

EXISTENCE AND FREEDOM IN HORSE METAPHOR: A STUDY OF CREATIVE PROCESS IN PAINTING ART

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 24-05-2026

Accepted: 19-06-2026

Published: 20-06-2026

Keyword: Freedom,
existentialism, horse
metaphor, creative process.

ABSTRACT

Freedom is understood as a fundamental aspect of human existence because every individual is confronted with the capacity to choose, determine attitudes, and take responsibility for the meaning of life they construct, as emphasized in existentialist thought, particularly that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Within the practice of contemporary visual art, this understanding is often manifested through personal experience, existential reflection, and visual symbolism that become essential elements in the creative process. This study aims to produce a painting that visualizes freedom and self-existence through the metaphor of the horse within an expressive surrealist approach. The method employed is a qualitative creation-based approach referring to Graham Wallas's stages of the creative process: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. The results indicate that the visualization of the horse is able to represent relational dynamics, awareness of limitation, and the process of accepting wounds as part of the formation of self-meaning. These findings affirm that painting can function as a reflective medium for understanding freedom as an ongoing existential process within human experience.

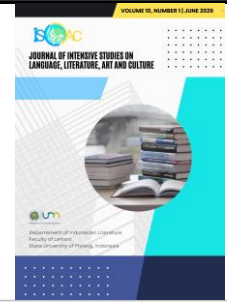
INTRODUCTION

Freedom is one of the central issues in human life that remains relevant in

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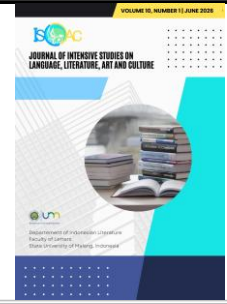


contemporary social and cultural contexts. In existentialist discourse, freedom is understood not merely as the ability to choose, but also as the responsibility for the consequences of those choices. Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy positions freedom as an existential condition inherent in human beings, in which individuals are required to recognize and bear the meaning of every action they undertake. This understanding continues to be widely used as an analytical framework in art and cultural studies today (Firdaus, 2011; Suryanto, 2022).

In contemporary visual art practices, the idea of freedom is often expressed through personal, reflective symbols and visual metaphors, in which visual elements function not only aesthetically but also as structures of meaning that connect the artist's ideas and inner experiences to the audience's interpretation. As a dominant creative visual form in contemporary art, visual metaphor is proposed as a foundation for artworks to communicate complex ideas and narratives visually, while integrating conceptual meaning with individual experience within the artistic creation process (Alghathami, 2023). Metaphor enables artists to communicate complex inner experiences indirectly yet communicatively. According to Suryanto (2022), metaphor in visual art functions as a bridge between the artist's subjective experiences and the audience's interpretation. One visual metaphor frequently used to represent freedom, strength, and existential dynamics is the horse.

In visual art, the horse is not merely presented as an anatomical representation, but also as a symbolic language rich in meaning. Hartanto (2021) explains that, within artistic contexts, horses are often interpreted as symbols of vitality, energy, and freedom of movement, while simultaneously representing the tension between power and restraint. This view is reinforced by Hismanto et al. (2022), who state that the horse, as an object in painting, can convey emotional and philosophical messages through body gestures, positioning, and relationships with other visual elements.

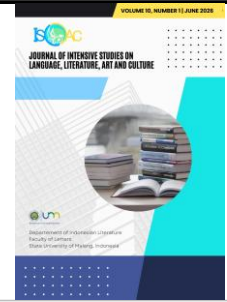
Studies of contemporary artists' work indicate that horse metaphors and bodily representations are frequently used to express personal existential experiences. The



works of Ugo Untoro, for example, position horses as symbols of suffering, wounds, and human limitations in the face of life's realities (Kunto, 2024). This approach does not portray freedom as an ideal condition but rather as a process marked by conflict and inner tension.

The works of Frida Kahlo present bodily experience, pain, and identity struggles as primary visual sources within her creative process. Her self-portraits function not only as physical representations but also as reflective media for trauma, suffering, and emotional experiences that shape self-awareness. Research by Turkheimer, Liu, Fagerholm, Dazzan, and Loggia (2022) demonstrates that the choice of color and visual structure in Kahlo's self-portraits is closely related to the intensity of her emotional and physical experiences, allowing the works to be understood as authentic expressions of complex inner experiences. Through emotional honesty in representing the body and wounds, Kahlo's artistic practice reveals that artistic freedom can emerge from the courage to express deeply personal experiences as part of the process of understanding and accepting oneself. This emotional honesty demonstrates that artistic freedom can arise through the disclosure of one's most intimate personal experiences.

