

## **A Psychological Thriller in Donna Tartt's *the Goldfinch***

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the researcher analyzes a psychological thriller in the form of anxiety in Donna Tartt's *the Goldfinch*. The researcher then uses psychological theory. The researcher analyzes the main character that undergoes a psychological worry; anxiety. At last, the researcher draws conclusion that the main character, Theodore Decker undergoes recurrent recollection(s), feeling humiliated, worry, fear, nightmares, and feelings of terror.

Key Words : anxiety, feeling humiliated, worry, fear, nightmares, feelings of terror.

### **Introduction**

Literature and society remain inseparable in that their existence influences each other; on one hand, literature affects society. On the other hand, society affects literature.

Levin (Scott, 1962:126) states that literature and society are mutually connected. Both affect each other in that society gets the literature's effect, on the other hand, literature gets the society's effect. Similar to this statement, Olsen (1978:203-204) has the idea of the influence of literature to society as well as of society to literature.

The researcher may well, as to the influence of literature to society, refer to a work by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle's Tom's Cabin* or *Life among the Lowly* influences the society to be social emancipation, to abolish racial discrimination between black and white people (Hardjana, 1981:70-71). English philosophers and poets are said to have influenced such worriers as social reformation and economic laws, instead (Jost, 1974:53-54).

As to the influence of society to literature, the researcher takes a look at the works by Graham Greene's *the Heart of the Matter*, which, as Gardiner has stated, has been unfairly punished in many years as being realistic in a negative meaning (Gardiner, 1959:86), Charles Dickens' (Jost, 1974:77); *Oliver Twist*, as Edgar Johnson, Professor of English, says, is a protest against fierce society (Dickens, 1961), *Our Mutual Friend* presents a disturbing vision of Victorian society (Dickens, 1997), Thackeray's (Jost, 1974:77), George Eliot's (Jost, 1974:77); *Daniel Deronde* is an analysis of contemporary Victorian society (Eliot, 1970:07), Daniel Defoe's, Richardson's, Cervantes', and Pushkin's (Jost, 1974:27). Likewise, such works as *Mole Flanders*, *Clarissa*, *Don Quixote*, and *Evgeny Onegin* are the products of the society (Jost, 1974:27). *Azab dan Sengsara*, *Siti Nurbaya*, *Pertemuan*, *Salah Asuhan*, *Katak Hendak Menjadi Lembu*, *Atheis*, *Belenggu*, and *Senja di Jakarta* are influenced by society, too (Hardjana, 1981:71).

Further, in line with the influence of society to literature, Little (1966:01) says that this can happen due to the fact that the people's literature becomes the

fundamental element of its culture which contains the information of the society's value, their worries and conflicts, briefly, their entire way of life.

Andre Hardjana (1981) confirms Little's statement by saying that in a Sociology of Literature, the fictional characters are similar to/representative of real characters in certain real society. He says that social worries give ideas to the novel through the author's reachable imagination. He then says that a great novel is reinterpretation of the social problems; history and social experience through the author's imagination in the society in which he lives. Thus, a fictitious character is not really imaginative. It represents a reality. Williams (1977:51) says that not all fictions are imaginative.

According to Victor Zhirmunski, literature in all its parts is basically a creation of society. Literary movement in general and literary facts in particular regarded as international phenomena, are to some extent based on comparably historical development in the social life of the particular peoples, and to some extent on the mutual cultural and literary interaction between them (Jost, 1974:27).

Miner (1990:30) says that regarding the fictional work such as the *Tale of Genji*, the novel gives us features of true emperor that match with unreal heroes and heroines, and the unreal persona put on real clothes, have real worries and have faith in real things of that era, i.e., spirit possession. He also says that even though a literary work is a fictional one, it cannot be said that it is fictional because if it is, then, the readers won't manage to understand it.

