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Psychological analysis of the movie 'SOUL'

Sadaf Manzoor

Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata

Richa Modanwal

Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow,
Lucknow

Abstract

Theatre has become an indispensable part of our lives to share stories and movies are updated form of theatre. Through movies we can understand the realities of life better and creators are also working hard to give viewers a better experience. In this research paper we have analyzed the psychological aspects that are covered in the movie 'SOUL' by Pixar Animation Studios. We have thrown light on the mental health issues that are discussed in the movie and also did a comparative analysis of the personality of the characters Joe Gardner and 22. This movie has given a different perspective towards life to the viewers. Adults think that animated movies are only for children but it is not true, this movie has the power to change perspective of adults towards life. This paper explores the film through the lenses of existential psychology, identity theory, developmental psychology, and positive psychology. By dissecting the psychological journeys of its central characters, the paper argues that Soul challenges the cultural fixation on purpose as a singular external goal, and instead reframes meaningful existence as an embodied, present-focused experience.

Keywords: Theatre, Movies, SOUL, Adults, Joe ,22, Perspective, Life, Personality, Positive Psychology, Developmental Psychology

1.Introduction

In the movie 'Soul' directed by Pete Doctor and produced by Pixar Animation Studios the director has portrayed beautifully the modern life where we have forgotten to cherish the beautiful life that we are living and we always complain about the things that we don't have.

In this movie we can see that the character Joe Gardner is a music teacher of a band and his dream was to play piano in a band of famous musician Dorothea Williams. His mother wanted him to get a permanent job as a music teacher so he had to compromise his dreams and he worked hard as a music teacher to make his mother happy. His life completely changes when fell in an open manhole and was struggling between life and death. He was being taken to The Great beyond but he escaped and reached The Great before from where the souls went on earth after getting their Earth badge, which they got when they found their spark. In the Great Before he met the soul 22, who was in the great before for thousand years and did not find her spark but after meeting Joe and accidentally coming on Earth,22 finds her spark and gets ready to live.

We see that Joe and 22 were struggling with their own problems in life but when they met each other, their perspective towards their problems changed completely and they helped each other through the journey to get solutions to their problems. We can see that Joe and 22 have very different personalities and they accept each other as they are. I have done a comparative analysis of personalities of the characters to understand the psychology of the characters better and how differently they look at life.

In current scenario Mental health is one of the major issues that has to be brought into light. The economy of the countries is growing, everyone is working hard to earn money for food, shelter and clothing for their families. But nobody is thinking neither about their mental health nor mental health of others, due to work load and the race of earning money people have stopped living.

In the greed for a lavish life people have forgotten to do the little things that make us happy and lively like, taking a sip of coffee with family, hanging out with friends, enjoying the beauty of nature, reading a book or enjoying a delicious meal without any worries. Due to the impact of social media, people have started comparing their life with others, this is one of the reasons of rising anxiety, depression, and other mental issues. The lost souls in the astral plane are portrayal of how people are lost and forgotten the purpose to live. They are trapped and like Moonwind saved them, in real life also these lost souls need someone to save them. Lost soul need people in their life to understand them. In this paper I have analyzed how in real life also so many people have turned into lost souls due to their anxieties, fear and depression.

2.Comparative analysis of personalities of Joe Gardner and 22

When we look at the personalities of Joe Gardner and 22, they both have very different personalities. We see that Joe's personality is representation of mimetic theory which was given by French anthropologist Rene Girard.

Mimetic theory states that human desires are not individual but collective or social. Our desires are inspired by the society we live in and we try to imitate others. Joe was inspired by his father and developed a love for jazz music like his father. When his father took him to jazz club, he was inspired by the guy who was playing piano and he was really mesmerized by his performance. After listening to that guy in the jazz club Joe wanted to play like him and realized that music is everything for him.

JOE

Look, I remember one time... my dad took me to this jazz club, and that's the last place that I wanted to be. Joe walks to the piano and starts playing while he explains:

JOE

But then I see this guy. And he's playing these chords with fourths on it and then, with the minor. Whooo! Then he adds the inner voices, and it's like he's... it's like he's singing. And I swear, the next thing I know... it's like he floats off the stage. That guy was lost in the music. He was in it, and he took the rest of us with him. Joe finishes with a beautiful, dreamy flourish. The class is captivated with his music. JOE And I wanted to learn how to talk like that. That's when I knew. I was born to play

From the dialogue above we can see that after listening to this guy in the jazz club Joe really wanted to imitate him. He wanted to learn to play like him. Here we see Mimetic theory in work. Joe was introduced to jazz music by his father and developed love for jazz all his life. We all imitate our desires just like Joe imitated his from his father and the guy who was playing piano in the jazz club.

JOE

Music is all I think about. From the moment I wake up in the morning to the moment I fall asleep at night

LIBBA

You can't eat dreams for breakfast, Joey.

JOE

Then I don't want to eat! This isn't about my career, Mom. It's my reason for living. And I know Dad felt the same way. Libba thinks about this. JOE And... I'm just afraid that if I died today, that my life would've amounted to nothing

In this scene we can see that Joe is passionate for music just like his father was and he is fighting to his mother for his dreams. He knows the struggles his father did to pursue his career in music and he also walk on the footsteps of his father.

Thus, we see that humans imitate their desire from others and the character of Joe is portraying Mimetic theory.

