

A Study of Alex Rose's Self Actualisation in *The Life List* (2025) Using Kaufman's Theory

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Abstract

This article examines Alex Rose's self-actualisation journey in Adam Brooks's film *The Life List* (2025) through Scott Barry Kaufman's contemporary theory of human needs. The study focuses on how Alex's internal conflicts create tensions between security needs and growth needs, and how her development later moves toward transcendence. Using a qualitative film analysis and close reading method, the data were taken from selected dialogues, scenes, subtitles, and narrative events that reveal Alex's psychological development. The analysis shows that Alex's dependence on her mother, fear of leaving her comfort zone, identity crisis after learning the truth about her biological father, disappointment with Johnny, and conflict with Garrett function as turning points in her movement toward self-understanding. These conflicts reveal unstable security needs, especially safety, connection, and self-esteem, while gradually opening the possibility of growth through exploration, love, and purpose. The article further finds that Alex's journey does not end in personal fulfilment. Her growth develops toward transcendence when she shares her mother's messages with her brothers, reconciles with Samuel, accepts grief, and forms a broader community of love and meaning. The film therefore represents self-actualisation as a dynamic, relational, and non-linear process rather than a final achievement.

Keywords: self-actualisation; transcendence; internal conflict

INTRODUCTION

Film has increasingly become a productive object of literary and cultural analysis because it presents character, conflict, and psychological development through narrative, dialogue, visual situation, and performance. Like literary texts, films can represent the inner life of characters and invite viewers to interpret emotional experiences as part of a broader human condition. Studies of film in literary contexts therefore do not only examine plot, genre, or entertainment value, but also the ways in which narrative constructs identity, desire, grief, and personal transformation (Dwi Hutami & Max, 2023; Leite et al., 2021). This perspective is relevant to *The Life List* (2025), a romantic comedy-drama directed by Adam Brooks, because the film is centred on Alex Rose, a young woman who is forced to reconsider her life after the death of her mother and after receiving a childhood list of dreams that she must complete.

The Life List follows Alex as she faces grief, family secrets, romantic uncertainty, and the pressure to build a life that feels more honest to herself. The premise of completing a list of childhood dreams may initially seem simple, but the narrative gradually turns the list into a psychological instrument. It forces Alex to confront the distance between the life she has been living and the life she once imagined for herself. The film is therefore not only about completing

tasks, but also about the process of recognizing fear, dependency, avoidance, self-doubt, and the desire to be loved without losing the self. These aspects make the film suitable for a psychological reading of character development.

The concept of self-actualisation is useful for understanding Alex's development. In classical humanistic psychology, self-actualisation refers to the process of becoming fully oneself and realizing one's potential. However, contemporary scholarship has questioned the view that human needs develop in a fixed and hierarchical sequence. Kaufman (2018, 2020), in particular, revisits Maslow's theory and proposes the sailboat model of needs. In this model, psychological development is shaped by the interaction between security and growth. Security includes safety, connection, and self-esteem, while growth includes exploration, love, and purpose. Rather than describing self-actualisation as a final stage, Kaufman presents it as an ongoing and dynamic process that continues to be influenced by life events, relationships, emotions, and adversity.

Kaufman's framework is particularly appropriate for reading Alex Rose because the film does not portray her development as a clean movement from weakness to success. Alex grows while still grieving, doubting herself, longing for validation, and fearing rejection. Her security needs are repeatedly disrupted: she loses the emotional presence of her mother, questions her belonging in the family, and experiences disappointment in romantic and biological relationships. At the same time, these disruptions push her toward growth. She explores uncomfortable truths, learns to choose a more authentic form of love, and finds purpose through teaching and meaningful relationships. Her journey shows that self-actualisation does not require the absence of insecurity; it develops through the negotiation between the need to feel safe and the need to move forward.

