

THE EXPLICATIONS OF EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR IN THE ANIMALS' *HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN*

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Abstract

This article explores into the concept of existential despair, as presented in The Animals' 1964 song *House of the Rising Sun*. The authors explore how the main character's personal journey grows important existentialist problems such as freedom, responsibility, regret, and the consequences of untrue existence by studying the song's lyrics. The authors of this article employ a qualitative method, which allows the reader to learn more about the object's background. By examining tone and symbolic imagery, the song changes into not only a warning but also a deep thought on what it means to experience life and awaken to the weight of one's own existence. In conclusion, this song is not only about melodic music, but it also contains song lyrics of existential despair as reflected in everyday points of human life.

Keywords: Existential Despair; *House of the Rising Sun*; *The Animals*

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas konsep keputusasaan eksistensial, seperti yang disajikan dalam lagu The Animals tahun 1964 berjudul *House of the Rising Sun*. Para penulis membahas bagaimana perjalanan pribadi tokoh utama menumbuhkan masalah eksistensialis yang penting seperti kebebasan, tanggung jawab, penyesalan, dan konsekuensi dari keberadaan yang tidak benar dengan mempelajari lirik lagu tersebut. Para penulis artikel ini menggunakan metode kualitatif, yang memungkinkan pembaca untuk mempelajari lebih lanjut tentang latar belakang objek tersebut. Dengan memeriksa nada dan citra simbolis, lagu tersebut berubah menjadi tidak hanya peringatan tetapi juga pemikiran mendalam tentang apa artinya mengalami hidup dan menyadari beban keberadaan diri sendiri. Sebagai kesimpulan, lagu ini tidak hanya tentang musik melodi, tetapi juga berisi lirik lagu tentang keputusasaan eksistensial sebagaimana tercermin dalam kehidupan sehari-hari manusia.

Kata kunci: *House of the Rising Sun*; Keputusasaan Eksistensial; *The Animals*

INTRODUCTION

House of the Rising Sun is an American song that has been sung in many versions, but the most famous version was released by The Animals in 1964 (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018). The song has a dark and melancholic theme, telling the story of a person whose life has been destroyed by a bad lifestyle, usually related to gambling, alcohol, or the brothels of New Orleans. It also raises the theme of a deep trauma that destroys someone's life. The song also talks about life that has become chaotic and meaningless in New Orleans. The song usually refers to a place with a bad reputation such as a prison, a brothel, and a casino.

The song has a strong connection to existential sorrow. A total loss of hope occurs in such a situation. Hopelessness is something that many people go through in their lifetime. Usually, it results from prior strong bonds with other close individuals. Some of them go through such dejection as a result of a traumatic incident, a loss, or even a protracted time of hardship. However, for some people, life itself is the source of their despair. This is particularly true when the essence of life is a challenging issue to emotionally analyze, primarily because the truths of life envelop and surround ordinary people. Obviously isolating matters is the only option. There are those who are depressed, even though it seems impossible to define. The despair keeps asking existential questions to people whether the meanings of life actually exist.

This study would like to explore the song of *House of the Rising Sun* from the perspective of existential despair. It focuses on the meanings of life being questioned in that song, especially when social conditions are quite related to individual situations. Therefore, the understanding of this article

would like to put forward life within its rich meanings of complex situations.

METHOD

By using a qualitative method, certain concepts and written data are analyzed to answer the question in this paper. Written through description, online and offline scripts are used to explain correlations between The Animals' *House of the Rising Sun* and point of view of existential despair alongside literary concepts and psychological ideas. Online and offline scripts are derived from books and journals to understand shown matters. The data analysis includes obtaining sources, reading sources carefully, comparing with other issues, quoting into paper, and writing down in reference lists. The research data comes from both the Animals' song and arguments of existential despair. Each of them is read then broken down into its every particular element. The following analyses then include how the song illustrates the side of existential despair. Here, The Animals' song is the object while existential despair is a tool to analyze.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Reflection of Social Complexity in *House of the Rising Sun*

House of the Rising Sun was sung by The Animals in 1964. The meanings of the song lie within such a brothel house. It gives perspectives not only to the men inside but also the women in there. It shows how despair and trauma are involved there (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018). The place may give temporary happiness, but somehow there is no great future in it. The full lyrics of the song are listed below;

Chorus

There is a house in New Orleans
They call the Rising Sun
And it's been the ruin of many of poor boys
And God I know I'm one

Verse I

My Mother was a tailor
She sewed my new blue jeans
My Father was a gambling man
Down in New Orleans

Verse II

Now the only thing the gambler needs
Is a suitcase and a trunk
And the only time he's satisfied
It's when he's all drunk

Verse III

Oh Mother, tell your Children
Not to do what I have done
Spend your lives in sin and misery
In the house of Rising Sun

Verse IV

Well, I got one foot on the platform
The other foot on the train
I'm going back to New Orleans
To wear that Ball and chain
(Genius.com, 2025)

In this song it is written that the character lives and grows up in an area called New Orleans which is known as a wild nightlife. There is no specific time mentioned in the song, but the atmosphere described in the song describes the atmosphere of the early 19th century to the mid-19th century. The character in this song experiences deep despair, this is caused by several things, including a life that is destroyed by bad choices, little chance of escape, feelings of guilt for his failed life. Apart from these three things, the environment

in which he lives also greatly influences the occurrence of the gloomy events that the character has experienced.

