



Existential Angst through Character of Sadness in Inside Out Movie

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Abstract

This article investigates a character called Sadness of the movie Inside Out in the sense of existential angst. Inside Out represents a fictional movie that reflects the primary emotions of an 11-year-old girl with the help of five characters in her mind, who tries to deal with significant changes in her life. Through qualitative method, this study analyzes Sadness to show rising tensions between freedom and search for meaning. Building upon the existential notions as proffered by Jean-Paul Sartre, this analysis explores how Sadness captures Riley's dread of the future, and the psychological upset occasioned by the idea of facing the future. When Sadness takes more space in Riley's life, the protagonist starts to comprehend the meaning of embracing rather than rejecting negative feelings. Moreover, this study highlights how Sadness, often perceived as a negative emotion, serves as a catalyst for personal growth, especially through fostering resilience, deepening self-awareness, and rediscovering emotional balance. In conclusion Sadness in Inside Out presents a powerful existential message that explicit recognition of anxiety and sadness is helpful to discover the purpose of life and develop higher levels of emotional regulation.

Keywords: *Angst, Existential Anxiety, Inside Out, Sadness*

INTRODUCTION

Inside Out is an animation movie produced by Pixar on June 19, 2015, and distributed by Walt Disney Pictures. It was directed by Pete Docter and was Linear Screenplay by Pete Docter, Meg LeFauve and Josh Cooley. Inside Out is all about an eleven-year-old girl called Riley who is uprooted from her comfortable life and must start all over again in a new city. The plot revolves around Riley's mind where five people named Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust must work to help her in her new world (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Sinarawerdhi et al., 2023). Sadness is the major component of Riley's character that was portrayed as evil at the beginning but turned out to be the key in her transformation.

Angst is a deep and often irrational feeling of anxiety, restlessness, or fear. It is more than just an ordinary worry, but rather a complex and heavy feeling that can make a person feel depressed and lose control of their emotions. Such angst arises from a person's decision to find purpose in life while living in a physically meaningless world. Angst is also characterized as an emotional imbalance, confusion, and struggle against sorrow to achieve self-actualization.

This paper deals with the existential angst of character of Sadness in animated movie Inside Out. Even though Joy attempts to remain in charge in the beginning of the movie, it shall be Sadness that proves herself as the character that plays an important role in the development of the main protagonist of the movie Riley (Caves & Basu-Roy, 2022; Docter, 2015; Siddique, 2019). The central research question of this type of analysis involves the identification of the positive value of the negatively characterized emotion, namely Sadness in the process of the formation of the main character's personality. Sadness is a symbol of existential anxiety especially concerning issues to do with uncertainty and change.

Yet, Sadness plays a positive role in Riley's personal transformation as there is always contribution of negative emotions to the search for meaning of

positivity in life (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Sinarawerdhi et al., 2023). The aim of the study is to determine how Sadness embodies the angst that people experience once they are faced with freedom, responsibility and the search for significance, as advanced by existentialism particularly from the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. In *Inside Out*, Riley's journey exemplifies this process that only after acknowledging Sadness then is she able to reconnect with her family and navigate the emotional turmoil caused by her problems (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Ponamon, 2023). This reinforces the idea that Sadness, rather than being a character that symbolizes an obstacle, is a crucial step toward emotional growth and self-acceptance.

METHOD

To analyze the film *Inside Out*, the researchers use qualitative methods through descriptive and explorative research. By emphasizing interpretations, this method underlines every day and problematic moments and meanings in people's lives, such as experiential experiences, introspection, life stories, interviews, observations, histories, interactive, and visual texts. Main data of this article is taken from the dialogues around Sadness in the film *Inside Out* directed by Pete Docter. The data is collected by doing observation, documentation, and literature studies. The researchers watched the *Inside Out* film directly by paying attention to how the dialogues and storylines are spoken in the film.

Furthermore, the documentation uses the film as the main object while angst theory and psychological analysis are the primary tools used to interpret the data. Then literature study is done to collect secondary data. In this case, the researchers read books and journals to find references and to complete data into how angst by Sadness and its relationship with the film *Inside Out*.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Data of Sadness' Crucial Roles towards Riley in *Inside Out*

Character of Sadness represents the darker feelings that one must embrace in Riley's characters. During the movie, Riley is overcome with stress from trying to come to terms with her new reality and Sadness comes into play as the entity that among other things, helps the character deal with the loss (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Katz, 2018). The film considers that positive feeling is as important as negative feeling, such as sadness, for human's psychological health. Due to appropriate humor, deep feelings, and realistic portrayal of the characters, *Inside Out* contains deep messages both for kids and grown-ups. The data around character of Sadness in the film is listed below;

Data 1

Joy: What are you doing?