Meanwhile, in more recent contemporary art practices, Alexander Kryzhanovskiy explores psychological conflict, memory, and inner transformation through symbolic figuration and ambiguous visual spaces. His artistic practice focuses on individuals as social beings whose unconscious experiences often conflict with rational expectations and societal norms. These tensions become sources of trauma, self-reflection, and the possibility of personal transformation (Kryzhanovskiy, 2025). This perspective suggests that internal experiences leave complex traces of memory that shape how individuals understand themselves and their surrounding reality. Such an approach reinforces the idea that inner experiences can be translated into reflective visual narratives, which aligns with the present study's use of the horse metaphor as a medium for exploring freedom, wounds, and self-acceptance in contemporary painting.



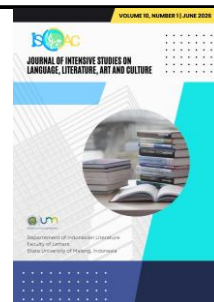
Based on this review, this study positions the horse metaphor as a visual medium for exploring self-freedom within expressive surrealist painting. Freedom in this research is not understood as limitless liberation but as a process of self-awareness that entails wounds, healing, and acceptance of limitations. Every individual inevitably encounters suffering. Such suffering may take the form of wounds, whether major or minor, physical or psychological. Emotional wounds, often referred to as inner wounds, may emerge through various events, including traumatic experiences originating from family environments or surrounding social contexts. Feelings of guilt may also become a source of emotional wounds (Agnes, 2021).

The creative process model introduced by Graham Wallas in *The Art of Thought* (1926) remains a primary framework for understanding how artistic ideas and meanings develop through systematic stages, namely preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Contemporary studies demonstrate that these stages continue to be used in analyzing creative thinking processes across various contexts, empirically mapping how individuals move from the initial exploration of ideas toward evaluation and realization of outcomes (Anggraini, Lutfiyah, & Anas, 2021). Through Graham Wallas's creative process approach, artistic creation is directed not only toward visual results but also toward interpreting the process itself as part of the artist's existential journey.

Therefore, this study aims to produce paintings that visualize freedom and self-existence through the horse metaphor, using an expressive, surrealist approach in which the creative process serves as the primary method for developing artistic ideas. This research is expected to contribute to the development of contemporary visual art discourse, particularly in artistic creation practices rooted in philosophical reflection and personal experience.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative creation-based research approach in the field of visual arts, positioning the artistic creation process as the primary method of inquiry. The



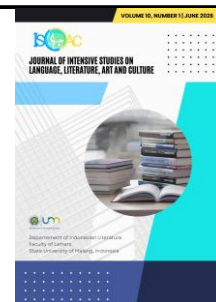
research focused on visualizing the concepts of freedom and self-existence through the horse metaphor in an expressive, surrealist painting approach. In this context, painting was not only understood as an aesthetic product but also as a reflective medium that integrates personal experience, philosophical understanding, emotional exploration, and symbolic visual representation.

The creative process in this study was based on Graham Wallas's theory in *The Art of Thought* (1926), which consists of four interconnected stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. These stages were used as the conceptual framework for developing ideas and realizing the artworks.

The first stage, preparation, involved collecting references and conceptual foundations related to existentialism, freedom, horse symbolism, visual metaphor, and contemporary visual art practices. Literature studies were conducted through books, journals, and previous artworks relevant to the themes explored in this research. At this stage, the artist also observed horse anatomy, gestures, body movements, and emotional expressions to deepen their visual understanding of the subject. Personal experiences of emotional wounds, self-awareness, freedom, and psychological conflict were explored as the conceptual basis for the artworks.

The second stage, incubation, was carried out through reflective contemplation and subconscious processing of ideas. During this phase, the collected references and personal experiences were internalized through emotional and imaginative exploration. The artist reflected on experiences of suffering, healing, limitation, and self-acceptance, allowing artistic concepts to develop naturally before being transformed into visual form. In this process, the horse metaphor gradually emerged as a symbol of strength, vulnerability, existential conflict, and freedom.

The third stage, illumination, marked the emergence of intuitive artistic ideas and symbolic visual imagery. At this stage, the artist began to discover visual concepts that could represent existential experiences through horse figures and surreal compositions. Ideas concerning color symbolism, body gestures, wounds, wings, spatial ambiguity, and



interactions between figures emerged intuitively and were developed through sketches and visual experimentation. Symbolic visual elements were consciously arranged to represent emotional healing, responsibility, inner conflict, and self-freedom.