Another important dimension of the film is transcendence. For Kaufman (2020), self-actualisation can open into transcendence when personal growth moves beyond self-focus and becomes connected to meaning, love, contribution, and something larger than the individual. This idea is also connected to studies of meaning and well-being that emphasize relatedness, beneficence, and the capacity to move beyond narrow self-interest (Martela & Ryan, 2016; Wong, 2016). In *The Life List*, Alex's development does not end when she becomes more confident or finds romantic love. It continues when she learns to reinterpret her mother's love, share emotional healing with her brothers, reconcile with Samuel, and accept grief as part of a meaningful life. Thus, the film connects self-actualisation with relational healing and acceptance.

Previous studies on self-actualisation in literature and film have often focused on ambition, career development, moral growth, resilience, or the fulfilment of personal potential. Farid (2022), for example, examines self-actualisation through artistic ambition in *Tick, Tick... Boom!*, while Wicaksono (2024) discusses professional development and independence in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Fathurohman et al. (2023) emphasize interpersonal relationships and moral values in *12 Cerita Glen Anggara*, whereas Roselyn and Koiri (2025) discuss family relationships and life reflection in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*. Vidyarini (2021) analyses endurance and hope in *Rita Hayworth* and *The Shawshank Redemption*, and Putri et al. (2025) connect ambition, identity, and modern womanhood in *The Queen's Gambit*. These studies show that self-actualisation remains a relevant concept for character analysis, but they tend to understand it as achievement, aspiration, personal growth, or emotional resolution.

This article contributes to that discussion by focusing on the role of internal conflict as the force that drives self-actualisation and by extending the analysis toward transcendence. Instead of treating Alex's conflicts only as obstacles, this study reads them as psychological pressures that reveal her unmet needs and push her toward a more authentic life. The article asks two questions: first, how do Alex Rose's internal conflicts drive her movement toward self-actualisation in *The Life List*? Second, how does the film portray Alex's movement from self-actualisation toward transcendence? By answering these questions, this article argues that *The Life List* represents self-actualisation as a dynamic, non-linear, and relational process shaped by security, growth, and the capacity to move beyond personal fulfilment toward meaning, connection, and acceptance.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative film analysis method. The research design was interpretative because it aimed to understand the psychological development of a fictional character through selected narrative evidence rather than to measure data statistically. A psychological approach was applied to examine Alex Rose's inner conflicts, emotional responses, motivations, choices, and relationships as they are represented in the film. This approach is suitable because psychological readings of film can reveal how character development is shaped by inner experience, dialogue, and narrative context (Priyanti & Tustiawati, 2025).

The main source of data for this study was *The Life List* (2025) directed by Adam Brooks. The researcher rewatched the entire film several times to fully comprehend the story and to locate the scenes that are relevant to the psychological growth of Alex Rose. During this process, ten scenes that reflected security needs, growth needs, self-actualisation, and transcendence were initially identified. These scenes were then evaluated purposively based on their relevance to Kaufman's Sailboat model. After this evaluation, eight scenes that most clearly represented Alex Rose's progression toward self-actualisation were selected for detailed analysis, as presented in Table 1. Dialogues, subtitles, narrative events, and timings from selected scenes were used to create data, which have been analyzed from these scenes to provide analytical traceability.

The data collection process involved several stages. First, the film was watched closely to identify its overall narrative structure and Alex's major emotional turning points. Second, the dialogues and subtitles related to Alex's psychological development were noted. Third, the selected scenes were grouped according to Kaufman's sailboat model: security needs, growth needs, and the movement from self-actualisation toward transcendence. This process follows the logic of film analysis in which scenes, dialogue, and character behaviour become interpretative evidence for understanding narrative meaning (Leite et al., 2021; Masyitah et al., 2023).

The data were then analysed through close reading. The analysis first examined Alex's internal conflicts as tensions between the need to protect herself and the need to grow. It then interpreted the selected evidence through Kaufman's three security needs, namely safety, connection, and self-esteem, and three growth needs, namely exploration, love, and purpose. Finally, the study analysed the scenes that show Alex moving beyond personal fulfilment toward transcendence. The interpretation focused on meaning, relational healing, reconciliation, acceptance, and the way Alex's growth affects people around her.