Gardiner (1959) in his book *Norms for the Novel* talks of author who cannot get rid of the fact of life. He calls him a realistic author. He says that the realistic author is one whose data come from the true life about him and are formed into his story, into his work of art. In this case, he puts his own subjective ideas and opinions as well as a little intrusion and influence.

As to the fictional character, he says that the author is to possess the truth about him and tells sufficiently about him. Whether or not this is sufficient is going to be ascertained by lots of things; by the author's notion of what sort of character he is, by his surrounding in society, by his friends and comrades, by his works, and on and so forth. His confirmation of the influence of society to literature is concluded by alluding to the Naturalists that they comment nothing of the society unless in the most negative meaning.

Wellek (1963:94) says that literature symbolizes life which becomes a social fact although the outside world as well as the subjective world of the individual has become targets of the literary imitation.

In contrast to the above opinions that real society influences literature, Williams (1977) in his book *Marxism and Literature* says that literature indeed gets influenced from society. Yet, society is seen fundamentally general and not concrete of human life in that it is the general social practice, the class specialization as well as the class limitation that influence it.

In a nutshell, the researcher insists that Madame de Stael's words be worth mentioning here that literature that is made by the nation should refer to society's

way of thinking because society has a sort of brilliant ideas (Jost, 1974:70) whether or not the society is abstract.

Thus, literature and society are bound together. Where there is a society, there is a literature and vice versa. It is because an author is a member of a certain society that gives ideas to his works. To this statement, Damono (2009:01) (2009:01) says that an author is inevitably a social member who is attached to a certain social group. Such a certain social group maintains education, religious practice, culture and all existing social institution. One of the existing social institutions is literature which uses language as its medium. Language then is a social creativity. Further, literature presents a picture of life which is a reality in society in that it involves relations among society, relation between society and personalities, relation among people, and among events in human's feeling.

As to Damono's opinion, Hardjana (1981:71) agrees that an author lives in a society. He can't avoid of its influence because there is an enforcement of social norms. Consequently, such enforced social norms inevitably give ideas to the author in his works. Further, He says that literary work doesn't come from the social vacuum. It, further, is an author's imagination which has been influenced by the society in which he lives.

All experts mentioned above like, Little, Hardjana and Williams with their similar representation of real character in a work of art, Gardiner with his idea of the realistic author, Victor Zhirmunski with his opinion of literature to be creation of society, Earl Miner with his idea of fiction becoming reality due to the readers' ability to comprehend, the characters having real worries as those in reality, and

Renne Wellek with his idea of life-symbolizing literature, Damono (and also Hardjana) with the idea that an author belongs to a society confirm that society gives ideas to literary works.

All of the aforesaid connection of literature and society above, Miner's idea of the characters having real worriers arrests the researcher, one of which is found in the novels of Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*. The main character undergoes psychological problems such as nightmares, recollection, etc.

Further, Theodore Decker, the main character undergoes anxiety after some events he did in the past; stealing a painting, the goldfinch, and other odds and ends which become the problems of his future. Consequently, the researcher raises such a condition into a paper with the title of **A Psychological Thriller in Donna Tartt's *the Goldfinch***, whilst, such a psychological thriller refers to the posttraumatic stress disorder which is in the form of anxiety disorder.

## **Methodology**

Because the researcher analyzes the main character psychologically, he researcher, therefore, delineates the use of psychology in literature below.

The psychological approach used by I.A. Richards in *Principle of Literary Criticism* began to appear in the twentieth century. In this approach, he relates the literary study with psychology (1926). Presumably, the flourishing use of psychology in literary criticism began with Conrad Aiken's *Skepticism: Notes on Contemporary Poetry* (Scott, 1962:70). However, the impact of psychology upon creative literature was strengthened by the additional influence of Adler's concept

of the inferiority complex, and Jung's theory of the collective unconscious (Scott, 1962:70). Therefore, psychology enters the literary study through some ways; one of them is that literary work also contains psychological proposition (Wellek, 1962).