The final stage, verification, involved the realization, evaluation, and refinement of the artworks. In this phase, sketches and conceptual ideas were transformed into paintings using oil paint on canvas as the primary medium. Technical considerations such as composition, color harmony, texture, brushwork, lighting, and visual balance were carefully evaluated to ensure the intended emotional and symbolic meanings were effectively communicated. Reflective evaluation was also conducted throughout the painting process to analyze whether the visual elements successfully represented the concepts of existential freedom, suffering, healing, and self-acceptance.

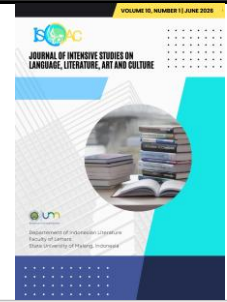
Through this method, the study positioned painting as a medium of existential reflection, in which the creative process itself became an essential part of understanding freedom, self-awareness, and the acceptance of human limitations in contemporary visual art practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results of this study are presented in the form of paintings that feature horses as the main subject. In these artworks, horses are depicted through an expressive surrealist style that combines representational forms with strong emotional expression. Visual elements such as wounds and body gestures symbolize the consequences of freedom itself, in line with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist thought that freedom always carries risk and responsibility (Firdaus, 2011).

Through Graham Wallas's stages of the creative process preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification, the artist created works that not only aesthetically represent the form of horses but also contain existential reflections on struggle, wounds, and self-freedom. This aligns with Hismanto's (2022) view in *Jurnal Seni Rupa* that "the



horse object in art can function as a visual language that conveys symbolic messages and meanings,” making the selection of horse imagery in this research conceptually relevant to the theme of freedom.

Discussion

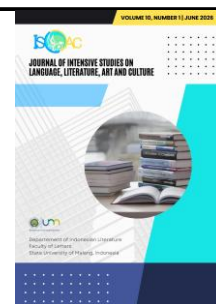
“Mutual Healing” 100 cm x 150 cm, Oil on Canvas

Mutual Healing visualizes freedom as a process of reconciliation and self-recovery achieved through empathy and relational connection. Rather than portraying freedom as complete independence, the artwork presents it as an existential process in which individuals confront emotional wounds and gradually attain self-understanding. This interpretation aligns with Sartre’s view that freedom requires individuals to consciously engage with their lived experiences and take responsibility for constructing meaning from them (Firdaus, 2011).

The horse serves as the central visual metaphor because of its strong association with vitality, strength, and freedom. In this artwork, the two horses symbolize different dimensions of the self that are connected through a shared process of healing. Their interaction suggests that freedom emerges not from escaping suffering but from acknowledging vulnerability and transforming it into a source of personal growth.

Visually, the magenta horse symbolizes emotional transformation and inner strength, while the brownish-gray horse represents stability and acceptance of reality. The beam of light connecting their unicorn-like horns reinforces the notion of emotional exchange and healing energy. Rather than confronting one another, the two figures appear to support and empower each other, emphasizing that genuine freedom can emerge when individuals achieve reconciliation with themselves and others.

The color magenta symbolizes inner strength, warmth, and the spirit of recovering from emotional wounds. According to systematic studies in color psychology, humans consistently associate colors with particular emotional responses. For example, pink or magenta is associated with positive, empowering emotions, suggesting that color can



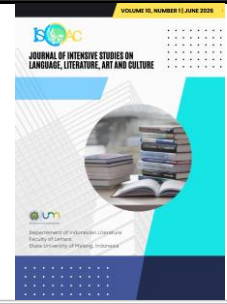
influence the affective experience of art viewers. Magenta is therefore understood as a symbol of emotional harmony and inner transformation, reinforcing meanings of inner strength and healing processes (Blackstock, 2025). Meanwhile, brown and its variations, including grayish-brown, are associated with stability, warmth, and security. Psychologically, these colors represent groundedness and connection to reality, supporting their symbolic interpretation as expressions of self-acceptance following suffering (Cherry, 2023). Thus, the contrast between magenta and grayish-brown in this artwork constructs a visual narrative of a journey from wounds toward emotional stability, reinforcing the meaning of freedom as a process of healing and self-reconciliation. These two figures are not confronting each other; rather, they are channeling healing energy toward one another, illustrating that true freedom emerges when individuals reconcile with themselves.