Sadness: Oh, I don't know. I'm sorry (Docter, 2015)

Regret takes a joyful memory and makes it a sorrowful one. This means Sadness is such existential danger that may hurt people. This is the series of anxieties about where Sadness fits into Riley's life and what she is doing is detrimental to Riley. The angst, however, comes in as she finds herself at the center of helping create Riley's emotional universe. However, she worries that her actions will only worsen the situation and bring sorrow, which is often viewed as a negative emotion (Caves & Basu-Roy, 2022; Docter, 2015; Siddique, 2019). This reflects the common societal tendency to avoid or suppress sadness. The regret of turning joyful memories sorrowful underlines the fear of hurting others, creating anxiety about her role in Riley's life. This quote shows Sadness' initial lack of understanding and her immediate apology suggests she is not able to control how she feels, that sadness can be good.

Data 2

Sadness: I just... I just don't want to make things worse. (Docter, 2015)

Sadness keeps saying that she is useless since she only causes sorrow all the time. Here the internal conflict stands since she cannot become an agent or

change anything in Riley life. Such immense feelings of failure do not let her rest and instead only increase her apprehensions regarding the part assigned to her in life. Sadness repeatedly expresses her feeling of uselessness, as she believes she only causes sorrow. This internal conflict arises from her perceived inability to positively influence Riley's life (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Katz, 2018). These feelings of failure amplify her apprehensions about her purpose. This indicates a fear that she is incapable of helping Riley, as she is not good at making things better and this will be her struggle throughout her life.

Data 3

Sadness: We're gonna get lost in here. (Docter, 2015)

This illustrates Sadness' fear and the worry she has. Sadness becomes helpless and frustrated as they go to the deep end of Riley's long-term memory. The huge and complicated structure refers to the anxiety of the modern world and moving in it. Her anxiety increases, deepening her concern about never finding her way back, which is an equivalent to the typical anxiety of someone losing control of their life. The quotation also symbolizes her recognition of important feelings, especially suffering (Caves & Basu-Roy, 2022; Docter, 2015; Siddique, 2019). Sadness easily recognizes fear, anxiety, and her experiences of loss, making Riley useless as well. However, later, it is Sadness' feelings that shapes Riley's strength in her ability to manage her sense of fear.

Data 4

Sadness: I'm sorry. You're right... I'm not very good at this. (Docter, 2015)

Sadness worries that Joy likes to leave her deeper, and this is the reason behind her feeling of existence anxiety. Sadness' expression shows a complete lack of self-confidence because she cannot change as it is not her job to. She feels unwanted and useless, thus, adds anxiety to her position in Riley's emotional world (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Katz, 2018). This rejection is therefore a rooted rejection of loneliness more than anything else, which only increases her

loneliness. Through this quotation, valuing happiness only in challenging circumstances is not enough, regardless of what Joy means as a stand for hope.

Data 5

Sadness: It's all my fault... (Docter, 2015)

This is Sadness' first real responsibility, and it is one that she cannot change. That Sadness cannot preserve a happy memory full just magnifies her worthlessness feelings. This powerlessness to sustain happiness increases her angst because she is the one who brings depression instead of happiness. This directed her conflict with the perceived detriment she is causing in Riley's life (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Ponamon, 2023). However, Sadness' confession brings forward such lesson that to achieve emotional health, it is necessary to face difficult emotions such as anxiety and fear.

Data 6

Sadness: These are Riley's memories... They're all we have left of her. (Docter, 2015)

Sadness remembers Riley's sad memories and struggles through life; it remembers the pain and suffering that parts of life will always have. This is her struggle with the idea that sadness is normal, but it's only normal. Sadness understands that if she did not exist then these memories would never have happened and Riley will not be who she is (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Sinarawerdhi et al., 2023). This quotation emphasizes the notion that avoiding uncomfortable emotions may look useful, but the optimal strategy for real emotional fortress is to confront and stay with them, especially through preserving memories.

