

# Analyzing “Soul” as a Representation of Existential Crisis

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**Abstract.** The word “film” is not something foreign anymore and it is used as a medium that pours the reality of life into a big screen. With existential crisis and finding the meaning of life as the context, this paper will use Pixar’s *Soul* as the study case and using the method of textual analysis to analyze the movie and Soren’s theory from Hicks’ book focuses on the four meanings in life along with theories of existence.

**Keywords.** Soul, Existentialism, Life, Meaning, Obsession.

## 1. Introduction

In the modern era like today, of course, hearing the word “film” is not something foreign to us. Joseph (2011) said that film is a medium that can pour the reality of life into a big screen [1]. Nowadays, the concept of film has been widely used during the rapid development of the creative industry, whether it is used as a medium to convey a message, entertainment, promotion, or as a medium for expression. Apart from conveying these things, the film is also often used as a medium to raise an issue or problem. Like the latest Pixar animated film called *Soul* (2020) which raises an issue related to our existence in a social environment as a reflection of human life.

*Soul* (2020) is an animated film made by Pixar that quickly sparked the interest of many people early on. Aside from creating such stunning visuals, it is also the first time Pixar made black characters. *Soul* (2020) represents philosophy regarding life that is brought up along with social issues (existential and or identity crisis). Pete Docter, the director of *Soul* stated that he always loved animation and thought once he had “made it”, he would feel satisfied and complete. He said he has directed several films at Pixar but he didn’t feel any different, hence he started to wonder “is living out your dreams the key to a fulfilled life?” This question led him and Kemp Powers, the co-director and co-writer of *Soul* started to create Joe Gardner, the main character of the movie, who wants nothing more than to become a big jazz musician and fulfilling his life’s purpose. Pete also said that even though Joe’s life is different from his, both he and Kemp wanted Joe’s story to echo something most people think about, and that is to find happiness in life.

But what is happiness? Is it something that needs to be achieved? And what happens after that? Is the purpose of living can only be one? These thoughts surely bring most people to feel a certain feeling, that is a crisis within themselves. A personal crisis or an identity crisis surely has become one phase

or moment that every person has felt in their lives. The term identity crisis was first popularized by a psychoanalyst who is also a psychologist, Erik Erikson. According to Erikson, the term identity crisis was formed since almost everyone has experienced the feeling of doubt of themselves. What benefit can be given to life, what purpose in life do we own, to our existence in this world, or simply put, existential crisis [2].

The analysis of this paper will discuss the animated film *Soul* (2020) and its relevance to the issue. In looking at certain aspects within the film regarding the storyline, the purpose of this analysis is to find the relation between the film and existential crisis which includes the meaning of life. The movie *Soul* will be analyzed specifically on the meanings that are portrayed and will be supported by Joshua A. Hicks and Clay Routledge's book, *The Experience of Meaning in Life: Classical Perspectives, Emerging Themes, and Controversies*.

## **2. Theoretical Studies**

### *2.1 Existence*

Taken from the Cambridge dictionary, the term existence is defined as, "the fact of something or someone existing:" and " a particular way of life" [4]. According to Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), existence is broken into three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. However, the stage that is used for the study case is the aesthetic stage. Those who walk through existence in the aesthetic stage represent a figure that does not recognize the meaning of life and allows its life to be controlled by tomorrow. When it realizes that its life lacks meaning, it will sense a push to change the course of the future, and with that change, it will live ethically [5].

### *2.2 Existentialism's New Idea #1: Meaning Is Relationships*

Søren once said:

*"The self is a relation that relates itself to its self, and in relating itself to its self, relates itself to another."* (Kierkegaard, 1828/1997, p.351)

What Søren means by this is that all ideas are combined. Every idea that is thought of, represents a multitude of different ideas that have been predicted or are expected regarding the relation of oneself. Some examples are that people expect that a pillow is soft, or that there is an expectation that when in conflict, they are to be saved, and so on. Søren is trying to emphasize that every idea is different, nevertheless, the one thing that connects each idea is the way that they all have predictions and or expectations. Not long after, an existentialist by the name of Albert Camus follows in Søren's argument in which people have a natural desire to connect one thing with another, with the intent to achieve a reality that is consistent, unified, and complete [6].

