

## **Inviting Youth into Discussions of Existentialism: Soul**

As a society, we've seen aspects of existentialism represented in many genres of film. Through documentaries, pseudo-documentaries, dramas, and even comedies, narratives addressing the meaning of life have become a popular topic in the film industry. A genre that hasn't been known to directly address such themes is animated movies, specifically those made for children. Even rarer are mainstream and well-known production companies, like Disney and Pixar, to tackle such topics. Last year, Pixar flipped the script and released an animated fantasy-comedy and drama called *Soul* that takes on essentialism, nihilism, and existentialism. The director explained the story of how the concept of the film came to be. He explained,

I did a lot of research. I thought about essentialism which, in the West, is an idea that comes from Plato and Aristotle: that you're born with an essence of who you are and your job in life is to discover that. And then there's nihilism and Nietzsche saying there is no such thing as meaning, it's all purposeless and absurd. And then there is Kierkegaard and Sartre and existentialism and the idea that you have to decide for yourself what your purpose is all about. And in the new film we get to put those things into characters.

(Brady, 2020)

Introducing these concepts to children can seem daunting, but Pixar successfully pulled off such a feat. According to Nielsen's weekly U.S. streaming rankings, "the emotionally-charged animation clocked 1.669 billion minutes-worth of streaming, defeating *The Office*, which had 1.435 billion minutes counted before making its Netflix departure." Such a successful film must have a story worth such praise.

This 2020 Pixar film introduces us to a middle-school band teacher, Joe Gardner, whose heart belongs to his love for jazz. Playing piano at gigs has become his life's passion and

teaching students to play was just his job. Yet, right when he's about to get his big break, he falls into a manhole. The next thing he knows, he's on a path into the afterlife, The Great Beyond. Joe is in shock to discover his fate, exclaiming, "This can't happen. I'm not dyin' today. Not when my life just started." (*Soul*, 10:57-11:00) He then jumps off his path and his soul ends up in The Great Before. The Great Before, also known as the "You Seminar," is a place where new souls discover their spark. Mistaken for a mentor, Joe is assigned soul number 22. Unlike other new souls that find their sparks quickly, 22 has had mentors as notable as Gandhi and Mother Teresa and still has yet to discover her passion. 22 hates life from what she can see, even joking "You can't crush a soul here. That's what life on Earth is for." (*Soul*, 26:34-26:39) In effort to avoid starting life on earth, she offers to give her "spark sticker" that grants life to Joe if he helps her find her spark.

After spending the day trying to find her purpose, 22 and Joe find themselves chased by a wandering monster. Rescued by a pirate ship of "free spirits" or hippies, they free the "monster" who is a Lost Soul. Moonwind, the free soul, explains "Poor fellow. Some people just can't let go of their own anxieties and obsessions, leaving them lost and disconnected from life. This is the result." (*Soul*, 31:46-31:53) Moonwind tries to help Joe back to his body and in the process 22 accidentally falls into Joe's body and Joe falls into a therapy cat sitting on the end of his hospital bed. Together, through trial and error, they navigate Joe's life. Along the way 22 learns that life isn't that bad. She makes connections, helps a middle schooler follow their dreams, and convinces Joe's mom that Jazz is a worthy venture when it's your life's passion. 22's experience in the Great Before offers great existential insight to those around her and she begins to truly live. Joe begins to believe "My life was meaningless." (*Soul*, 24:41-24:43) and wants to get back to his body to try again. Meanwhile, 22 is discovering a new love for life. Admitting she didn't

think she was good enough for living, she divulges her time on Earth helped her find passion and purpose. Realizing she doesn't want to give Joe his body back, she runs off and they both are discovered by the authorities of The Beyond.

When brought back to the Great Before, they discover 22's Earth badge is complete with her spark sticker. Joe claims it's his doing and 22 gives him her Earth badge. He comes back to Earth and plays his gig. Everything appears to be a dream until Joe claims it doesn't feel like he thought it would. His bandmate, Dorothea, replies to Joe, "I heard this story about a fish. He swims up to this older fish and says, 'I'm trying to find this thing they call the ocean.' 'The ocean?' says the older fish, 'that's what you're in right now.' 'This?' says the younger fish, 'This is water. What I want is the ocean.'" (*Soul*, 1:16:20-1:16:40) This causes Joe to reflect on his life and, despite not being perfect, is beautiful. He realizes 22 deserves a chance at all life has to offer too. During this time, 22 has become a lost soul. Moonwind explains at this moment, "Lost souls are obsessed by something that disconnects them from life. And now that 22 has technically lived, she's become one of them." (*Soul*, 1:21:50-1:21:61) Joe tries to help her and she ends up swallowing him whole, revealing all of the hurtful things Joe has said to her that make her feel purposeless and lost. Joe reaches her by revealing the last box of the badge is checked when you're ready to live, not when you find your purpose. And 22 is ready to live. So Joe guides 22 back to Earth, as a mentor, and watches her fall to Earth. Joe finds himself back on the path to the Great Beyond but is stopped by one of the authorities and is given a second chance at life. Joe ends the film by reevaluating his views on life and saying "I'm going to live every minute of it." (*Soul*, 1:30:09-1:30:12) From there we are left to wonder what will happen next for these two.