Data 7

Sadness: Maybe... maybe Riley needs to feel sad right now, and that's okay. (Docter, 2015)

Sadness shows her understanding here by knowing she needs to make Riley sad or else she will not come to terms with what has happened. Sadness

understands that she brings emotion to Riley's world and that she is needed. This is the moment when Sadness begins to accept that she is a part of Riley's life and that Riley cannot overcome without her, but balance is needed, and Sadness is that balance (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Sinarawerdhi et al., 2023). As she realizes her value, her existential angst begins to subside. The quotation even also proposes that Riley's formation of endurance and emotional intelligence largely rests on the ability to recognize all feelings, especially the negative ones.

Data 8

Sadness: Sometimes, we just need to be sad. (Docker, 2015)

Sadness teaches us that not every moment is happy, that it's okay and this will make you stronger, and you need to be sad to cope with emotions. By accepting the role she plays in Riley's emotional life, she can confront her existential fear. It is a shift in which she acknowledges her purpose rather than being afraid of it. By being sad, Sadness would like to appreciate any kind of problem Riley faces in her life (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Ponamon, 2023). In reality, honoring emotional strength over time means addressing life's joyful and distressing parts by transforming anxiety into a method for increasing personal awareness and growth.

Data 9

Sadness: I just... I remember how scared she was. It felt like everything was changing. (Docker, 2015)

Sadness recalls Riley's move from Minnesota, and it makes her feel so sad and out of place. Sadness shows that a change can make things sad as this quote shows a reflection of sadness. On this occasion she reflects on the loneliness and doubt of other major life changes she will be going through, symbolizing her work on deep emotional transitions, something that will be painful but necessary (Docker, 2015; Katz, 2018; Mujani et al., 2024). Despite the angst that Sadness

shows, embracing Sadness is integral to Riley's personal transformation and the development of deeper emotional intelligence.

Data 10

Sadness: I'm not sure... sometimes things feel happy and sad all at once. (Docter, 2015)

This quote represents not having a feeling as she knows that is when there is a problem with Riley. Sadness feels all the different, confusing, conflicting emotions that Riley has and worries that the future will continue to be one of happiness and sadness (Docter, 2015; Katz, 2018; Mujani et al., 2024). Sadness understands that life has an ambivalent quality: this scene contains fear. This realization leads to her not knowing how to deal with this emotion, a weight she cannot control.

Furthermore, the character of Sadness underscores that allowing oneself to experience sadness fosters significant personal growth and adaptability. As Riley navigates her struggles, it is Sadness who enables her to reconnect with her emotions and seek comfort from loved ones, facilitating her journey of self-discovery. This transformation highlights the necessity of sadness in emotional processing, reinforcing that growth comes not from avoidance, but from fully engaging with one's feelings.

Existential Angst and Its Continuations

Angst refers to a very confused feeling about freedom, life/sense of responsibility and life uncertainty. This kind of feeling argues that people are free to choose their own paths with the directive that it is their own responsibility to place meaning into a world that, by necessity, is empty, or meaningless (Macann, 2023; Pasopati et al., 2024; Sartre, 2022). It argues that life has no purpose, and people must make their own by the actions they do and act in everyday life. An angst, or an existential anxiety, is presented with the prospect of freedom and then is imposing on individuals for being solely responsible for giving value to their existence.

Then, angst also generates isolation, fear, or hopelessness that is part of an existential crisis. However, people who would consciously experience such feelings will grow as human beings and be granted profound new meanings. In existentialism sense, angst is such an inevitable issue in life. It is indeed a process of self-actualization, where people make their own values out of all the uncertainty of life (Macann, 2023; Pasopati et al., 2024; Sartre, 2022). As people move towards choosing their own lives and becoming free to plan it how they like, they are moving away from being anxious for a healthier state. This is how existentialism explains the important kind of transformation necessary for character and emotion healing, and the elevation of character.

