



# **From an Existential Vacuum to a Tragic Optimism: The Search for Meaning and Presence of God in Modern Literature**

*Barbara A. Heavilin, Charles W. Heavilin*

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From an Existential Vacuum to a Tragic Optimism: The Search for Meaning and the Presence of God in Modern Literature employs a new theoretical approach to critical analysis: Victor Frankl's logotherapy (from the Greek "logos" for word or reason and often related to divine wisdom), a unique form of existentialism. On the basis of his observations of the power of human endurance and transcendence - the discovery of meaning even in the midst of harrowing circumstances - Frankl diagnoses the malaise of the current age as an "existential vacuum," a sense of meaninglessness. He suggests that a panacea for this malaise may be found in creativity, love, and moral choice - even when faced with suffering or death. He affirms that human beings may transcend this vacuum, discover meaning - or even ultimate meaning to be found in Ultimate Being, or God - and live with a sense of "tragic optimism." This book observes both the current age's "existential vacuum" - a malaise of emptiness and meaninglessness - and its longing for meaning and God as reflected in three genres: poetry, novel, and fantasy. Part I, "Reflections of God in the Poetic Vision," addresses "tragic optimism" - hope when there seems to be no reason for hope - in poems by William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Part II, "American Angst: Emptiness and Possibility in John Steinbeck's Major Novels," presents a study of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent* - novels that together form a uniquely American epic trilogy. Together these novels tell the story of a nation's avarice, corruption, and betrayal offset by magnanimity, heroism, and hospitality. Set against the backdrop of Frankl's ways of finding meaning and fulfillment - all obliquely implying the felt presence of God - the characters are representative Every Americans, in whose lives are reflected a nation's worst vices and best hopes. Part III, "A Tragic Optimism: The Triumph of Good in the Fantasy Worlds of Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling," defines fantasy and science fiction as mirrors with which to view reality. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*, and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series are considered in the light of Frankl's logotherapy - providing paths to meaning and the ultimate meaning to be found in God. In a postmodern, fragmented age, these works affirm a continuing vision of God (often through His felt absence) and, also, a most human yearning for meaning even when there seems to be none - providing, as Frankl maintains, "a tragic optimism."

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