Simplifying these ideas of life, death, meaning, and purpose for a younger audience takes college-level material and makes it accessible to all who have access to the film. 34th Street Magazine describes the film as a “multilayered film that appeals differently but equally to viewers of all ages.” (Stanger, 2021) We often overlook and forget that kids have the same questions about the meaning of life that scholars who spent their whole life studying philosophy and existentialism do. In the end,

Pixar’s position comes closest to the Platonic view. Souls depart from the dying person and travel to the great beyond. Souls also pre-exist their earthly incarnation, and some of them at least don’t seem overly keen to embark on this journey into life. Souls are immaterial - another tenet of Platonic philosophy - although in the movie they are understandably not invisible. Finally, reincarnation seems possible, even across species as Joe finds out when, for a while, he enters the body of a cat. (Schumacher & Zachhuber, 2021)

Not only does this film address these broader theories, but it also addresses issues of representation. This is Pixar’s first film with an African-American protagonist. Lauren Dundes, the author of *The Psychosocial Implications of Disney Movies*, notes that “Regarding demographic portrayals, several scholars note a deficiency in the representation of minority families within popular media.” (Lauren Dundes, 2019, pg. 3) This isn’t revolutionary, as the battle for better representation in media is over a century old. But what is unique about this film is the representation of meaning within black culture. We see a visual representation of black dreams, black success, and black standards. By no means does Joe Gardner represent the black experience, but it creates a space for not only children to participate in philosophical and metaphysical discussions, but black children as well.

This film also highlights the debate between Susan Wolf and Steven Cahn's opinions on what the meaning of life is. Joe and Joe's mom, Libba, argue over if he is fulfilling his purpose by pursuing jazz gigs instead of getting a "normal" job. In this film, Libba pushes him to pursue his teaching job so that he can keep a roof over his head and engage with young musicians. Libba appears to stand with the beliefs of Wolf, who pushes that a meaningful life for an individual has to be one that is actively engaged in a somewhat successful project of positive value. (Wolf, 232) Joe argues that his passion for jazz and playing piano should be meaningful enough, his views aligning with Cahn. Cahn believes that "if a person can find delights that bring no harm, such a discovery should not be denigrated but appreciated." (Cahn, 237) A notion that Joe has come to live by most of his life. 22's vision of life, once she's lived, was meaningful because of things like a lollipop and a spool of thread, not being actively engaged with something that Wolf would consider "of value." When Joe asked 22 what she thought of living, she replied "I always said it was dumb, but just look at what I found. Your mom sewed your suit from this cute little spool. When I was nervous, Dez gave me this [the lollipop]. A guy on the subway yelled at me. It was scary. But I kind of liked that, too." (*Soul*, 1:06:20-1:06:42)

*Soul* has done what few have and invited the youth into discussions of existentialism. The film's "lessons about life, death, and finding your spark can be easily understood by young audiences, especially when accompanied with its mesmerizing visuals, witty characters, and whimsical music." (Stanger, 2021) In doing this we give children a headstart in figuring out their purpose and deciding what is meaningful to them. Introducing these concepts to them at a young age can help them navigate through life that much easier. Dr. Zoi Simopoulou, a counselor and psychotherapist who works with children, wrote an article on this exact concept titled *Children's Existential Encounters in Literature*. Her article explains

Existential questions are children's concerns around life and death; good and bad; choice; freedom; aloneness and togetherness. They can be expressed verbally in questions, in narratives, in stories, in conversations, or be embodied in children's art, their play, their role-play, and the quality of their relationships. They can be triggered by children's interactions with others (their peers, a family member, a teacher, an animal), with objects or toys, seasons, and events; children experience or witness a moment that triggers their wonder about its meaning in their lives.

After all, if we are questioning our existence in a college classroom, it would be naive of us to assume children are immune to such curiosity.

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