Existential Despair and Its Implications

Existentialism is an idea of philosophy from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that emphasizes the individual's existence, freedom, and choice (Pasopati et al., 2024; Roy et al., 2023; Sasan, 2023). Existentialism is a school of philosophy that emphasizes individual freedom, personal responsibility, and the search for meaning in life in an absurd or meaningless world. Existentialism is also an approach to philosophy that has influenced people's view of understanding, reality, values, and ethics (Pasopati et al., 2024; Roy et al., 2023; Sasan, 2023). This study examines its impact on all of these essential aspects of the human condition. This school of thought emerged as a response to the uncertainty of life, suffering, and human anxiety in the face of freedom and choice. In the context of the song of *House of the Rising Sun*, this theory is used to describe a person's responsibility to continue living a meaningless life.

Kierkegaard, one of the pioneers of existentialism, considers despair as a human condition that arises when a person does not live authentically or is not in harmony with his "true self." The feeling of "true self" involves coherence between mental awareness and actual experience, as opposed to self-alienation (Anthony, 2007; Galanaki et al., 2023; Wijaya et al., 2024). This despair occurs because of the tension between what a person wants and the reality he faces. For Kierkegaard, despair is the first step towards authenticity and a deeper relationship with God. The existentialist belief in individual experience and freedom has resulted in an analysis of existing religious beliefs and traditions (Anthony, 2007; Sasan, 2023;

Wijaya et al., 2024). The exploration of despair and authenticity is crucial to reveal humans' true selves and establish a more meaningful connection with their beliefs and values.

In the theory of Existentialism, all the events told in the song are included in the type of existential crisis. An existential crisis is a feeling of discomfort or a recurring thought pattern regarding the meaning of life, identity, and purpose of life. This crisis can cause a person to feel anxious, hopeless, or confused (Deng et al., 2025; Garnow et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2023). An existential crisis can occur at any time in life, but it often occurs when someone experiences a significant life transition. That transition may include such experiences of deep despair, major trauma, guilt about something, loss of a loved one, feeling socially unfulfilled, and dissatisfaction with oneself.

From childhood to adulthood, teenagers may struggle with societal expectations, such as those placed on them by school, parents, and society. Young adults face anxiety and existential concepts about life and meaning. They also may feel a sense of useless pressure when they grow up without knowing what they really are (see Paundrianagari & Arifin, 2025; Rifqi et al, 2025;). This is an existential moment in which children understand they have separate identities from others. Adolescence is a period of unpredictability in which adolescents explore meaning and build their identities (Deng et al., 2025; Garnow et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2023). Teenagers experience increased freedom in making decisions and developing beliefs, which are often met with anxiety.

From adulthood to retirement side, Adulthood is full of decisions, including profession and family. Growing up as an adult is characterized by self-focus, identity discovery, and instability in fields such as school, love, work, perspective on the world,

and residence. The conflict between defined goals such as profession, family, and the unpredictability of life (for example, illness, death, and failure of life) expresses existential tension. Existential meaning concerns all human experiences related to one's essential identity and relationship with the world (Galanaki et al., 2023; Firzatullah et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2023). Furthermore, existentialism promotes subjective interpretation and human experience. Many people feel isolated and locked up in habits or roles. In other words, it is repeated on a daily basis.

An existential crisis roots from various deep and life-changing experiences that challenge a person's sense of purpose and identity. The psychological perspective views it as the psychological impact of existential crises on people's actions and mental health, focusing on depressive disorders, anxiety, and the creation of identities (Anthony, 2007; Pasopati et al., 2024; Uddin, 2024). It also examines how social and cultural factors can influence the development of existential crises, taking into consideration people's change in societal values and norms. Deep sadness, whether caused by personal failings or emotional distress, can rise to questions about life's meaning. An existential crisis is a state of confusion when a person questions the meaning and purpose of his or her exact existence (Deng et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2023; Uddin, 2024). This internal struggle of questioning their beliefs, values, and overall purpose in life can manifest in various ways, impacting both the individual's mental well-being and their sense of identity within society.

Major trauma, such as accidents or events that are not expected, can destroy one's faith in a peace world. Guilt for previous acts can affect a person, causing feelings of guilt and a struggle to reconcile with their

beliefs. An existential crisis is an important moment of self-reflection caused by important incidents in life that raise deep issues related to existence, such as the meaning of life, the existence of reality, and the fact of death (Firzatullah et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2023; Uddin, 2024). The death of a loved one often causes people to realize their mortality and their limited capacity of human connection. Dissatisfaction with a person, such as feeling separated from one's goals or true identity, can lead a person to consider deeply on who they are and what they truly desire out of life. Meaningful relationships and focusing on personal growth can help people learn a sense of meaning of their life (Deng et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2023; Uddin, 2024). Feeling dissatisfied or misunderstood can lead to a sensation of loneliness.