There are several characteristics of Angst in existentialism sense. The first is Awareness of Freedom and Responsibility. Humans are 'condemned to be free', which means they choose, yet they get to choose (Russo, 2022; Sartre in Akinbode, 2023; Wijaya et al., 2024). When people say freedom, it means that people can make their own choices without having to follow other people's rules. The existential perspective of freedom combines the elimination of external blocks with the freedom to create personal direction in life. Having freedom means that people must deal with their responsibility to decide what happens in their lives. People must take full responsibility for what happens because of the choices they make. People become fully responsible when they exercise their freedom because

they must accept both success and failure without labeling them as fate or divine destiny (Russo, 2022; Sartre in Akinbode, 2023; Wijaya et al., 2024). Taking personal responsibility means accepting both the choices people make and their meaning in life. In the sense of existentialism, it is freedom and responsibility that often lead to angst as both shape a deep anxiety about life's meaning and the uncertainty of the future. Angst arises when individuals face the burden of freedom and responsibility, especially during major life changes. Though challenging, this feeling can lead to personal growth by pushing people to create meaning in an uncertain world.

The second is Confrontation with Life's Uncertainty. Existentialists believe life has no meaning, and people must give meaning to it (Kierkegaard in Grøn, 2022; Okoh & Ifeakor, 2024; Putriana et al., 2024). When it comes to existentialism, uncertainty becomes a primary focus to describe how people live without fixed goals. People must deal with the uncertain direction of life and choose their essential purpose. The uncertainties are related to Purpose, Moral Decisions, and Relationships. The Uncertainty of Purpose underlines that without a predefined life plan, everyone needs to establish their own path and purpose. The Uncertainty of Moral Decisions indicates that people may have the freedom to make choices but still face the burden of not knowing the future consequences (Kierkegaard in Grøn, 2022; Okoh & Ifeakor, 2024; Putriana et al., 2024). There are no absolute moral rules that can be a guide to whether people's choices will be the right ones. People must make their way through life's difficult choices without knowing what is right or wrong, which creates stress. The Uncertainty of Relationships underlines that human relationships indeed are unpredictable as conflicts are always present though each person may already practice well- behaved deeds.

The third is Awareness of Mortality and Life's Limitations. The awareness of death accounts creates angst but also makes people aware of the fact that they should embrace such authenticity in life. When people understand the basic limits of their lives, including death and suffering, they will experience existential despair (Kaumpungan et al., 2023; Okoh & Ifeakor, 2024; Russo, 2022). The main part of existential thinking describes how people experience mental conflict after realizing that life has no real direction. The human mind creates inner distress when people face death as inevitable and see pain everywhere without finding meaning. People feel fear and worry when despair strikes, but humans can turn these feelings into growth if people choose to take control of their life's path.

Sadness' Existential Angst in *Inside Out*

In Data 1, Sadness helps people reflect on their lives while forcing people to face their discomfort. By letting tears flow, Riley uses crying to understand her feelings while remaining emotionally honest. In existentialism, humans have freedom, but people must accept responsibility to face their life's problems head on. Crying allows Riley to express her feelings so that she can deal directly with her problems. Sadness shows that embracing emotional challenges promotes better understanding to achieve better results (Coëgnarts, 2018; Docter, 2015; Sinarawerdhi et al., 2023). This statement reflects the idea of confronting existential difficulties by slowing down and allowing oneself to process emotions. Existentialists, such as Sartre, believe that experiencing freedom and responsibility often involves facing the weight of life's struggles head-on, including what Sadness utters.

In Data 2, this quote highlights the paralysis that comes with overwhelming emotions. Existentialism speaks to the idea that people must work through their confusion and emotional paralysis on their own terms. This reflects the existential process of confronting one's own emotional state. In addition, Sadness stops because uncertainty about life's purpose leaves people unable to act. The confusion Riley experiences show up in her feelings of sadness. According to existentialism, people live in a world without a clear purpose, so people must discover their direction for themselves (Docter, 2015; Macann, 2023; Pasopati et al., 2024). Sadness remains because she cannot decide what to do next while feeling lost. By openly accepting her feelings, Riley finds it easier to understand what is happening to her.

In Data 3, Sadness expresses a desire for connection, a fundamental human need. Existentialism acknowledges the difficulty of forming genuine bonds in a world that lacks inherent meaning, underlining the tension between personal freedom and the desire for relational connection. As a result, Sadness only wants to connect with Riley's past happiness because existentialists accept that true bonds between people always remain uncertain. People need emotional bonds in life but find it hard when they cannot connect with each other (Docter,

2015; Macann, 2023; Pasopati et al., 2024). Sadness needs to experience Riley's happy moments as she tries to access her emotions, but Joy works against this. In Duffy's vision, relationships create a conflict between natural desire for human connection and respect for personal freedom.