RESULTS

The analysis produced three main findings. First, Alex Rose's internal conflicts functioned as the starting point of her movement toward self-actualisation. These conflicts were not merely emotional disturbances; they showed the instability of her security needs. Alex relied strongly on her mother for emotional safety, stayed close to familiar situations to avoid risk, questioned her identity after learning the truth about her father, felt rejected when Johnny did not appear, and realized that her relationship with Garrett required her to shrink parts of herself.

Each conflict exposed a tension between self-protection and the need to move toward a more truthful life.

Second, Alex's self-actualisation developed through the interaction between security and growth. Her safety need appeared in her tendency to remain in what felt familiar. Her connection need was shown through her desire to be accepted by her family and father figures. Her self-esteem need appeared in her negative self-perception and her need to feel capable. However, the film also showed the emergence of growth needs. Exploration appeared when Alex searched for Johnny despite fear. Love appeared when she chose a relationship with Brad that allowed her to be vulnerable and honest. Purpose appeared through her gradual recognition that teaching could become a meaningful role in her life.

Third, the film portrayed transcendence as a continuation of self-actualisation. Alex's development did not stop at self-recognition or personal happiness. It moved beyond the self when she shared her mother's DVDs with her brothers, reaccepted Samuel as her father, and participated in a final gathering that included family, friends, students, and Brad. These scenes showed that her growth had become relational. She did not simply become more confident; she learned to live with grief, preserve love, and create meaning with others.

Table 1. Selected narrative evidence and psychological categories in Alex Rose's development

No.	Scene / timestamp	Narrative evidence	Psychological category
1	Alex fears losing her mother (00:09:01-00:09:03)	Alex asks what she will do without her mother.	Connection and emotional security
2	Elizabeth says Alex has settled for what is safe (00:32:58-00:33:07)	Alex is confronted with her avoidance of risk and uncertainty.	Safety vs. exploration
3	Alex learns the truth about her father (00:45:50-00:46:13)	Alex questions who she is and whether she has been equally loved.	Connection and self-esteem
4	Johnny does not appear (01:31:57-01:33:04)	Alex feels rejected and realizes a stranger cannot fix her life.	Self-esteem and self-recognition
5	Alex confronts Garrett (01:36:02-01:37:03)	Alex says that her messy place, friends, and books are part of who she is.	Authenticity and love
6	Alex shares the DVDs with her brothers (01:43:25-01:44:52)	Her private grief becomes a space of family healing.	Transcendence

7	Alex calls Samuel Dad (01:44:53-01:45:17)	Alex accepts emotional fatherhood beyond biological certainty.	Acceptance and reconciliation
8	New Year gathering (01:54:33-01:56:34)	Alex is surrounded by family, friends, students, and Brad.	Meaning, belonging, and connection

Internal conflicts as the beginning of self-actualisation

Alex Rose's development begins with the loss of emotional certainty. The early scene in which Alex asks her mother, Elizabeth, what she will do without her reveals that her mother is not only a parent but also the centre of Alex's emotional security. In Kaufman's model, connection is part of the security system because people need to feel attached, accepted, and emotionally held before they can move toward healthier growth. Alex's question shows that she does not merely fear death; she fears the collapse of the emotional structure that has guided her life. This dependence does not make her weak in a simple sense. Rather, it indicates that her sense of safety has been organized around her mother's presence.

The list that Elizabeth leaves behind begins to disturb that dependence. When Elizabeth's recorded message tells Alex that she has been settling for what is safe, the film identifies one of Alex's deepest internal conflicts. Alex has chosen familiarity because it protects her from failure, rejection, and uncertainty. In Kaufman's terms, safety is necessary, but it becomes restrictive when it prevents movement toward exploration and purpose. The conflict therefore appears as a tension between security and growth. Alex wants emotional protection, but the life list repeatedly pushes her to enter situations that require risk. The list becomes a narrative device that turns her mother's absence into an active call toward growth.

