

# Psychological Condition in Facing Existential Crisis Reflected in Gulch's Song Lyrics

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## Abstract

*Understanding how music conveys complex psychological experiences requires both literary and semiotic interpretation. This thesis analyzes the existential crisis reflected in the lyrics of the band Gulch, particularly from their albums *Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath* and *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress*. The analysis applies Roland Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation to explore how literal (denotative) and symbolic (connotative) meanings in the lyrics reflect deep psychological turmoil and existential anxiety. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. The primary data consist of selected song lyrics by Gulch, and the theory of two orders of signification by Roland Barthes is used to decode the embedded meanings within the texts. This study also considers the emotional states and existential conflicts expressed through the lyrical characters. The findings reveal that Gulch's song lyrics convey profound psychological conditions such as alienation, suicidal ideation, inner conflict, and loss of meaning. Through Barthes' semiotic lens, these lyrics serve as metaphors for existential suffering and the modern individual's struggle to find identity and purpose amidst chaos. The violent and surreal imagery, while intense, becomes a literary medium through which existential crises are expressed and interpreted.*

**Keywords:** *existential crisis, psychological condition, denotation and connotation, Gulch*

## Introduction

Growing up often leads individuals to confront various internal challenges, including the need to make personal decisions independently. This developmental phase is not only marked by physical maturity but also by emotional and psychological transformations. The shift from childhood to adulthood becomes a defining moment that prompts people to reflect on life's purpose, meaning, and the reality of existence. As people mature, they begin to experience confusion, doubt, and even emotional instability. These conditions are commonly recognized as symptoms of an existential crisis.

Existential crisis is a period or condition when someone facing a deep hesitation and questions about meaning, purpose and value of life itself. Usually this crises are involve an intense reflection about fundamental things like the meaning of life, self identity, death, existence, freedom and responsibility. As

quoted from Senkevich (2016: 1) stated that “In psychology, the issue of meaning of life and searching for life purpose has been linked, with the phenomenon of self-transcendence of human existence”.

This crisis usually involve deep evaluation towards self identity, values, and someone’s beliefs. Even though this term often being linked with existential philosophy, that being pioneered by figures like Jean-Paul Satre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard. Existential crisis also relevant on field of psychology and mental helath.

As stated by Senkevich (2016: 4-7) “Existential crisis is a phenomenon that involving deep contemplation about meaning and life purpose. Even though it can inflicting an uncomfortable situation, this crisis is also open an opportunity for self development and wider comprehension about identity and life”.

Literary works, especially in the form of poetry and lyrics, often serve as a mirror to reflect these internal battles. Lyrics, in particular, are a compelling medium through which musicians express personal struggles and emotional depth. The hardcore punk band Gulch, originating from Santa Cruz, California, exemplifies this phenomenon through their aggressive yet emotionally charged lyrics. Songs from their albums *Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath* and *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress* convey themes of pain, identity conflict, nihilism, and spiritual disconnection. Central themes in existential thought.

Despite the literary richness of lyrical expression, hardcore punk as a genre has often been overlooked in academic literary studies, which tend to focus more on traditional poetry, mainstream music, or politically motivated genres like hip-hop. Gulch, in particular, has received minimal scholarly attention, even though their lyrics are dense with metaphor, emotional nuance, and existential reflection. This thesis addresses that gap by offering a literary and psychological interpretation of their work, treating their lyrics as texts worthy of academic inquiry.

All aspects that occur in existential crisis and it’s influences on social hustle in society, certainly cannot be defined by individual own perspective only, that’s why there must be a limitation that determine research on this aspects. Researcher uses the Semiotic Theory of Roland Barthes in this research, it’s a

theory that analyze how everyday objects, texts, and images carry ideological meaning beyond their surface-level appearance.

Based on this background, researcher will analyze the selected songs from “*Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath*” and “*Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress*” albums with the theme of existential crisis in facing the struggle of questioning the meaning of life itself. In order to be the right research, the researcher will use the Semiotic Theory of Roland Barthes by using a semiotic approach.