In Data 4, Sadness comes from accepting that as human beings' people must face difficult times in their lives. As people face the natural limits of life and death, people must face the fragile parts of themselves. Sadness shows that Riley needs to understand how dealing with sad emotions helps her mental well-being. People grow as people by honestly accepting their hardships. Rather than pushing sadness away, Riley chooses to integrate it into her life (de Leeuw et al., 2024; Docter, 2015; Macann, 2023). In doing so, Sadness highlights the importance of experiencing and expressing difficult emotions as a natural part of life. This resonates with existential thought, which emphasizes accepting all aspects of existence, including suffering, as part of human growth.

In Data 5, Sadness shows her weakness in the face of life's difficult challenges. Through Sadness' shared hardship, Riley sees her own difficulty in adjusting to life's changes. According to existential beliefs, people find true authenticity by being open to life's limitations (de Leeuw et al., 2024; Docter, 2015; Macann, 2023). People must understand that difficult feelings are part of their life experience. Then, Sadness reflects existential angst. It mainly because she shows constant presence of despair that signifies the human confrontation with life's hardships and the ongoing need to face the harsh realities of existence.

In Data 6, Sadness steps forward to take full responsibility for Riley's emotional experiences, in accordance with existentialist teachings about personal responsibility. Sadness tells people how taking responsibility for their impact creates a greater awareness of the choices people make. In this moment, Sadness takes responsibility for her actions, highlighting the existential concept of personal accountability (Kurnia et al., 2023; Docter, 2015; Wijayanto et al., 2025). This understanding is essential because the power to

make choices requires that people take responsibility for the effects on their life path.

In Data 7, both Joy and Sadness seek their place in the world by focusing on finding reasons to be important to Riley. This shows how people define their purpose by taking meaningful actions in their life. In this context, this dialogue reflects the search for purpose, which is central to existential philosophy (Kurnia et al., 2023; Docter, 2015; Wijayanto et al., 2025). Sadness' desire to help Riley aligns with the idea that individuals seek meaning in their actions and relationships. Ultimately, the act of helping Riley helps Sadness discover her purpose in life.

In Data 8, Sadness knows that Riley must make changes when her life is updated. The story explores how people deal with life changes and uncertainty. Therefore, change and adaptation are crucial to existentialism, which recognizes that life is in constant flux (Goya, 2024; Docter, 2015; Tyran, 2018). Sadness acknowledges the inevitability of this transformation, encouraging Riley to accept change as part of the process of living. As a result, growth requires adapting to new circumstances though people must face existential turbulence in finding meanings of life.

In Data 9, Sadness means accepting that people's emotions are constantly evolving. It accepts that happy and sad feelings exist within a sequence of memories. In this way, this exchange illustrates the complexity of emotions. In existentialism, the coexistence of joy and sadness represents the intricacies of human experience, with both positive and negative emotions shaping one's understanding of life (Bahn, 2025; Docter, 2015; Lammon, 2025). Moreover, this part shows acceptance of all the changing situations in life.

In Data 10, Sadness presents that hardship is an accepted part of life that should be fully acknowledged. Riley will survive better if she accepts what life brings her. In this context, this dialogue captures the existential acceptance of life's inherent challenges. It aligns with existential thought,

which advocates accepting both the highs and lows of existence as part of the human experience (Bahn, 2025; Docter, 2015; Lammon, 2025). Indeed, this concept supports what existential philosophers say about accepting the limitations of life.

CONCLUSION

The film of *Inside Out* exposes freedom, responsibility, the uncertainty of life, and the acceptance of mortality as existential themes that character of Sadness explores. Sadness then is a painful emotion, not a weakness, and that all people make mistakes, making people realize that they are merely human after all. Sadness also emphasizes that it is better to embrace negative feelings and stop fighting and let them out. It is proven by how Sadness eventually helps Riley develop emotional resilience and balance, especially related to existential questions that life's challenges are what create meaning. Sadness' role in changing Riley's emotional world is also a proof that facing painful feelings does not have to be a negative to grow. This balance of emotions allows Riley to reconnect with herself and her family. *Inside Out* delivers meanings that dealing with negative emotions may play a crucial role in personal transformation, especially when facing such angst that actually leads to emotional intelligence and a more meaningful existence.

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