The revelation about Alex's biological father intensifies this conflict. When Alex learns that Samuel is not her biological father, she asks who she is and wonders whether Samuel could have loved her the same way he loved her brothers. This moment is important because it shifts the conflict from grief to identity. The question is not only about family history; it is also about belonging and worth. Alex's connection need becomes unstable because she begins to doubt whether the family bond she trusted was real. Her self-esteem is also affected because she interprets the truth as possible evidence that she may have been less loved. In this sense, the film shows identity as relational: Alex's understanding of herself is deeply connected to how she believes she has been loved by others.

Alex's disappointment with Johnny further exposes the problem of external validation. After learning about her biological father, she hopes that meeting Johnny might fill the missing part of her identity. When he does not appear, she feels foolish and says that a stranger cannot

fix her life. The statement is painful but psychologically significant. It marks a shift from looking for completion outside the self to recognizing that validation from Johnny cannot become the basis of her worth. Kaufman's model helps clarify this movement. Alex's need for connection and self-esteem is real, but self-actualisation requires her to stop handing her sense of self to someone who is emotionally absent.

A similar realization occurs in her relationship with Garrett. Garrett represents comfort and stability, but he does not fully enter Alex's personal world. When Alex tells him that her messy place, friends, and books are part of who she is, she articulates a clearer sense of authenticity. This scene is one of the strongest signs of her movement toward self-actualisation because she recognizes that love should not require self-erasure. Alex has previously tried to remain acceptable, manageable, and safe, but here she refuses a relationship that cannot hold her whole self. Her internal conflict therefore produces growth: she moves from seeking approval to protecting her own truth.

Security and growth in Alex Rose's self-actualisation

Kaufman's sailboat model makes it possible to see that Alex's needs do not appear in a fixed order. Security and growth develop together, sometimes supporting each other and sometimes pulling Alex in different directions. The safety need is visible in Alex's tendency to choose what is predictable. She is not simply passive; she is trying to remain protected from emotional disruption. However, the film shows that excessive safety can produce stagnation. Elizabeth's message functions as a loving confrontation because it points out that Alex's safe choices have not allowed her to become herself.

Connection is the second security need that shapes Alex's development. At first, connection is fragile because Alex associates belonging with biological truth and romantic acceptance. The secret about Johnny makes her doubt Samuel's love, and Garrett's emotional distance makes her question whether she is accepted as a whole person. Yet connection is gradually repaired when Alex recognizes that family is built not only by blood but also by care, memory, and presence. Her return to Samuel as Dad is not a denial of biological truth. It is a more mature acceptance that emotional fatherhood can be meaningful even when the family story is complicated.

Self-esteem is also unsettled throughout Alex's journey. The film shows Alex describing herself through self-loathing and failure. She interprets disappointment as evidence that

something is wrong with her. This fragile self-esteem is important because it explains why she looks for reassurance from others. When Elizabeth's message tells her that she can become a great teacher, Alex receives a different mirror of herself. The message does not solve her insecurity, but it helps her imagine herself as capable and valuable. Her self-esteem begins to shift from external approval to a more internal recognition of her potential.

Growth, however, is what moves Alex forward. Exploration appears when she decides to search for Johnny. This decision is not presented as fearless. Alex panics when the meeting becomes real and almost withdraws. The scene matters because it shows exploration as something that can coexist with fear. Alex does not wait until she is fully secure before she moves; she moves while still afraid. This supports Kaufman's view that self-actualisation is dynamic rather than linear. People do not finish security and then begin growth. They often grow while trying to repair security.

Love appears as a growth need when Alex begins to distinguish between attachment and authentic love. Her relationship with Garrett provides a form of social stability, but it does not allow her to be fully herself. By contrast, her relationship with Brad develops through honesty, vulnerability, and emotional recognition. When Alex tells Brad that he helps her become her best self, the statement suggests that love has become a space for growth rather than a requirement to perform acceptability. Love in this sense is not merely romantic completion. It is a relational condition in which Alex can integrate the messy, grieving, creative, uncertain, and hopeful parts of herself.

