Esther Greenwood’s Psychological Conflicts Reflected in Sylvia Plath’s
The Bell Jar (1963): A Psychoanalytic Criticism

Zenithda Arief Fadlila
English Department, FKIP-Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta
Jl. A. Yani, Tromol Pos 1, Pabelan, Surakarta 57102; Telp. 0271-717417 psw. 156, fax. 0271-715448;
*Email: azenithda@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The research is proposed to analyze Esther Greenwood’s psychological conflicts in The Bell Jar novel by using Psychoanalytic Criticism. The major problem in this article is to explain how the psychological conflict is reflected in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar. The object of study is The Bell Jar novel written by Sylvia Plath. Qualitative study is a method which is used to analyze the psychological conflicts reflected in the novel. The result of this study shows that in this novel Sylvia Plath illustrated a psychological phenomenon in which an individual encounters an inner conflict that requires resolution.

Key Word: Psychological Conflict, The Bell Jar, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Sylvia Plath

Introduction

The Bell Jar is a novel by Sylvia Plath that was published in 1963. Sylvia Plath was born in London, on October 27, 1932. She is a poet and novelist. Plath is the legendary author of the novel who shows psychological problem. The Bell Jar is her only, which is based on her life and deals with one young woman’s mental breakdown. After publishing a number of works, Plath won a scholarship to Smith College in 1953. Then, a Fulbright Fellowship brought her to Cambridge University in England. In 1956, she married with Ted Hughes. But, Hughes left her for another woman in 1962, and then Plath fell into a deep depression. Struggling with her mental illness, she wrote The Bell Jar. The depressive Plath committed suicide in 1963.

Based on the writer’s observation, The Bell Jar was analyzed by Dewi Ningsih (Petra Christian University, 1992). She focused the research on “A Character Study of Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar,” by using psychological approach. The second researcher’s observation was already done by Y L Zhang (2012), entitle “An Analysis of Esther’s Anxiety of Writing in The Bell Jar”. He explores Esther’s anxiety of writing in Sylvia Plath’s autobiographic novel The Bell Jar based on the feminist theories about the anxiety of authorship and women’s creativity. The third researcher’s observation was already done by Smith, Caroline J (2010), entitle “The Feeding of Young Women: Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar, Mademoiselle Magazine, and the Domestic Ideal”. This article examines the way in which Sylvia Plath’s novel, The Bell Jar, interacts with and is informed by 1950s magazines, focusing on 1953 issues of Mademoiselle Magazine, the year in which Plath’s novel takes place. Dewi Ningsih, Y L Zhang, and Smith Caroline J left an opportunity for other researchers to study the novel. Different from the researchers above, here the writer tries to conduct the research on the psychological conflicts that appear in the major character, Esther Greenwood by using psychoanalytic criticism. The writer uses Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory.

All people experience psychological conflicts, knowingly or unknowingly. Psychological conflicts involved among the thoughts, emotions, and rational thinking. Psychological conflict or inner conflict, to Freud (in Cloninger, 2004:35), is both persuasive and important. People can both love and hate the same person. The conflict may lead to aggression. It
is influenced by the structure of personality. Psychoanalysis can be analyzed by using Psychoanalysis. According to Freud “Psychoanalysis reflected changing valve in the society and plays a role in the changing of valves” (Pervin, 1984: 21). Freud develops a comprehensive theory in which he said personality consisted of three separate but interacting parts, the id, the ego, and the superego.

In analyzing the novel, there are three parts of analyzing namely, structure of personality, psychological conflict, and aggression.

The first is a structure of personality. Structure of personality itself is divided into three parts, namely, id, ego, and superego. The id is the raw, unorganized, inherited part of personality whose sole purpose is to reduce tension created by primary drives related to hunger, sex, aggression, and irrational impulses (Feldman, 1989: 329). The ego provides a buffer between the id and the realities of the objective, outside world. The ego is also the seat of higher cognitive abilities such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, reasoning, and learning. The principle by which the ego operates, in which instinctual energy is restrained in order to maintain an individual's safety and integration into society (Feldman, 1989: 329). The superego, the final personality structure to develop, represents the rights and wrong of society as handed down by a person’s parents, teachers, and other important figures (Feldman, 1989: 329). The superego works in contradiction to the id.

The second is a psychological conflict. Psychological conflicts involved among our thoughts, emotions, and rational thinking. This conflict produces irrational thoughts and behavior, Freud’s particular interest, as a clinician, was in cases in which the forces of the conscious and the unconscious mind were conflicted (Cloninger, 2004: 35)

The third is an aggression. Aggression is problem solving by ending the life. Aggression can involve violence that may be adaptive under certain circumstances in terms of natural selection. The aim of the destructive drive, according to Freud (in Feist, J and Feist, GJ: 42), is to return the organism to an inorganic state. Because the ultimate inorganic condition is death, the final aim of the aggressive drive is self-destruction.

Research Method
In analyzing the psychological conflict of Esther Greenwood, the writer uses The Bell Jar novel which is published by Heinemann in 1963 as the object of the study. The primary data of the study is The Bell Jar novel, written by Sylvia Plath. The secondary data is Psychoanalytic criticism.

The writer uses note taking technique of collecting data in this research. It is reading the novel, searching the data by internet and determining the major issue, taking notes of the important point both in primary and secondary data. The technique of data description in this study started from studying materials of social psychology and continued by interpersonal attraction analyzing in the novel.

