

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Greiner (2021) explains that the historical genre of a film can be defined as an aesthetic-narrative construction that not only establishes the film's relationship to historical events or periods but also serves as a formal criterion for distinguishing historical films from other genres. Furthermore, his definition emphasizes the dual role of the historical genre in shaping how history is represented and perceived in film while providing a framework for categorizing films within the genre. Historical fiction is a genre that blends imaginative storytelling with real historical settings, events, and figures. It provides a lens through which audiences can explore the human condition within specific historical contexts, often revealing the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of a particular era. By situating characters and narratives in historically accurate settings, historical fiction not only entertains but also interrogates the complexities of the past, offering insights into how individuals and societies navigated pivotal moments in history. This genre serves as a bridge between history and literature, allowing for the dramatization of historical truths while exploring universal themes like identity, morality, and resilience.

Historical fiction set in the aftermath of World War I often reflects the cultural trauma and disillusionment experienced by a generation grappling with the collapse of traditional values. Fussell (1975) argues that the war created a cultural rift, obliterating Romantic ideals of honour and heroism that had previously defined conflict. This disillusionment is captured in historical fiction, where characters frequently confront a moral vacuum and the breakdown of societal norms. By dramatizing these struggles, such narratives illuminate the existential crises that defined the post-war period.



Moreover, historical fiction often employs nihilism to critique the societal structures that contributed to the war and its aftermath. Luckhurst (2008) notes that narratives from this era frequently depict characters rejecting conventional morality, instead adopting pragmatic or self-serving approaches to survival. This shift mirrors the broader cultural disillusionment with institutions such as religion, nationalism, and political authority, which had failed to prevent the catastrophic destruction of the war.

The study of nihilism within literature serves as a vital exploration of the ways in which individuals grapple with meaninglessness, alienation, and freedom. Literary texts such as Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) and Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) depict characters confronting life's futility and forging their paths in a world devoid of inherent order. Through the intimate experiences of such protagonists, literature transcends abstraction, offering tangible reflections of existential despair and resilience. These narratives not only enrich philosophical understanding but also provide readers with tools for navigating their existential dilemmas.

In such works, nihilism is often depicted as both a personal and collective crisis. Characters are shown navigating a world that no longer offers clear moral or existential guidance, reflecting the broader cultural disillusionment of the time. For example, narratives may explore the psychological toll of war on soldiers returning home, their disconnection from civilian life, and their struggle to reconcile their experiences with the expectations of a society eager to move forward. These portrayals highlight the tension between despair and resilience, as individuals confront the void left by the collapse of traditional meaning.

The television series *Peaky Blinders* exemplifies this approach, using its post-World War I setting and historical genre to delve into the nihilistic worldview of its protagonist, Thomas Shelby. Thomas led a criminal gang, Peaky Blinders, a fictional representation of its authentic criminal gang carrying the same name, originated in Birmingham's Small Heath, with their earliest documented activity appearing in a newspaper in March 1890 (Dilillo, 2022). The report described a

violent attack on a man by a gang called the "Peaky Blinders." Known for their brutality and criminal activities, the gang sought recognition and aimed to have their actions publicized in national newspapers. A former soldier haunted by his experiences in the trenches, Thomas embodies the existential struggles of a generation disillusioned by the war. His rejection of traditional morality and relentless pursuit of power reflect the nihilistic mindset that emerged in the wake of the war. However, the series also explores moments of transformation, where Thomas begins to confront the limitations of his power, thus creating nihilistic perspective and seeking renewal, illustrating the genre's ability to engage with complex philosophical themes.

Peaky Blinders, created by Steven Knight, is a critically acclaimed British television series set in post-World War I Birmingham, England. Premiering in 2013, the series chronicles the rise of the Peaky Blinders gang, led by the enigmatic and morally ambiguous Thomas Shelby. The story revolves around the struggles and journey as Thomas Shelby, the main protagonist led the Peaky Blinders to its succession as a part of greater society. The show combines historical accuracy with creative liberties throughout 6 seasons consisted of 6 episodes each, blending its early 20th-century setting with modern music and contemporary narrative techniques. Praised for its innovative storytelling and compelling performances, *Peaky Blinders* has earned numerous accolades, including BAFTA awards, and has been hailed as a landmark in television drama. Its exploration of complex themes such as trauma, power, family, and morality position it as a culturally and intellectually significant work.