Within Wallas's creative process framework, this artwork emerged particularly through the stages of illumination and verification. During the illumination stage, the artist gained spontaneous inspiration through contemplation on the relationship between wounds and healing. This idea was then developed into the visualization of two interacting horses. The verification stage involved arranging the composition, color, and visual direction to convey the spiritual and emotional meanings effectively.

Visually, the soft, misty cream-pink background creates a transcendental atmosphere. The energy radiating from the meeting of the two unicorn horns symbolizes balance between strength and gentleness, between giving and receiving. Therefore, *Mutual Healing* becomes a symbol of freedom born through inner healing and self-awareness.

“Tidak Terlalu Tinggi” 90 cm x 120 cm, Oil on Canvas

Not Too High explores freedom as a condition inseparable from responsibility and self-awareness. Inspired by Sartre's existentialist philosophy, the artwork emphasizes that freedom is never absolute; every choice carries consequences that individuals must acknowledge and bear. The wounded winged horse serves as a reflection of humanity's

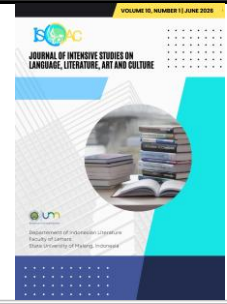


desire to pursue limitless possibilities while simultaneously confronting personal limitations and vulnerability.

The horse functions as a metaphor for aspiration, strength, and the human drive to transcend boundaries. The addition of wings intensifies this symbolism by suggesting the pursuit of absolute freedom. However, the wound on the horse's chest introduces a contrasting element, indicating that the pursuit of freedom often involves struggle, sacrifice, and emotional consequences. Through this imagery, the artwork communicates that authentic freedom requires awareness of one's limitations rather than the pursuit of unrestricted autonomy.

The visual contrast between the white horse and the reddish background further supports this interpretation. White symbolizes purity, hope, and sincere aspiration, while red evokes intensity, suffering, and sacrifice. Together, these elements create a visual narrative suggesting that freedom is not the absence of constraints but the courage to navigate life's challenges while remaining conscious of one's responsibilities and limitations.

In color psychology, white is generally associated with purity, simplicity, and new beginnings, and is often understood as representing sincere intention and a pure inner state. Elliot and Maier (2014) explain that colors possess associations formed through cultural and psychological experiences, in which white is frequently connected to cleanliness, innocence, and transitions into new phases. Meanwhile, red is known for its high affective intensity and is consistently associated with passion, energy, and strong emotional responses, including experiences of danger or wounds (Elliot & Maier, 2012). In visual symbolism, the association of red with blood and physiological arousal makes it an effective metaphor for bitter experiences and unavoidable suffering on the journey toward freedom. Thus, the contrast between white and red in this artwork constructs a visual narrative of sincere intentions tested through painful experiences as part of the formation of self-awareness. This visualization demonstrates that freedom is not absolute but must be accompanied by awareness of responsibility and personal limitations.



According to Hismanto (2022), the horse symbol in art possesses expressive power capable of “depicting emotional dynamics and philosophical meanings visually.” This is evident in the artwork *Tidak Terlalu Tinggi* (“Not Too High”), in which the wounded winged horse serves as a visual representation of humanity’s attempt to understand its own limitations. In line with Sartre’s existentialism, freedom without awareness may lead individuals into emptiness.

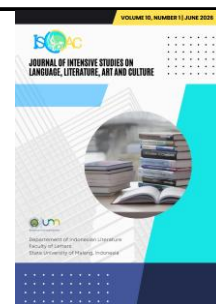
This artwork originated from the incubation stage, in which the artist reflected upon the tendency of humans to pursue “the highest freedom” while ultimately losing balance. Inspiration then emerged during the illumination stage, when the idea of a winged horse appeared as a symbol of absolute freedom, yet still wounded as a reminder of human limitation.

Visually, the horse’s gesture, appearing strong yet slightly leaning downward, illustrates the effort to remain grounded, not excessively elevated, yet sufficiently strong to bear the freedom it possesses. *Tidak Terlalu Tinggi* serves as a visual reflection of the balance between idealism and reality, between the desire to fly and the ability to endure.

“Beautiful Parasite: Cure Everything” 110 cm x 120 cm, Oil on Canvas

The artwork *Beautiful Parasite: Cure Everything* presents two horse figures with contrasting colors, one golden-brown and the other magenta, positioned closely within the same space. Their bodies appear ambiguously merged, as though they are neither entirely separate nor completely united. The title itself contains a paradox among the words *beautiful*, *parasite*, and *cure*, representing the complex relationship among dependency, wounds, and healing in human experience.