Purpose appears through Alex's growing relationship with teaching. The life list initially feels like an obligation, but teaching turns it into a source of meaning. Alex begins to understand that her life is not only about recovering what she lost or completing what her mother assigned. She can also affect others. Her care for her student and her recognition of herself as a teacher show purpose as a movement beyond self-repair. This does not yet equal transcendence, but it prepares the ground for it because purpose helps Alex see that her growth can matter in the lives of others.

From self-actualisation to transcendence

Alex's self-actualisation becomes visible when she can name what is true about herself, choose love without self-erasure, and recognize a meaningful role in teaching. Yet the film does not end the journey there. It moves Alex toward transcendence, which, in Kaufman's framework, is connected to meaning, contribution, love, and a reduced focus on the isolated

self. Transcendence does not mean that Alex becomes free from grief. Rather, it means that grief is transformed into connection, memory, and shared meaning.

The first clear movement toward transcendence occurs when Alex shares Elizabeth's DVDs with her brothers. At the beginning, the DVDs seem to belong only to Alex. They are private messages that guide her through the life list and preserve her emotional connection with her mother. When she shares them, the meaning changes. The messages become a space where the family can grieve together. Alex's action shows that she is no longer only protecting her own relationship with Elizabeth. She recognizes that her brothers also need access to the mother's love, memory, and guidance. Her healing becomes shared healing.

The reconciliation with Samuel deepens this movement. After the secret about her biological father, Alex's anger is understandable because the truth has disturbed her sense of belonging. However, when she calls Samuel Dad again, she moves beyond the need for biological certainty as the only proof of family. This is not a simple return to the past. It is a new understanding of family as care, presence, commitment, and memory. The scene therefore represents transcendence because Alex's growth enables her to hold pain and love at the same time. She does not erase the wound, but she no longer allows it to be the only meaning of the relationship.

The final New Year gathering brings these strands together. Alex is surrounded by family, friends, students, Brad, and Samuel in her mother's house. The scene is not a fantasy of a life without loss. Elizabeth is still absent, family history remains imperfect, and Alex's future is not fully settled. However, the emotional meaning of the scene lies in Alex's ability to live within a broader circle of belonging. Her mother's love continues through the connections Alex now chooses to nurture. The film therefore portrays transcendence as a relational state: Alex's self-actualisation expands into family healing, acceptance, and a life shaped by meaning with others.

DISCUSSION

The findings support Kaufman's view that self-actualisation should be understood as a dynamic process rather than a final stage of human development. Alex does not reach self-actualisation by eliminating insecurity. Instead, her insecurity becomes part of the process. Her fear of losing her mother, her confusion about her father, her need for romantic acceptance, and

her self-doubt all become moments that reveal what she needs and what she has avoided. This pattern is consistent with Kaufman's sailboat model, which presents security and growth as interdependent systems rather than separate steps (Kaufman, 2018, 2020).

The study also suggests that internal conflict is not merely a narrative problem to be solved. In *The Life List*, internal conflict has a constructive psychological function. It exposes Alex's dependence on safety, fragile connection, and unstable self-esteem, but it also pushes her toward exploration, love, and purpose. This finding develops previous studies that have examined self-actualisation through ambition, career success, resilience, or interpersonal growth (Farid, 2022; Fathurohman et al., 2023; Roselyn & Koiri, 2025; Wicaksono, 2024). While those studies are valuable, the present article shows that self-actualisation in contemporary film can also be driven by grief, family secrets, emotional dependency, and the difficult work of accepting one's own truth.