Despite his trauma and other psychological effects of war to his character, Thomas Shelby started his journey towards nihilism from the loss of his beloved wife, Grace Shelby. Thus, this study will focus on Season 3 up to the last of Season 6 of the *Peaky Blinders* series, where the narrative unveils the devastating loss of Thomas Shelby's wife, Grace Shelby. This tragic and unforeseen event profoundly influences the protagonist's moral framework and philosophical outlook, significantly shaping his approach to life and decision-making. His disillusionment

with aspects of morality and traditional values becomes a driving force behind the nihilistic morality perspective he adopts throughout the series.

Film, as one of the most powerful and widely consumed forms of audio-visual communication, serves as a unique and dynamic platform for storytelling. In recent years, film analysis has gained recognition as an essential approach within literary studies. Films, much like novels and plays, utilize narrative, character development, symbolism, and thematic exploration to convey stories and ideas, making them a rich field for critical analysis. Scholars like Bordwell and Thompson (2019) argue in *Film Art: An Introduction* that film functions as a form of "visual literature," utilizing its own distinct language—composed of images, sounds, and symbols—to engage with cultural and social issues. This perspective positions film not merely as a form of entertainment, but as a serious art form that reflects and influences society. Similarly, Geiger and Rutsky (2017) in *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader* emphasize the importance of approaching film as literature, suggesting that the narrative techniques employed in cinema deserve the same level of scholarly inquiry as traditional literary texts. Analysing films allows scholars to explore how visual elements, storytelling, and character development contribute to broader cultural discourses, making it a critical tool for understanding modern social dynamics, including gender and identity. Unlike static forms of art, films possess the distinct advantage of freedom in motion, constantly evolving to reflect new societal realities (Boggs, 2000). Over the centuries, the development of cinematography has transformed film into not only a form of entertainment but also a vehicle for ideological messaging and cultural propaganda. The narratives embedded in films often carry subliminal messages that challenge or reinforce cultural norms and values, making them a reflection of and an influence on the society in which they are created.

Cinema as one of the forms of literature, serves as a potent medium for philosophical engagement, uniquely capable of dramatizing existential themes through visual and auditory storytelling. As argued by Plantinga and Smith (1999), film operates as a modern form of literature, merging narrative and imagery to

evoke complex emotional and intellectual responses. Movies and television series often reflect philosophical concerns, with existentialism and nihilism appearing as recurring motifs in narratives that emphasize character development, moral ambiguity, and existential crises. The cinematic medium, with its ability to intertwine dialogue, imagery, and atmosphere, offers an immersive avenue for grappling with life's profound questions. Television series like *Peaky Blinders* exemplify this potential, using the lens of historical drama to explore timeless existential themes.

The study of existential nihilism within literature serves as a vital exploration of the ways in which individuals grapple with meaninglessness, alienation, and freedom. Literary texts such as Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) and Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) depict characters confronting life's futility and forging their paths in a world devoid of inherent order. Through the intimate experiences of such protagonists, literature transcends abstraction, offering tangible reflections of existential despair and resilience. These narratives not only enrich philosophical understanding but also provide readers with tools for navigating their existential dilemmas. Television series like *Peaky Blinders* exemplify this potential, using the lens of historical drama to explore existential themes.

Within the layered narrative of *Peaky Blinders*, nihilism emerges as a central theme, particularly in the character of Thomas Shelby. Shelby, a war veteran deeply scarred by the horrors of trench warfare, exemplifies Nietzsche's concept of nihilism as the recognition of life's inherent meaninglessness in the wake of moral and societal collapse. His actions throughout the series reflect a tension between his desire to impose order on chaos—through the pursuit of power and wealth—and his awareness of the ultimate futility of these efforts. Shelby's arc mirrors the existential struggle described by Camus (1942), as he confronts the absurdity of existence and oscillates between despair and defiance. His alienation from others, despite his outward success, underscores the isolating nature of his existential plight.