Visually, the presence of these two figures can be interpreted as symbols of humanity’s relationship with things tied to self-trauma, memories, or emotional relationships, which, on the one hand, may be painful yet, on the other hand, contribute to the formation of identity and self-awareness. The “parasite” element in this artwork is not understood in biological terms, but rather as an existential metaphor for something that

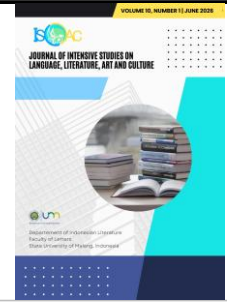


persists within humans despite often being perceived as a burden. From an existential perspective, freedom is not understood as absolute liberation from all conditions, but as a process continuously constructed through dialogue among individuals, their experiences, and their limitations. Freedom emerges through intentions and actions that take into consideration conditions inherent within oneself, while also involving the willingness to accept those conditions in constructing awareness and meaning in life (Längle, 2018). In this context, freedom is not presented as total release, but as the ability to reconcile with what remains attached to the self.

This approach aligns with existentialist thought, which holds that humans cannot escape their factual conditions but must consciously engage with them. Sartre emphasized that humans create the meaning of their lives through choices and attitudes toward conditions they do not always choose (Firdaus, 2011). Therefore, the figures in this artwork represent the awareness that inner wounds, or “parasites,” may become pathways to healing once acknowledged and accepted.

From the perspective of visual metaphor, the horse is once again employed as the primary visual language for conveying human inner dynamics. Hismanto (2022) explains that horse figures in visual art possess symbolic power to represent conflict, instinct, and existential impulses. In this artwork, the horse forms are intentionally not entirely realistic, emphasizing an expressive, surrealist approach in which they are modified to strengthen emotional and psychological meaning.

In relation to Graham Wallas’s creative process, *Beautiful Parasite: Cure Everything* developed strongly during the incubation and illumination stages. During incubation, the artist reflected deeply on the relationship between suffering and healing, particularly on inner experiences that are difficult to release yet ultimately contribute to personal wholeness. These ideas then emerged intuitively during illumination in the form of two figures that are visually dependent on one another. The verification stage was carried out by arranging colors, composition, and body gestures to communicate the paradoxical relationship between wounds and healing fully.



Overall, this artwork expands the interpretation of freedom within this research. If *Mutual Healing* emphasizes freedom through empathy and relationships, and *Tidak Terlalu Tinggi* highlights limitation and responsibility, then *Beautiful Parasite: Cure Everything* presents freedom as the process of accepting the things attached to oneself, even painful ones. Thus, the artwork emphasizes that self-freedom does not always mean letting go, but also understanding, nurturing, and processing what has become part of human existence.

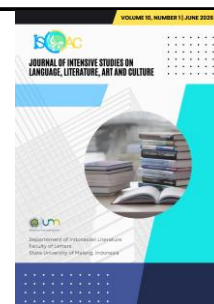
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This painting-creation research positions the horse as the primary metaphor for interpreting self-freedom in the context of human existential experience. Through an expressive, surrealist approach, freedom is understood not as a limitless condition but as a process of self-awareness that involves choice, responsibility, and acceptance of the individual's inner condition.

The artwork *Mutual Healing* interprets freedom as a relational space in which the healing process emerges through connection and empathy. In *Tidak Terlalu Tinggi* ("Not Too High"), freedom is reflected in an awareness of limitations and self-positioning, emphasizing that it also requires reflection and self-control. Meanwhile, *Beautiful Parasite: Cure Everything* presents freedom as the ability to reconcile with wounds and experiences attached to the self, which, although burdensome, contribute to the formation of meaning and personal wholeness.

The creative process, as outlined by Graham Wallas's stages, demonstrates that artistic creation results from the interplay of personal experience, conceptual contemplation, and visual intuition. Each stage contributes to constructing a visual narrative that not only represents the idea of freedom but also opens spaces for psychological and emotional reflection.

Therefore, this study affirms that painting can serve as a medium for self-interpretation, in which freedom does not appear as a final destination but rather as a continuous process of understanding and responding to life experiences. The



visualization of horses in these artworks serves as an effective metaphorical language for conveying such complexity while enriching the discourse of contemporary creation-based painting practices.

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