## **Literary Review**

### **Semiotic Theory of Roland Barthes**

To analyze the psychological conditions individuals face during an existential crisis particularly as reflected in literary texts such as song lyrics—requires a structured approach rooted in theory. One such approach is semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior. Semiotics explores how meaning is constructed and understood through signs in language, culture, and media. Within this field, Roland Barthes presents a foundational theory that divides signification into two levels: denotation and connotation.

### **Definition of Existential Crisis**

An existential crisis is a profound psychological state characterized by intense introspection and questioning of one’s existence, purpose, and meaning in life. This paper provides a comprehensive definition of existential crisis, integrating insights from philosophy, psychology, and sociology. By examining its conceptual foundations and distinguishing features, the study aims to clarify the phenomenon and highlight its relevance in contemporary contexts, particularly as it relates to personal growth, mental health, and societal influences.

### **Existential Crisis in the Eyes of Psychology**

An existential crisis is characterized by deep contemplation of fundamental questions concerning existence, such as “What is the purpose of life?” or “What defines my identity?” Often triggered by significant life events or transitions, existential crises can evoke feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and alienation. The

concept has its roots in existentialist philosophy, notably in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger, who emphasized the individual's struggle to find meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe.

### **Types of Existential Crisis**

Types of Existential Crisis:

a. Identity Crisis

An identity crisis occurs when an individual questions their sense of self, including their roles, values, and goals. It is often prompted by significant life changes, such as career transitions, relationships, or adolescence.

b. Mortality Crisis

A mortality crisis arises from an acute awareness of death and the finite nature of life. It is commonly triggered by personal loss, aging, or life-threatening events.

c. Crisis of Meaning

This type involves questioning the overall purpose and significance of one's life or existence. It is often linked to experiences of monotony, failure, or existential boredom.

d. Isolation Crisis

An isolation crisis is rooted in the realization of one's inherent separateness from others, even in close relationships. This crisis highlights the tension between individual autonomy and the desire for connection.

e. Freedom and Responsibility Crisis

This crisis stems from the realization that humans possess ultimate freedom to shape their lives, accompanied by the weight of responsibility for their choices.

### **Speakers in Song Lyrics**

In a literary work such as poem or song, the speaker must have the purpose of why they brought the work. In addition, they also want to voice the voices for whom they work. So in this thesis the researcher uses several theories in order to analyze who is the speaker or for whom they created the work. Story (2017) argue that In analyzing a song or song lyric, the audience does not only assume that the poet is the main speaker, even if the creator can create the work much differently than he really is.

## Research Method

To get answers of the psychological condition in facing existential crisis reflected in Gulch's song lyrics, qualitative research is used here. It is used because the researcher gives a descriptions about something and it does not include any statistic calculation and enumeration. In this research, the researcher is really concerned with the process. The researcher's opinion is based on Cresswell (2009:13) said that as Qualitative approach-Participatory worldview, narrative design, and open-ended interview. Based on the quotation above, qualitative research can be used to examine human behavior presented in narrative form, and this research focuses on psychological phenomenon by analyzing words, providing detailed views and also conducting research in a more natural large. Qualitative research is very different from quantitative one and this explanation provides an understanding so that the research can be understood well. This study analyzes the psychological condition in facing existential crisis reflected in the song lyrics of the album "Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath" (2018) and "Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress" (2020) by Gulch. The main data of this study are the song lyrics from both albums, which are analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Supporting data are obtained from Gulch's official Bandcamp website and Spotify. The data collection methods include reading, identifying, classifying, and selecting relevant song lyrics. Data analysis is conducted by displaying, explaining, and interpreting the data to answer the research questions.