### *2.3 Existentialism's New Idea #2: Meaninglessness Feels Bad*

Humans represent the creatures of intelligence, however, intelligence that is owned by man can be a double-edged sword. One side presents the ability to think about meaning that is favorable and good in life, whereas the other is unfavorable. Once there is a contradiction in life's experience, it can become troublesome and unfavorable to the individual [6].

Albert Camus gives a better understanding as to why Søren is concerned and that is from the contradiction that is felt due to an idea that is absurd and does not make sense. This feeling stated is as if the experience felt by an individual does not show compatibility within the meaning in one's self. The contradictions weren't making us feel just any kind of anxiety, but a very special one, a "feeling of the absurd". [6].

### *2.4 Existentialism's New Idea #3: Meaninglessness Makes You Affirm Meaning*

Once an individual experiences uncomfortable feeling table, when there are things that they deem to not

make any sense, they will shift their focus into doing things that make them feel good such as, going to the theater and watching their favorite movie. Once Camus senses such feelings, he too applies the same method in shifting focus in *Hideaway* (Hick, 2013, 51)

Often individuals will feel at ease to strengthen their ideas or meaning that are balanced to build a newer meaning to resolve any doubt. Generally, an individual's response to strengthen their meaning is the best choice for them to act upon, which brings a positive impact to their life and the life of the people around them [6].

### *2.5 Exceptional Challenges to Meaning: Existential Crisis*

A great deal that still believes life holds meaning and beliefs are held up to this day. However, human thoughts are not going to withdraw themselves from its belief. With doubt, man will be forced to think deeper and critically reasons may cause people to speculate and question the meaning of life. Among them are thoughts the philosophical thoughts events and the many things that, have a significant impact on life. People tend to stand firm on their knowledge towards the meaning of life by obtaining new information of life's meaning itself so that their foundation can become stronger. Nonetheless, not all foundations can stand strong when it is faced with a threat that has a huge impact [6].

New knowledge that creates conflict with a person's belief will be hard to accept, especially when that truth can invoke doubt and unsure thoughts as a whole. In consequence, this person would need a variety of knowledge that intends to support their belief for them to avoid a truth that goes against theirs. Yet, the knowledge that aims to support has a limit and this becomes a threat due to the new knowledge that contrasts will not stop until accepted. If the matter at hand dominates and changes the person's mind towards the meaning of life, it will prove difficult in solving problems without questioning everything [6].

An individual that is not capable of accepting, creating new interpretations, or is ignorant, with force, will have to evaluate their way of knowing to which they will find proof, reason, and justification to their current knowledge. As soon as a person begins to think critically, they will realize that this new knowledge that was once feared, that was not at all something to be feared of, will do their best to hold their views longer. However, if the knowledge is not parallel with the views that are applied, then it will be likely that doubt towards the current view will decrease and will cause the person to question what the meaning of life is and questions if living up to the present provides any meaning or not [6].

## **3. Method**

This study uses a textual analysis method to describe and interpret the character of the message through the visual and audio language. The purpose of this method is to explain the context, structure, and message of the animated film, *Soul*. There are four approaches within the textual analysis and those include rhetorical criticism, context analysis, content analysis, interaction analysis, and performance studies [7]. However, this particular analysis requires only one approach and that is content analysis. This approach is used to identify and analyze, in detail, the occurrences of specific messages and their characteristics [7]. The soul will be the case study for this analysis.

## **4. Discussions**

### *4.1 Existent The soul*

*Soul* is interesting to talk about and Kierkegaard's theory suits what *Soul* represents, especially the theory about the aesthetic stage. That way of thinking is what led Joe to experience how to find his spark, and 22 to join in his journey.

### *4.2 Story*

Joe Gardner, is a part-time band teacher who dreams of becoming a professional jazz musician. Yet,

before he can achieve his dream, by playing with Dorothea Williams, he gets into an accident and is transported to a world where the souls are sent to the great beyond. Knowing that his life was just getting started after getting an offer to play a gig, he attempts to escape the great beyond but finds himself in the great before. Joe poses as a mentor named Dr. Bjorn Börgensson to avoid the great beyond meets a soul named 22 and is assigned to help her find her 'spark'.