The writer uses the technique of data collecting in this research, there are reading the novel repeatedly to get more understanding, reading some related reference to observe the theory, taking notes of important in both primary and secondary data and classifying the data into some categories. The technique of data analyzing in this study is descriptive qualitative method, structural elements of the novel, and psychoanalytic criticism.

Finding And Discussion
The analysis of the psychoanalytic criticism is divided into three aspects, namely, structure of personality, psychological conflict, and aggression.

Firstly, structure of personality consists of id, ego, and superego. In The Bell Jar, Esther’s first id can be shown when she is not accepted in writing class. Her id wants to postpone her lecture or go to Germany until mastering that language.

Then I thought I might put off college for a year and apprentice myself to a pottery maker. Or work my way to Germany and be a waitress, until I was bilingual. (TBJ: 65)

Esther’s second id begins when she remembers about some old Roman philosophers or other how they want to die;
they said they would open their veins in a warm bath. Her id considers that open the veins in a warm bath are simple.

I thought it would be easy, lying in the tub and seeing the redness flower from my wrists, flush after flush through the clear water, till I sank to sleep under a surf gaudy as poppies. (TBJ: 78)

Esther's first superego can be seen when she is not accepted in writing class and her id wants to postpone her lecture or go to Germany until mastering that language. Her superego claims her to take the other courses.

I went to look up the requirements of an ordinary English major at my college. (TBJ: 66)

Esther’s second superego occurs when she tries to open her veins in a warm bath. Her superego realizes that her skin is unwilling to bleed.

The skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at. (TBJ: 78)

When she is not accepted in writing class; her ego is confused with many choices. Between postponing her lecture, going to Germany until mastering that language, learning stenograph, or taking other her scholarship. Finally she stuck in choosing, she decides to junk her thesis and junk her scholarship.

I decided to junk my thesis. I decided to junk the whole honors program and become ordinary English major. (TBJ: 66)

After her superego realizes that her skin is unwilling to bleed. She just spills a little blood for practice.

Then I thought maybe I ought to spill a little blood for practice, so I sat on the edge of the tub and crossed my right ankle over my left knee. Then I lifted my right hand with the razor and let it drop of its own weight, like a guillotine, onto the calf of my leg. (TBJ: 78)

Secondly, the psychological conflict reflected in Esther’s self is causing an effect. The conflict that aroused her is also having causes. In the end, to solve the conflict, she needs a resolution. The conflict of Esther’s self is when she wants to end herself. The reasons why Esther wants to end herself are as follow: 1) she came to her deep psychological conflict, and 2) she feels that there is nothing can make her being better again. The effect of her conflict is finally she tries to suicide three times. The resolution of her conflict is following her mother’s suggestion to cover the therapy with the psychiatric, Dr. Nolan. She trails her command. She stays in Dr. Nolan’s hospital. She is placed in Caplan. Caplan is the middle level at Dr. Nolan’s hospital after Wymark. She undergoes the nursing well. She also gets electroshock therapy like in Dr. Gordon’s but she feels pleasant. Dr. Nolan guides Esther patiently. Dr. Nolan most always besides of her when she is terrified. After several steps, Esther is moved in to Belsize. Belsize is the highest level at the private hospital where the patients is close to normal life. In the end, she passes her last therapy in Belsize until she really gets well and she starts her normal life again.

Thirdly, the aggression arouses her three times. Esther is inclined to end her life by employing physical aggression. Physical aggression is exertion of physical force so as to injure.

The first, she cuts her veins by using razor blade. But, in the middle of her action, she decides to cancel it.

But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at. (TBJ: 78)

The second, she tries to hang herself with the silk cord, but she cannot find the place to fasten it.

After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat’s tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother’s bed and tried pulling...
the cord tight. But each time I would get
the cord so tight I could feel a rushing in
my ears and a flush of blood in my face,
my hands would weaken and let go, and
I would be all right again. (TBJ: 83)

The last, she tries to end her life by
consuming pills in the cellar.

Then I took the glass of water and the
bottle of pills and went down into the
cellar. (TBJ: 89)

The aggression that arouses her is
causing several effects not only for herself but
also for other people around her. Causing from
her aggression, she has to undergo the medical
treatment in some private hospitals. It makes
her to postpone her course. Her family,
especially her mother; she has to supervise
Esther more than before; she has to spend her
money to recover Esther’s condition. The
breach between Esther’s interpretation of
experiences and the world’s interpretation of
them, when she tries to end her life by
consuming pills in the cellar, she just sees the
pain and swallowing pills bring her to the
darkness. But, the world views as a
sensational story of a missing girl. It is proved
from three headlines of the newspaper;

SCHOLARSHIP GIRL MISSING. MOTHER
WORRIED (TBJ: 104)
SLEEPING PILLS FEARED MISSING
WITH GIRL (TBJ: 105)
GIRL FOUND ALIVE! (TBJ: 105)

Conclusion

After analyzing The Bell Jar novel in order
to understand how the psychological conflict is
reflected, the writer concludes the result based
on the psychoanalytic criticism, it is apparent
that in The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath wants to show
a psychoanalytic circumstance in which an
individual encounters an inner conflict that
requires resolution.

The pedagogical implication of this study
is that unresolved psychological conflicts may
lead to aggression. The conflicts are caused by
her neurotic. The necessity of value causes the
breach between Esther’s and other person;
make her different. So, she has to adapt with a
normal life by passing some medical
treatments in hospitals; Dr. Gordon’s Private
Hospital, Caplan Private Hospital and Belsize
Private Hospital.

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