Existentialism concept revolve around the philosophy of human existence. According to Sartre (2007), "existence precedes essence" for human beings, meaning that individuals are not born with a predefined purpose or "essence." Instead, they define themselves through their actions and choices over the course of their lives. Consciousness is inherently free and not constrained by predetermined definitions or natural limitations. Sartre emphasized that humans are "condemned to be free" because they face countless choices in creating meaning for their lives. From an existentialist perspective, the world is understood subjectively, as objective meaning is absent. Through awareness, free will, and personal responsibility, individuals create subjective meaning. Objective meaning, if it exists, is only valid insofar as it is beneficial and remains a continuously evolving concept rather than a fixed truth.

Nietzsche's philosophy complements this view by emphasizing individualism and the importance of self-discovery. Nietzsche argued that individuals must rise above external influences and harness their inherent will to power to achieve inner peace and authenticity. This perspective aligns with the existential challenge of confronting life's inherent meaninglessness while striving to create purpose and value.

The concept of nihilism has also evolved significantly, particularly as discussed by Donald A. Crosby. According to Crosby (1988), nihilism is not a complete or definitive description of the human condition but is rooted in historically conditioned assumptions and ideas subject to critical examination. In his book *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, Crosby provides a clearer depiction of nihilism in modern life, highlighting its complexity and the ways it shapes human perspectives.

Nihilism is deeply intertwined with human personality, and analysing it often requires insights from psychology. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach is essential for understanding the phenomenon. Alfred Adler's individual psychology offers a valuable framework for exploring how nihilism can arise from personal psychological struggles. Adler, a prominent psychotherapist and founder of

individual psychology, proposed that human behaviour is driven by a quest for power and superiority. He simplified motivation to a single drive: striving for excellence or success. According to Adler, all individuals begin life with feelings of physical inadequacy, which foster a sense of inferiority and compel them to strive for achievement. Psychologically unhealthy individuals focus on personal greatness, while mentally healthy individuals seek success that benefits humanity. Regardless of the motivation, Adler asserted that a person's ultimate goal governs all their actions (Feist & Feist, 2010).

Based on the explanation above, the researcher hypothesizes that the character Thomas Shelby embodies elements of moral nihilism. This study examines how nihilism is depicted through Thomas Shelby, focusing on its types, its effects, and the ways in which it is internalized within his character.

The researcher identified several previous studies related to this research. First, Satrio Jagad's (2017) study, *Moral Nihilism as Reflected by Joker in The Dark Knight Movie*, examines the portrayal of moral nihilism through the character of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. The research focuses on the Joker as a moral nihilist. Second, Kamilatun Nisa's (2018) research, *Nihilism Destructive Effects in Life Reflected in Ernest Hemingway's Short Story Entitled A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, analyzes the destructive effects of nihilism in Hemingway's story, using a genetic structuralism approach.

Third, Chaima and Maroua's (2020) study explores absurdism and moral decay in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, focusing on how the novel portrays images of absurdism and nihilism. Fourth, Tembo, Mutasa, and Maganga's (2019) research, *Existential Nihilism in Ignatius Mabasa's Poetry: Implications for the Development of the Human Factor*, investigates how Mabasa's poetry incorporates existential nihilism as a way of life. Fifth, Chigbu, Umezurike, and Onunkwo's (2018) study, *From Un-concealment to Nothingness: Nihilism in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House and Zainabu Jallo's Onions Make Us Cry*, explores the existential development in both plays, culminating in the acceptance of nihilism.

The researcher analyzed the character of Thomas Shelby using two theoretical frameworks: moral nihilism and Adler's concepts of individual psychology. Based on the existing literature, there is no prior research that specifically examines the portrayal of moral nihilism in *Peaky Blinders*. This study offers a unique perspective by exploring how nihilism is depicted through Thomas Shelby's character in the series. By applying Adler's concept of individual psychology as a secondary theoretical framework, this research investigates Thomas Shelby's individual type as a nihilist, contributing to a deeper understanding of his portrayal.