For able to discuss the scenes, it is best to make breakdowns for the storyline. The breakdowns are:

1. **Dream** (Joe's obsession to be a jazz-musician).
2. **Pursuing** the dream (He got to play at the gig with Dorothea Williams).
3. **Downfall** (He died). The discussion regarding existentialism starts from the failure of Joe's experience

In the downfall phase, Joe is faced with harsh reality and he started to feel his life is meaningless, and when he meets 22, the audience is introduced that 22 is someone who doesn't know why she needs to live. According to 22, her past mentors making her questioning her existence in the north. Even though she sees life differently while she's in Joe's body, she's still struggling with at does it mean to live a life.

4. **Reassurance** (Joe got some "insight from by a thirerson to that helped him realize he has been wrong about his belief about his life's purpose. 22, on the other hand, got some supports from Joe).
5. **Living life to the fullest** (Joe finally understood and got his second chance to live, and 22 finally got her earth pass).

The discussion willspeakspeaks about point 3 and its relation with Kierkegard's theory. In the story Joe meets a soul named 22, the two of them watched Dr. Bjorn Börgensson's memories, and as always, 22 is not interested. Joe then told 22 that he is not Dr. Bjorn Börgensson and it is not his life. 22 who was confused at first finally believed Joe and she lets Joe see his memories. Thus, the discussion begins from here.

#### 4.3 Scene I.

In this scene, Joe watches his life with 22 from the first time when he wanted to be a professional jazz musician, until when he failed, which is when he died. He then said his **life is meaningless**. The anxiety Joe's feeling is shown through his expressions and gesture. The shot that is used is medium shots, slowly zooming in to tell the audience. When Joe failed to be a musician, he then decided to be a jazz teacher.



Figure 1. Joe and 22 watching the glimpse of Joe's life.

The relation between this scene and the theory is written from Kierkegard's theory are:

1. **#2: Meaninglessness Feels Bad:** When our life didn't turn out to be what we have planned and dreamed, it would cause **anxiety**.
2. **#3: Meaninglessness Makes You Affirm Meaning:** When an individual experiences the contradiction, they often do things to make them feel good.

The story then goes on to where the two of them making plans for Joe to go back to earth and 22 to keep staying at the youth seminar. Both of them then tried to find 22 sparks until they're running out of time, hence they then ran into 22's "secret base". Joe was introduced by the feeling of "in the

zone” and also, a lost soul.

#### 4.4 Scene II.

Joe and 22 happened to see the Lost Souls while they are on their way to return to their bodies. In this movie, soul portrays anxiety and obsession through the form of lost souls. Lost souls are formed when humans are disconnected from their life because they are fixated on one thing instead of all aspects of life. How Soul showed it is by using long shots to show the shape of the lost souls and the different sizes from both characters. The relation of this scene with Kierkegaard’s theory is **#2: Meaninglessness Feels Bad**: When our life didn’t turn out to be what we have planned and dreamed, it would cause **anxiety**.



**Figure 2.** Joe and 22 are sed by a lost soul.

As the story goes, Joe and 22 “accidentally” fell to earth, causing the two of them to exchange bodies, where Joe is in a cat, and 22 is in Joe’s body. The two of them start their journey to return to their body back. Although, during their journey, 22 starting to notices little aspects of life.

Joe is obsessed with becoming a professional jazz musician to provide his life meaning, thus ignoring everyone and everything around him. One scene that triggers Joe into realizing that he has been missing out on a lot of things in life is shown in the barbershop scene. 22 began to talk about her own life in Joe’s body and eventually led Dez into talking about his dream to become a veterinarian but he became a barber instead, yet he still loves his job. This surprised Joe for a bit and the audience can see that it opens Joe’s mind to new knowledge (and 22’s) for a short moment. Though it has not changed Joe’s understanding of spark just yet.

When the deadline of the gig is coming close and Joe is finally able to go back to his body, 22 on the other hand refuses to go back because she feels she’s already close intending her spark. This led to another chasing moment, and the two of them were caught by Jerry who has been looking for them and sent them back to the youth seminar.

22 got her spark after experiencing life in Joe’s body. However, she still doesn’t know her spark because she thought her spark can only be “one” and her spark is her purpose to live. Joe convinces 22 that she is wrong and tells her that everything she said is “it’s just a regular old livin’”. 22 became so obsessed with finding her spark that eventually disconnected from it the world and became a lost soul. This is possible due to already having experienced living, turning her into one of the lost souls.