## Finding and Discussion

Some Gulch songs on the *Burning Desire To Draw Last Breath and Impenetrable Cerebral Fortess* album that become objects include; *Flesh Pursuit*, *Burning Desire To Draw Last Breath*, *E.P.T.S*, *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortess*, *Cries of Pleasure Heavenly Pain and Self-inflicted Mental Terror*, all lyrics are written by all of band members including Elliot Morrow (vocal), Cole Kakimoto (guitar), Chirstian J. Castillo (guitar), Tim Fleagal (bass), Michael Durrett (bass), Salvatore Ciaramitaro (drum). However, to find out more about the issues to be raised, existential crisis, is main topic of this analysis. Then Researcher identified

the symptoms of existential crisis about anything that members tried to express in their songs:

***Flesh Pursuit***

*Flesh Pursuit* is the second listed on the *Burning Desire To Draw Last Breath* album. The song represents a dark, psychological confrontation with the self. Its lyrics reflect emotional numbness, moral corruption, and existential despair. Below is a breakdown of selected lyrics using Barthes' semiotic framework:

<b>Lyrics of the Song</b>	<b>Denotative Meaning</b>	<b>Connotative Meaning</b>
“Aggressive repercussions for denial of advances”	Bitter consequences for refusing to take the progress or change.	Offer internal abuse for suppressing vulnerability or rejecting personal growth-conflict between self and ego.
“No outcome but one, no path for second chances”	Only one conclusion, no chance for redemption.	Bringing a gloomy mindset; mirrors existential hopelessness, where the future feels predetermined and irreversible.

(Gulch, *Flesh Pursuit*, 2018: stanza 1, line 1-2)

The quotation on the first line, “*Aggressive repercussions for denial of advances*”, opens with a paradoxical pairing of the words “*aggressive*” and “*repercussions*”. Denotatively, this line suggests violent or harsh consequences that follow a refusal to move forward or accept something new. The phrase “*denial of advances*” likely refers to an individual’s refusal to grow, to change, or to respond to emotional or psychological developments.

Moreover, the phrase “*mental incapacity*” connotes a kind of psychic paralysis. It reflects a condition where the individual no longer possesses the strength or will to perceive or process reality as it is. It may indicate trauma-induced disconnection or the mind’s retreat from rational structure. Together, the line builds a deeper connotative layer that expresses emotional or psychological truth.

The depiction of the modern individual as broken, suspended in illusion, and emotionally numb.

The following line, “*Close the door on remorse and empathy,*” adds a chilling emotional dimension. Literally, it refers to someone intentionally cutting off feelings of guilt and compassion. Denotatively, the phrase is simple and brutal: there is a decisive act of emotional shutdown. Connotatively, this line suggests the dehumanization of the self. Barthes would describe this as a symbolic rejection of emotional accountability and connection, where remorse (regret for moral failure) and empathy (the ability to feel for others) are seen not as virtues, but as vulnerabilities to be sealed off.

The line “*Flesh pursuit, carnal injustice*” opens with a duality that is central to Gulch’s lyrical aesthetic: the tension between bodily instinct and moral consequence. Denotatively, “*flesh pursuit*” refers to the pursuit of physical or sexual gratification, while “*carnal injustice*” suggests that such acts involve a moral or ethical violation. The word “injustice” implies harm. Something unjust being done, possibly to the self or others..

In the quotation above the line “*Circle the void into realms of foreign fantasy*” continues the motif of existential disorientation. Denotatively, it describes a motion *circling* around a *void*, or emptiness, and entering into *foreign fantasy*, or unfamiliar imagined experiences. On the surface, it evokes the image of someone orbiting a hollow center, avoiding a direct confrontation with whatever lies at the core of their emptiness. Connotatively, Barthes’ theory invites us to look beyond the surface image. The *void* represents existential nothingness, the terrifying emptiness that confronts individuals when traditional meanings, such as religion, relationships, or societal roles fail to provide purpose. “*Circling*” this void implies that the subject does not fully enter or confront it; instead, they move around it, postponing or avoiding direct existential confrontation.

This leads directly into the next line, “*A belly full of mud, a desire to attach*”, which offers a stark contrast between pollution and connection. The song “*Flesh Pursuit*” reflects a profound existential crisis, portraying an individual overwhelmed by inner conflict, shame, and emotional detachment.

Through Barthes' denotation and connotation framework, the lyrics reveal themes of suppressed trauma, compulsive desire, moral decay, and isolation. Despite deep psychological wounds and self-perceived impurity, the subject continues to long for connection and meaning. Capturing the tragic paradox of the human condition: being broken yet still reaching for healing.