Aiming to analyse various elements of the film that contribute to the overall portrayal of the nihilism issue, the researcher utilized Boggs' concept of *The Art of Watching Films*. Boggs highlights numerous aspects of film, each with its own function in conveying the director's intended message. The analysis focuses on both visual and verbal elements of the film. Visual elements include pictures, photographs, or scenes designed to create a particular effect or to convey meaning (Cambridge Dictionary). Verbal elements, on the other hand, refer to written or spoken language, as defined by Nelson and Shaw and cited in Dewitri and Marantika (2023). Since films are a medium rich in both visual and verbal elements, Boggs' approach to film studies provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how these elements work together to explore themes like nihilism.

This study analyses the verbal and visual elements of *Peaky Blinders* using Boggs' *Art of Watching Films* to identify the states of nihilism portrayed in the series. The research focuses on examining the protagonist's moral nihilism, as well as exploring how psychological aspects influence his life. Given the limited research addressing nihilism in *Peaky Blinders*, this study aims to shed light on this theme and contribute to the field, offering insights that may be valuable to other literature enthusiasts.

1.2 Research Questions

The research will be answering the two following questions:

1. How does Thomas Shelby's character in *Peaky Blinders* experience moral nihilism?
2. What effects of moral nihilism are shown in Thomas Shelby's personality in *Peaky Blinders*?

1.3 Purpose of The Study

This study aims to investigate how Thomas Shelby's character in *Peaky Blinders* represents and experiences moral nihilism, while also examining its impact on his personality and life choices. By analysing these elements, the research seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the character's psychological and philosophical development, shedding light on how nihilism influences the social life of a returning war veteran morality.

1.4 Scope of The Study

The scope of this study focuses on the exploration of moral nihilism through the character of Thomas Shelby in the television series *Peaky Blinders*. By analyzing verbal and visual elements, specifically from seasons 3 to 6, the study investigates how Shelby's internalize and experience the core tenets of nihilism to see the psychological effects on his personality. The research will examine the series' verbal elements, characters, and visual elements, as well as literature review on the relevant topics of Nihilism and psychological aspects.

1.5 Limitations of The Study

This research focuses on analyzing the nihilism depicted in the character of Thomas Shelby in specific episodes of various seasons from the series *Peaky Blinders* (2013). Thomas Shelby demonstrates aspects of both existential and moral nihilism. Consequently, this study narrows its scope to these two forms of nihilism, with a primary focus on moral nihilism, among the five types outlined by Crosby. The analysis is confined to Thomas Shelby's character and the impact of moral nihilism on his development throughout the story.

To examine the impact of nihilism on the main character, Adler's concept serves as a secondary theoretical framework in this research. However, the study does not

delve into the defense mechanisms of *Peaky Blinders* (2013) characters as veteran soldiers coping with PTSD, as this is outside the primary focus of the analysis.

The researcher employs Boggs' concept from *The Art of Watching Films*, using selected moments from the series to illustrate how visual elements contribute to understanding and analyzing the portrayal of moral nihilism. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this research seeks to offer a deeper insight into how Thomas Shelby's moral nihilism is depicted in the series and the resulting impact on his character.

1.6 Significance of The Study

The result of this research can provide valuable insights to readers and audiences, serving as a significant reference point for those engaged in nihilism philosophy branch, media studies, and literary analysis. By delving into the complex portrayal of Thomas Shelby's character, this study sheds light on the multifaceted aspects of moral nihilism as depicted in *Peaky Blinders*. It encourages viewers to adopt a more discerning approach to historical fiction narratives, viewing them not solely as sources of historical entertainment but also as platforms for philosophical reflection. Through the lens of nihilist criticism, this research underscores the importance of scrutinizing characters' internal morality struggles with meaning, identity, and despair, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how nihilistic themes are interwoven with trauma and cultural disillusionment. Moreover, the findings of this study serve as a catalyst for further exploration and discourse within the realms of moral nihilism, contemporary literature analysis, and modern storytelling, fostering a more nuanced appreciation of the complexities of human existence and the search for purpose in the life of returning war veteran.