Meanwhile, Joe returned to his body and got to play his first gig. As soon as he finished his performance, he asked Dorothea “what happens next?” She then answered, “we come back tomorrow night, do it all again.”

#### 4.5 Scene III.

Joe realizes that something is missing. He finally achieved his dream, and now what? Dorothea then told

him a story about two weres were a younger fish wanted to go to the ocean and believes that it lives in only water, to which the older fish responds that it is already in the ocean. She didn't finish her story and left Joe after her cab arrived.



Figure 3. Joe and Dorothea after the gig.

Joe needs to be a coder to understand Dorothea's answers. The reason why Dorothea didn't finish her story is that is up to Joe to decide whether he wants to see his life through a bigger picture (the ocean) or a smaller picture (the water).

The relation between this scene and the theory is written from Kierkegaard's theory are:

- **#1: Meaning is Relationships:** People expecting something is already a relation, and by expecting something, they already give their idea *meaning*.
- **Exceptional Challenges to Meaning: Existential Crisis.** the new knowledge surely creates conflict with a person's belief will be hard to accept, and it will become a threat to the individual who received it.

Joe's expectation in performing with the gig would be very spectacular for him, and it is star. But he didn't know what was going to happen after he achieved it. Hence the feeling of emptiness and Dorothea's story about the fishes.

Going home feeling empty, Joe sat in front of his piano and stared at the items 22 found when she was on earth. He started to remember what 22 saw with his eyes, what she felt, and that imagery slowly transitioned into his memories. He started to understand what spark meant as he plays his piano based on what he feels, finding himself in a meditative trance. There, he met Moonwind, where he was told that 22 has become a lost soul. When Joe got "gobbled" up by 22, he could see the ex-mentors that kept bringing 22 down and undervaluing her. Joe shockingly found that he was one of them.

Joe gave 22 a flower petal (an item that 22 had picked up) and it immediately erased Joe's demeaning figure away. 22 hasn't found her spark yet, because she thought a spark is her purpose to live. Joe told 22 that her spark is not her purpose. Like what Jerry told Joe before he was sent back to earth to perform his first gig, "a spark isn't a soul's purpose. ... your purpose is your meaning of life". A spark is everything that makes up life, it indicates what's starting.

Soon after 22 returned to earth, Joe was sent to the great beyond. But this time, he didn't feel sad or angry, instead he was calm. Jerry suddenly appeared and told Joe that he had done many things, and had inspired the Jerries. With that, Jerry offered Joe a second chance in life. When Joe was asked what he was going to do with his second chance, he didn't answer wanting to be a professional jazz musician, or anything related to jazz. Instead, he stated the simplest yet meaningful answer, "...I'm gonna live every minute of it".

## 5. Conclusions

As what Joseph (2011) stated about how film is a medium that pours the reality of life into a big screen (Kartika, 2016), Pixar's *Soul* succeeded in portraying the issue through their visual

representation. Adlina (2018) wrote that the term identity crisis was formed because almost everyone has experienced the feeling of doubt of themselves, which was taken from Erikson (Adlina, 2018).

Soul represents how society has been feeling in 2020, especially during the pandemic situation. Many just realized how they've been missing. The movie tells many messages that all people can't accept. The way they tell the audience about how achieving the biggest dream only will make our life meaningful, but there are many reasons to enjoy life without missing a thing. A movie can represent someone's life and is connected with human psychology. An existential crisis in a human's life can happen if they feel their life is meaningless after failing to reach their dream. In this paper, it could be concluded that Soul has succeeded in representing the issue through its storyline. Few notes that could be taken from Soul is:

- Obsessed with one dream and achieving it is not the only way to live a life.
- There are still other things we could notice and enjoy in life.
- Take a chance to open your heart and listen to others.
- Failing doesn't mean that your life is over.

If we take time to breathe and look at how the world works, that is already living life and already enjoying it. As simple as enjoying nature, breathing the air while it's raining, watching how ants steal food are already reasons to live. Joe and 22 are two completely different people, but the two of them complete each other. The fact that the was movie released on December 25th, 2020 is definitely not a coincidence and is already planned from the beginning. indeed, Soul is not a Christmas movie, but it is definitely is needed by many people, adults, and young adults, especially during the pandemic.

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