In general, the application of psychological knowledge to art can generate three kinds of illustration and one of which is that psychology can be used to explain fictitious characters (Scott, 1962:71-72). Thus, in other words the researcher can say that psychology can be used to observe the behaviors of the characters in the novels to explain literary phenomena (Hardjana, 1991:66). On the other hand, Jung says that psychology can be applied in literary study because human's psyche is the source of knowledge and art (Sukada, 1987:104).

## **Discussions**

As mentioned above that the researcher uses psychology theory which is posttraumatic stress disorder in the form of anxiety disorder. Further, the individual here undergoes intrusive, recurrent recollections, worry, fear, flashbacks, feeling humiliated, and nightmares. Anxiety disorder has types: panic disorder, people with this condition have feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly with no warning. Social anxiety disorder involves overwhelming worry and self-consciousness about every day social situations (Wikipedia). Yet, not all the mentioned types of anxiety are used here. Rather, the researcher uses psychological effects undergone by the main character, Theo, such as recurrent recollection(s), feeling humiliated, worry, fear, nightmares, and feelings of terror.

### **Theo's recurrent recollection of the past event**

One of the bad things that Theo undergoes in bygone years that now occupies in his mind is that a reminder from an old man he met in the museum that was bombed that killed his mother. The old man, Welty, reminds him to go away with the Goldfinch and other priceless paintings with him unless he will face troubles. Yet, Theo ignores the tiny signs given by the old man who turns out to know that something bad is going to happen to Theo. The signs the old man asks Theo to take care are the aforesaid real painting of the Goldfinch that is stolen during his high school study and fake paintings that he sold to a criminal that then blackmails him. Such a recollection comes to his mind when he sees a movie with his friend, Lee Ann. It is one of the actors in the movie, Tyrell, the way she looks at the piano that puts him back to his past years of his life. The following quotation verifies the aforesaid delineation:

“God, I’m so haunted by that movie. I think about Tyrell’s niece a lot.

“What do you mean?”

“That scene where she is looking at the pictures on the piano. When she’s trying to figure out whether her memories belong to her or Tyrell’s niece. I go back through the past too, only looking for signs, you know? Things I should have picked up on, but missed?” (Tartt, 2013:766).

### **Theo's Feeling Humiliated**

After settling things in Amsterdam, Theo goes back to New York to face an angry and devastated Hobie, a friend whom he met on the way he returned the things that he stole, who has learned the full details of Theo's selling of the fake antiques. Theo explains everything to Hobie, including the Goldfinch, which,

according to Hobie, is Welty's, the old man's, favorite painting, too. The following quotation verifies Theo's feeling of shame when he meets Hobie:

“Hobie—“ a fire with shame; I'd always worked so hard to screen my double-dealing self from him, to show him only the improved and polished version, never the shameful threadbare self I was so desperate to hide, deceiver and coward, liar and cheat —“ (Tartt, 2013:937).

### **Theo's Feeling Worried, of Fear, and of Terror**

It is a girl that Theo wishes to get and she makes him feel feared and worried. He, then, spends his times to go to clubs, restaurants, men's rooms through which he thinks that he can go away from the fear he faces. The following quotation verifies Theo's condition:

“Why did you start?”

“Why does anyone? My girl left me! Girl at the time. Wanted to be all bad and self- destructive, hah. Got my wish” (Tartt, 2013:960).

Instead of the aforesaid fear, Theo's has another fear, that is to say, the fear of being sent away to Nevada care home having been regarded as an orphan by the killing of his mother by the bomb and the estrangement of his father by the government. Therefore, his waiting for the coming of Mr. Bracegirdle feared him so much. He and his friend, Borris, steals money for going away, instead. The following quotation verifies the above delineation:

“Oh, sure,” I said, a little too quickly, though I was remembering the isolation and terror of that time: my constant fear of social services; the soap heavy smell of my un-lockable bedroom, the drastic chill of the stone gray reception area where I waited to see Mr. Bracegirdle, my fear of being sent away” (Tartt, 2013:942-3).