The role of transcendence is another contribution of this study. Many readings of self-actualisation stop at the point where a character becomes independent, confident, or successful. *The Life List* complicates that pattern. Alex's development is not complete simply because she chooses a healthier relationship or finds a meaningful profession. The film extends her growth into the relational sphere. She shares her mother's messages, reconciles with Samuel, and participates in a community of love and memory. This movement supports Wong's (2016) argument that self-transcendence involves moving beyond narrow self-interest and connects with the idea that meaning and well-being are strengthened by relatedness and beneficence (Martela & Ryan, 2016).

This interpretation also clarifies why Alex's journey is non-linear. There are moments when she moves forward and moments when she retreats. She searches for Johnny but panics before meeting him. She wants love but recognizes that the wrong kind of love can reduce her. She is hurt by Samuel's secret yet eventually accepts him again. These movements show that self-actualisation is not a smooth rise toward fulfilment. It is a process of negotiating fear, truth, memory, and desire. In this respect, the film represents a contemporary understanding of human growth that is closer to the sailboat model than to a rigid pyramid of needs (Yu, 2026).

The discussion also points to the importance of maternal memory in the film. Elizabeth's DVDs are not simply plot devices or sentimental objects. They function as posthumous guidance that moves Alex from dependency to autonomy. At first, the messages continue Elizabeth's role as emotional anchor. Later, they encourage Alex to take responsibility for her

own life and eventually become a shared family memory. This transformation is significant because it shows that Alex does not overcome grief by forgetting her mother. Instead, she learns to carry her mother's love differently. The memory of Elizabeth becomes a source of connection rather than a reason to remain emotionally frozen.

The study has several limitations. It focuses only on Alex Rose as the main character and does not examine the development of supporting characters in detail. The analysis also prioritizes psychological development rather than cinematic techniques such as camera movement, colour, editing, sound, or mise-en-scene. Future studies may explore how film form contributes to the representation of grief and self-actualisation in *The Life List*. Other researchers may also examine Elizabeth, Samuel, Brad, Garrett, Johnny, Lucas, or Julian to understand how the film constructs family, romantic intimacy, and memory from multiple perspectives. In addition, trauma studies, psychoanalysis, or adaptation theory may offer different insights into the relationship between grief, identity, and the life list as a narrative object.

Although this study interprets Alex Rose's development as reflecting transcendence within Kaufman's sailboat model, alternative interpretations remain possible. The transformation of Alex is not just a transcendence, as her loss and uncertainty is not fully overcome by the end of the film, for some viewers it was more of an emotional recovery. However, in Kaufman's model, self-actualisation and transcendence are not considered a lack of suffering, but a continuous process of growth, making sense and connecting. Therefore, Alex's unresolved emotions do not contradict her psychological growth but instead demonstrate that personal development can coexist with continuing vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that *The Life List* portrays Alex Rose's self-actualisation as a conflictual, dynamic, and relational process. Alex's internal conflicts drive her toward self-actualisation because they expose the instability of her security needs and push her to confront what she has avoided. Her dependence on her mother, fear of leaving her comfort zone, identity crisis after learning about Johnny, disappointment with biological validation, and realization that she cannot shrink herself for love all become turning points. Through these conflicts, Alex gradually learns to choose honesty, self-worth, and authentic connection over fear and approval.

The film also shows that Alex's growth is shaped by Kaufman's security and growth needs. Safety, connection, and self-esteem explain why Alex initially seeks protection, belonging, and validation. Exploration, love, and purpose explain how she begins to move forward, accept uncertainty, choose a healthier relationship, and recognize teaching as a meaningful direction. Her self-actualisation is therefore not represented as perfection or final success, but as a gradual process of becoming more truthful about who she is and what kind of life she wants to live.

Finally, Alex's journey moves beyond self-actualisation toward transcendence. Her growth becomes transcendent when it extends into family healing, reconciliation, acceptance, and shared meaning. By sharing her mother's DVDs, accepting Samuel as her father, and joining a broader community at the end of the film, Alex learns to live with grief without being defined only by loss. *The Life List* thus suggests that becoming oneself is inseparable from learning how to love, remember, forgive, and belong with others.

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