Now, we will analyse the personality of 22,

When Joe Gardner met 22 in the Great Before, 22 had a perception that earth was boring and even great mentors like Abraham Lincoln, Mother Teresa, Muhammad Ali, Marie Antoinette and Nicholas Copernicus were not able to motivate 22 and find her spark because that spark did not come from outside but inside. After meeting Joe, 22 was curious that even though Joe did not do something great but still, he wanted to go back on earth. 22 met so many great personalities and had a vast amount of knowledge but he never wanted to be like anyone and be herself. We see that 22 find her spark in a way different from other souls. She has her own journey in finding her spark. We see that 22 is a representation of Idiosyncratic Trait.

In Idiosyncratic trait we include people who perceive the world in a different way than others do. They are non-conformist, creative, risk takers and have a different way to look at problems in their life. They have a colorful lens to look at the problems in their life. They take a path that is less travelled. They like to explore new things in their life just like 22.

JOE

Wait. Are you actually helping me?

22

Joe. I have been here for who knows how long, and I've never seen anything that's made me want to live. And then you come along. Your life is sad and pathetic. And you're working so hard to get back to it. Why? I mean this I gotta see! JOE Okay, let's go

We see that 22 is really curious about knowing why Joe wants to go back on earth. 22 doesn't find anything interesting in Hall of Everything like other souls but seeing Joe's urge to go back on earth intrigues 22. We see that 22 has a different perspective than other souls and gets curious if she finds her spark on earth. We see 22 did not stick to whatever her mentors taught her. No matter how hard the mentors tried she never agreed to go on earth.

JOE

Please. If I'm going to get this gig back, I need your help. Beat.

22

Okay.

JOE (surprised)

Really?

22

I'll help you. But I... wanna try a few things. Some of it's not as boring as it is at the You Seminar. If Connie can find something she loves here, maybe I can too

In these dialogues off we see that 22 is enthusiastic as well as curious to know about new things and explore herself as well as her surroundings. She is really hopeful that if Connie can find her spark, then she can too. The people of Idiosyncratic trait love to explore new things and we can see this trait in 22.

22 and the Fear of Living: A Study in Learned Helplessness

The character of 22 represents the opposite psychological dilemma. Unlike Joe, who is consumed by purpose, 22 avoids life altogether. Her resistance to embodiment is shaped by centuries of internalized voices (notably those of respected historical mentors) that dismiss her worth, leading to a condition resembling learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Though ostensibly apathetic, 22's detachment masks deep-seated fear and a perceived lack of self-efficacy.

Her transformation begins not through grand ideas of purpose but through sensory immersion in life—tasting pizza, feeling wind, watching leaves fall. This shift mirrors the principles of mindfulness-based therapy, where engagement with the present moment fosters reconnection with self and meaning.

2.1. The Fragility of Identity: Joe Gardner's Existential Crisis

Joe Gardner's character exemplifies Erikson's psychosocial conflict of identity vs. role confusion, wherein identity becomes overly entwined with a singular passion—in Joe's case, jazz. The film reveals how Joe's sense of self is precariously dependent on external validation. His internal narrative suggests that life begins only once he achieves artistic success. This fallacy is deconstructed throughout the narrative, aligning with existential psychology, particularly Viktor Frankl's concept of existential vacuum—a state where the absence of clear meaning produces inner emptiness.

Joe's initial arc reflects what psychologists identify as the arrival fallacy—the mistaken belief that achieving a goal will yield lasting happiness. Despite his long-awaited musical performance with Dorothea Williams, Joe finds himself emotionally unmoved. Dorothea's parable of the fish searching for the ocean reinforces the futility of mistaking career achievements for existential fulfillment.

2.2. Body -Switching and Empathy: Psychological Role Reversal

The narrative device of Joe and 22 swapping bodies provides a profound lens for empathy development. Joe, living through 22's fresh sensory perspective, reenounters life with wonder, while 22, occupying a human body, gains agency. This scenario evokes principles from phenomenology and embodied cognition, suggesting that identity is not merely a mental construct but a lived, physical experience.

Moreover, 22's eventual descent into a lost soul, triggered by internalized criticism, is symbolic of cognitive distortions and negative self-schemas, often observed in depressive disorders. Joe's empathy, finally awakened, enables him to relinquish his own dreams to help 22 find her path—a moment of self-transcendence (Maslow, 1969), which marks his own existential growth.

3.The Zone and Lost Souls: Between Flow and Obsession

One of the most psychologically charged metaphors in *Soul* is the representation of the “zone”—a space between the physical and metaphysical where individuals experience flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), characterized by full immersion in activity. However, the same zone is shown to become a prison when flow devolves into obsession, leading to the transformation of souls into disconnected, ghostlike beings.

These “lost souls” represent those who, in pursuit of singular goals or avoidance mechanisms, become dissociated from their emotional and embodied selves. The film illustrates how compulsions, even those rooted in talent, can erode mental well-being when unmoored from presence and connection.

4.Conclusion

Pixar's *Soul* resists traditional narrative arcs that reward success with resolution. Instead, it offers a rare cinematic meditation on the psychological terrain of existence. Through Joe and 22, the film critiques modern society's reduction of identity to profession and purpose to productivity. The message is clear: the meaning of life is not to be found in an idealized future but in the nuanced, often unnoticed moments that make up lived experience. In a world obsessed with ambition, *Soul* becomes a quiet advocate for presence.

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