Theo's feeling of terror can be traced through the following explanation; Theo has gotten himself into trouble in the old days when he stole the Goldfinch and other fake paintings by selling those fake paintings/antiques because he is addicted to prescribe medications. Now one of the buyers of the fake paintings, Lucius Reeve, is attempting blackmail. It turns out that Reeve has figured out Theo was in the same room with the Goldfinch during the bombing and believes that Theo and Hobie know where it is now. He threatens Theo with the consequences of revealing this information. Therefore, Theo is not only afraid for himself but also for his trusting friend, Hobie. Years later, at about eight years to come, Reese appears in a party which should have been attended by Theo. He, therefore, disappears on the knowledge of Reese's coming. Hobie then is upset with Theo's selling fake things especially to a wrong person, a criminal, Reese. The following quotation verifies the aforesaid delineation:

“And then this terrible visit from Reeve. I was in the middle of making pie crust—should never have gone to the door, I thought it was Moira—nine a.m. and standing there gaping at him with flour all over me—Theo, why did you do it?” he said despairingly.’ (Tartt, 2013:938).

### **Theo's Nightmare**

To him, his mother is his favorite and when the bombing in the museum kills his mother, the reflection of his mother cannot go away from him because he tries hard to hold his mother in his mind in order that he can meet her in his dream. Not being able to see her in his dream, he sees her reflection on his being awake; he sees her on a crowd of people, in a taxicab. Likewise, he smells her

favorite perfume. When he becomes an adult eight years later, the reflection of his mother keeps coming to him, in his dream which makes him feel panic to learn that his mother is still alive and she is now somewhere near him. Though it is only in his dream that people tell him the existence of his mother, he tries to call a taxi to meet his mother soon after he wakes up from his dream.

“In adult life these chronic near misses pulsed with a messier and much more painful anxiety. I would be stricken with panic to learn, or remember, or be told by some implausible party that she was living across town in some terrible slum apartment where for reasons inexplicable I had not gone to see her or contacted her in years. Usually, I was frantically trying to hail a cab or make my way to her when I woke up” (Tartt, 2013:901).

It turns out that Theo’s mother’s reflection does not merely visit him in his dream. It visits him in reality, instead. “And when I looked away for a second and then looked back, I saw her reflection behind me, in the mirror” (Tartt, 2013:903).

All the psychological terms mentioned above such as recurrent recollection(s), feeling humiliated, worry, fear, feelings of terror, and nightmares accumulatively lead Theo to a condition of considerable desperation. He tries to kill himself by drinking overdosed drugs. Luckily, he is safe by his miscalculation of the dose. The following quotation verifies the aforesaid condition:

“Unfortunately I’d miscalculated the dose and awakened twelve hours later with vomit all over the bedspread and had to stagger down stairs still sick as a dog for a ten p.m. meeting with the IRS” (Tartt, 2013:906).

In a nutshell, from the delineation above, the researcher comes to the understanding that Theo’s psychological problems such as recurrent

recollection(s), feeling humiliated, worry, fear, feelings of terror, and nightmares embrace the whole life of him from the time when he is still thirteen years of age till eight years later when he becomes an adult.

### **Synopsis of Donna Tartt's *the Goldfinch***

The story commences with the visit of Theo and his beloved mother to a Dutch museum. There, suddenly, a bomb of terrorist explodes and kills his mother. During his panic due to the bomb, Theo steals a valuable painting, the Goldfinch and other priceless paintings/antiques. Later, he loses the Goldfinch and sells the priceless ones to everybody for the survival. Unexpectedly, what he does, his girl ignorance of him, and the death of his mother become his psychological worries; he feels humiliated, worried, feared, terrorized, recollected to past events, and to his mother's decease, a nightmare, all of which almost lead him to commit a suicide.

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