### ***Burning Desire To Draw Last Breath***

*Burning Desire To Draw Last Breath* is the third song on the album with same name or also can be called the title track of the album. This song captures a visceral psychological descent, blending existential despair with imagery of physical defilement and emotional numbness (Gulch, *Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath*, 2020: stanza 1, line 1–2)

The opening lyric "*Ingesting lies to feed a disease*" vividly portrays the consumption of deception, either self-inflicted or imposed by society. Denotatively, it speaks of physically taking in lies as sustenance for a disease. Connotatively, this line reflects internalized self-hate, societal shame, or personal delusions that fuel an ongoing mental or emotional deterioration.

Barthes would categorize these words as loaded signs, what is denoted as "*lies*" and "*disease*" is re-coded culturally and psychologically. The "*disease*" here isn't literal, it's existential rot, a manifestation of long-held disillusionment or trauma that festers over time. The subject becomes a victim of their own belief system, perpetually feeding their despair.

The line "*Eyeless existence trading pleasure for pain*" paints a chilling picture of a life lived without insight or joy. Denotatively, it suggests a being that cannot see, giving up pleasure in exchange for pain. On the connotative level, the lyric reflects a willful retreat from emotional engagement, indicative of depression or dissociation. The individual chooses numbness over vulnerability, reinforcing a key theme in existential psychology: the rejection of authentic feeling as a defense against suffering.

(Gulch, *Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath*, 2020: closing line)

The final line, "*Burning desire to draw last breath*," is both the song's title and its emotional culmination. Denotatively, it speaks of an intense wish to die, with "*draw last breath*" symbolizing death itself. The word "*burning*" adds

urgency, passion, and suffering. This is no quiet resignation, but a desperate craving for an end. Connotatively, this is the epitome of existential collapse. The subject is consumed by the weight of life, no longer able to reconcile with the contradictions, lies, numbness, and pain that define their reality. This line encapsulates nihilistic longing. Not just for death, but for freedom from self-awareness.

The “Last breath” isn’t merely biological. It’s symbolic of ending one’s narrative, a rebellion against the pain of continued existence. The subject sees no path to meaning within life, so death becomes the only remaining resolution. Overall, “Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath” is a poetic descent into existential despair. Through Barthes’ semiotic model, each line uncovers layers of emotional repression, self-destruction, and longing for oblivion. The song encapsulates the internal war between surviving and surrendering. Between enduring reality and escaping it entirely. It offers a brutal yet honest portrayal of the psychological breakdown that follows prolonged alienation from truth, meaning, and self.

### ***E.P.T.S***

E.P.T.S by Gulch explores the psychological landscape of a person consumed by suicidal ideation, alienation, and a profound sense of spiritual and physical degradation. Gulch’s lyrical structure is characterized by fragmented but intense expressions of existential exhaustion. The opening line, “*Ever present thoughts of suicide*” starkly communicates the persistence of suicidal ideation. The denotative meaning is clear, such thoughts never disappear. However, connotatively, it suggests more than simple repetition: it’s about a haunting psychological state, one that defines the subject’s day-to-day existence.

Barthes would view this as a second-order sign, where the phrase does not merely describe death-wish but embodies existential dread. It reflects a connotative perspective of reality where suicide becomes not an escape, but a constant mental companion almost a character within one’s consciousness.

The next line, “*Looming urge of self extermination*” adds weight. “*Looming*” implies threat; “*urge*” suggests impulsivity; “*self-extermination*” gives the act a cold, clinical finality. “*Hypnotism of the soul and mind*” evokes a trance-like dissociation. Denotatively, it describes being mentally and spiritually

subdued. Connotatively, this signals a loss of autonomy or agency, the subject becomes a passive observer of their own suffering.

Barthes might interpret this as an example of meaning erasure, where language seems full of emotion but actually points to a void of subjectivity. The individual is not controlling their thoughts or emotions; they are under the influence of overwhelming mental exhaustion.