House of the Rising Sun and Its Deep Existential Meanings

The song brings up the subject of severe trauma that ruins lives. The song also discusses how chaotic and pointless New Orleans life has become. Typically, the song alludes to a place with various negative reputations. The Chorus introduces a place known as "Rising Sun". The songwriter here uses a euphemism style in explaining "Rising Sun" (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018). "Rising Sun" has the meaning of "Brothel House" in the context of the song. The Rising Sun becomes a silent place of pain. It is how the lives of drunkards and gamblers were at that time, and gave a lot of destruction and trauma to most of the boys at that time. It also underlines existential crisis in by regarding the meaning of life, identity, and purpose of life.

Verse I actually introduces his mother who is a tailor and his father who is a gambler and drunkard. It can be seen that the main character in the song is a miner. This can be

seen from the lyrics: "My mother was a tailor; she sewed my new blue jeans". Jeans at that time were used by miners/miners to protect their bodies from gravel, because jeans are a type of pants made of strong material or denim (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018). For the second stanza, especially the words "My father was a gambling man", it shows the existential value of freedom. The words "my father was a gambling man" also represented self-distraction or risk of his life. Both mother and father represented their own meaning, such as the mother represented care by the words "she sewed my new blue jeans" and the father represented an existential of freedom by the words "gambling man". This verse also points to an existential crisis in the senses of self-reflection of meaning in life, the existence of reality, and the fact of death (Deng et al., 2025; Dawdy & Weyhing, 2008; Riza et al., 2025). The lyrics of the song "House of the Rising Sun" by The Animals can be interpreted as a reflection on the complexities of life and the choices we make. The contrasting roles of the mother and father in the song highlight different aspects of human existence and the search for meaning.

Verse II shows how the father of the main character in the song, apart from being a gambler and drunkard, is also a traveler. This verse also shows how his father represents how destructive lifestyle is seen clearly. We can see this from the lyrics: "And the only things a gambler needs are a suitcase and a trunk" (Literal meaning: Suitcase and trunk). Suitcase and trunk at that time were used by people to travel. People who often travel without a clear direction and have no purpose (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018). Then, one thing that makes a drunkard, gambler, and traveler feel satisfied is when he could not control himself or was drunk. The words "And the only time he's satisfied is when

he's all drunk" shows that satisfaction of his life is nonsense, on the other words there is no purpose or connection. This verse also shows how existentialism shows the impact of drunk people who feel dissatisfied (Deng et al., 2025; Dawdy & Weyhing, 2008; Hananto, 2022). By stating so, this verse also underlines dissatisfaction with a person, such as feeling separated from one's goals or true identity in life.

In Verse III, it indicates that the trauma experienced by this character is deep enough that he gives a message to all mothers not to let their children make the same mistakes and spend their lives in misery and experience an existential crisis in New Orleans (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018; Rafiuddin et al., 2025). In this verse, the writer wants to break the cycle of life to avoid the same fate of his life. The words "Oh Mother, tell your children", it can be understood that his mother plays a role as a prevention of future mistakes. And the words "the house of rising sun" has a meaning as an ending of bad faiths that have already been done by him. Moreover, this verse also underscores such following existential concerns as all human experiences related to one's essential identity and relationship with the world (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018; Roy et al., 2023).

In Verse IV, the lyrics reflect a sense of longing, regret, and attachment. The image of "one foot on the platform and one on the train" symbolizes confusion or uncertainty in choosing between two places or decisions (Beviglia, 2022; Breihan, 2018; Rafiuddin et al., 2025). Returning to New Orleans "to wear the ball and chain" indicates acceptance of the burden or consequences, perhaps related to past actions or responsibilities that must be faced. By stating so, this verse points out to the feeling of "true self" that involves coherence between mental awareness and actual

experience, as opposed to self-alienation (Deng et al., 2025; Dawdy & Weyhing, 2008; Hananto, 2022). This despair occurs because of the tension between what a person wants and the reality he faces. These lyrics are simple but powerful, creating a clear emotional picture.

CONCLUSION

The song *House of the Rising Sun* is a traditional folk ballad that tells the story of a life full of trauma and suffering. The essence of this song is a warning that the environment has a major influence on a child's mental health. This song describes a life that is destroyed by the past, both in lifestyle choices and relationships that can trap them in a meaningless world, so that they cannot move forward to a better life. The writer of the song directs the audience on a journey that shows existential crises such as the burden of freedom, the consequences of untrue choices, and the painful being alone that comes with a life without meaning. The song also explores the main character's inner conflict between a family trait, behaviors and personal choice. In the end, *House of the Rising Sun* serves as a powerful and poetic representation of existentialism. It also represents the moment when a person looks back on a life not completely lived, taking a huge burden of regret, while still holding the clarity to warn others. The song does more than just sadness, it examines, admits guilt, and, in its own tragic manner, speaks the truth.

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