis and intergenerational trauma. The findings underscore the important role of popular culture in both reflecting and shaping societal understandings of masculinity, parenting, and emotional vulnerability. Moreover, the approach used here—integrating existential theory with close textual analysis—can be effectively applied to other science fiction works, providing a framework for examining how existential dilemmas are represented and resonate with audiences. Analyzing a fictional character like Han Solo also demonstrates the effectiveness of using literature to explore real psychological themes, making complex concepts more accessible and relatable. The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining existential psychology with literary and cultural analysis in a science fiction context.

For future research, it is recommended to explore existential dilemmas in a wider range of literary works or to compare the experiences of different characters and family backgrounds. Further studies could also examine how existential feelings influence other family members, such as mothers or siblings, and how support systems might help ease these struggles. While this study is limited by its focus on a single fictional character, expanding the scope could provide a richer understanding of how existential issues shape family relationships and personal growth in both literature and real life.

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