Then comes “*The body is a temple that is damned to demolition.*” Here, the sacred (“*temple*”) is desecrated (“*demolition*”). The connotative impact is immense. It implies a complete self-repudiation. What is supposed to be revered is now condemned, showing the subject's collapse of self-worth and total existential alienation. Barthes’ theory helps decode this reversal: where what is culturally feared (death) is now imbued with emotional warmth. This suggests the romanticization of suicide, common in extreme existential breakdowns, where obliteration seems like the only way to reclaim peace or dignity.

In conclusion, Gulch’s *E.P.T.S* is a direct confrontation with the existential void. Through Barthes’ semiotic theory, the song’s violent and vulnerable language emerges not just as a narrative of suffering but as a system of signs encoding deeper existential depiction of impurity, rejection, failure, and silent rebellion. The subject’s suicidal ideation is not merely personal; it becomes a universal symbol for the human condition in crisis, where meaning has dissolved, and only the illusion of relief remains. Barthes’ connotation framework allows the listener to grasp how *E.P.T.S* offers not resolution, but a mirrored emotional extinction.

### ***Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress***

Gulch’s *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress*, which shares its title with the band’s 2020 album, presents a visceral and metaphorically rich depiction of psychological imprisonment and existential suffocation. Using Barthes’ concept of denotation and connotation, the lyrics are decoded to explore deeper layers of existential anxiety and inner torment. The opening line, “*Holding hands with torment through the sea of mental stressors,*” evokes both a visual and emotional metaphor. Denotatively, it describes a person enduring overwhelming mental

strain. But connotatively, it personifies suffering as something the subject is intimately connected to—not resisting pain, but walking hand-in-hand with it.

The next line, *“Intertwined with solitude is silence the aggressor,”* plays on contradiction. Silence, usually considered peaceful, is now violent. Connotatively, this line explores how isolation amplifies mental suffering. Solitude becomes claustrophobic; silence becomes oppressive. In Barthes’ perspective, the “aggressor” is a second-order sign of : mental silence transforms into psychological noise.

The image of *“1000 eyes that spark / Hovering in the dark”* evokes an eerie, dreamlike setting. Denotatively, it describes glowing eyes in the void. Connotatively, these “eyes” represent internalized judgment, fear of being watched or exposed. common in states of anxiety or mental fragmentation. Barthes might interpret this as the connotative depiction the mind’s projection of guilt or fear takes on a symbolic form of surveillance.

The line *“Star sent servant sent to please this senseless urge”* continues this theme. It suggests the self has become a servant to irrational cravings or destructive instincts. The “star” connotes fate or destiny, giving the line deeper meaning on psychological perspective.

*“Impenetrable cerebral fortress from which they can't emerge”* is the song’s thematic core. Denotatively, it refers to a mental structure so strong it becomes inescapable. Connotatively, it captures the essence of existential entrapment. The mind, once a place of thought and awareness, becomes a prison. Barthes’ concept of second-order sign applies here. The fortress is not just a literal structure but a symbol of how thoughts can alienate rather than empower.

*“Blood for tears, ever-growing fears”* reflects a profound emotional deadening. crying has stopped, replaced by blood, symbolizing violence, injury, or emotional collapse. This connotes the idea that pain has become so internalized it must now express through physical or destructive ways.

The closing line, *“Oozing through the cell of one’s own construction,”* is a powerful metaphor for self-created suffering. The “cell” represents the boundaries the subject has placed around themselves. Perhaps defensively, but now they act as containment for fear, guilt, or trauma. In Barthes’ theory, this is a

rich example of a sign that conceals a painful truth: that we often create the very prisons from which we long to escape. *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress* is a sonic architecture of psychological decay and existential confinement.

The next line, “*A seed for desires unattainable forever*” drives the existential point home. Desires are planted, but never harvested. Denotatively, it speaks to craving something unreachable. Connotatively, it reflects perpetual dissatisfaction. A key marker of existential crisis. The more the subject chases fulfillment, the further it seems. The segment below portrays self-abandonment and the pursuit of union with another, not for love, but to escape inner voids. In “*Slipping tongues through the void of aspirations,*” the lyric turns grotesque and poetic. The tongue, a symbol of speech and intimacy, enters an emotional vacuum. It attempts to bridge the gap between bodies and dreams. But that void, lost ambition or failed hope remains. It reflects how, for the subject, sex has replaced purpose, yet leaves them more hollow than before. The following lines below encapsulate the paradox of the entire song. The unholy marriage of pain and pleasure, the confusion between suffering and ecstasy.

*Cries of Pleasure, Heavenly Pain* is Gulch’s sensual lament, where the vocabulary of sex becomes the grammar of existential collapse. Through the lens of Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory, the lyrics reveal more than erotic imagery. They communicate the fragmentation of identity, the futility of longing, and the futility of salvation through the flesh. Each connotative layer turns desire into a mirror of suffering, showing that when the soul is starved, the body cries louder, but not clearer. In this song, the human condition is exposed not in agony, but in the silent scream between pleasure and pain.

### ***Self-Inflicted Mental Terror***

Gulch’s *Self-Inflicted Mental Terror* is a visceral and symbolic descent into the tortured psyche. The lyrics convey a brutal, unfiltered confrontation with the internalization of pain, self-destruction, and the collapse of meaning, themes resonant with existential crisis. Through Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework, we can interpret these lyrics at two levels: denotation, or literal meaning, and connotation, the associative, emotional, or cultural symbolism encoded within the language.

The chorus line “*Self-inflicted mental terror / Seeking pleasure through the endless pain*” encapsulates the song’s existential paradox: the pursuit of relief through destruction. The subject is not a victim but an active agent, a self-harmer of the soul. Pain is no longer the consequence. It is the desire.

*Self-Inflicted Mental Terror* presents a harrowing self-narrative of existential collapse, where the mind becomes a dungeon of fear and longing. With Barthes’ theory of denotation and connotation, the song transcends mere horror-core lyricism; it constructs a sign of internal exile, where trauma is chosen, not just endured, and the search for meaning becomes a descent into pain. Gulch portrays the modern subject not as a seeker of truth, but as one who punishes themselves for not finding it. In this track, terror is not inflicted by the world. But by the self, trapped within the echo chamber of its own collapsing identity.

## Conclusion

According to the fourth chapter, this research concludes that Gulch’s selected song lyrics from the albums *Burning Desire to Draw Last Breath* and *Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress* vividly portray psychological turmoil rooted in existential crisis. Using Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory. Particularly his concepts of denotation and connotation. The analysis uncovers that behind the violent and chaotic surface of the lyrics lies a layered emotional landscape filled with fear, emptiness, and existential anxiety. The analysis focused on how the denotative and connotative meanings within Gulch’s lyrics reflect the psychological condition of individuals facing an existential crisis. The characters portrayed in the lyrics appear to struggle with a variety of existential themes: guilt, spiritual decay, suicidal ideation, and emotional numbness. Each song functions as a unique representation of a different form of existential anxiety. Whether it be self-inflicted isolation (*Impenetrable Cerebral Fortress*), erotic escapism (*Cries of Pleasure, Heavenly Pain*), or suicidal finality (*E.P.T.S*). Barthes’ theory allowed the researcher to move beyond literal interpretation and examine how these songs create a broader portrait around suffering and identity. Ultimately, this study affirms that Gulch’s lyrics are not only emotionally intense but also rich with symbolic meaning. When interpreted through semiotic theory, these works

become more than musical expression; they emerge as literary artifacts that mirror the internal conflict many individuals face when grappling with despair, freedom, identity, and emotional detachment. This research proves that music, particularly within extreme genres like hardcore punk, can serve as a powerful medium for articulating the complex psychological realities of existential crisis.

This study is expected to serve as a meaningful contribution to literary research, particularly for those interested in the intersection between music, psychology, and semiotics. For future researchers, there is vast potential to explore similar themes in other alternative or underground music genres that are often overlooked in academic circles. Gulch's work provides an excellent starting point for examining modern expressions of existential dread, identity fragmentation, and emotional trauma.

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