

THE CAUSING ASPECTS OF JOHANNES BETZLER'S
OBSESSIVE LOVE IN *CAGING SKIES* (2004)Intan Nur Sya'bana¹Eni Nur Aeni^{2*}Ririn Kurnia Trisnawati³^{1,2,3} Jenderal Soedirman University, Purwokerto, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article is entitled The Causing Aspects of Johannes Betzler's Obsessive Love in *Caging Skies* (2004). It is a fiction novel written by Christine Leunens that tells a story of Johannes Betzler and Elsa Kor. As an avid Hitler believer, Johannes was furious when he found that his parents hid a Jewish girl named Elsa Kor behind a false wall in their house. However, his initial anger slowly turned into interest, love, and then obsession. In order to reveal the aspects that caused Johannes Betzler's obsessive love for Elsa Kor, this article used a qualitative descriptive method to analyse the data. This study obtained the data from the narrations and conversations between Johannes and his parents especially his father in *Caging Skies* (2004). Using family communication pattern theory by McLeod and Chaffee (1972; 1973) and attachment theory by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1957; 1966), this study has found two aspects that caused Johannes Betzler's obsessive love for Elsa. Those two aspects are his communication pattern and attachment style with his parents.

Keywords: *attachment style, family communication, obsessive love*

INTRODUCTION

Love is one of the various emotions that a person might experience in life. As defined by Alidou Razakou Ibourahima Boro, it is an emotion that signifies a passionate or intense affection for someone. He also mentioned that to love means to have a strong fondness or deep tender feeling for someone; to take pleasure in, which

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is in romantic aspect defined as a profound feeling or affection for someone you are sexually attracted to (Boro, 2020).

Psychologist Robert Sternberg (1986) has described the types of love based on three scales namely intimacy, passion, and commitment (Tobore, 2020). When two or more of these components combined, it resulted in different types of love. These types of love are: liking or friendship, infatuation or limerence, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love, and consummate love (Sternberg, 1988). Based on the types of love above, one of its types which is consummate love has the possibility to grow into an unhealthy type of love that is obsessive love.

The portrayal of obsessive love can be found in a novel entitled *Caging Skies* written by Christine Leunens. It appears that the main character of the novel has showed some obsessive behaviours towards his love interest. The portrayal of obsessive love in literary works has been existed since a long time ago. It can be seen in one of Shakespeare's work, *Romeo and Juliet*. In this literary work, the portrayal of obsessive love showed through the act of suicide committed by the two main characters by the end of the story. It has showed how the characters were obsessed with one to another that they quick to end their lives when they think the other had gone from the world, leaving them behind.

Obsessive love is somewhat still uncommon in literary studies. However, the researcher has taken one previous study that also talks about obsessive love. It is an undergraduate thesis entitled "Kemal Basmaci's Obsessive Love as Reflected Through His Attitude and Behavior in Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*" written by Anastasia Merylin Dimitria (2016). Through this research, Dimitria discussed the characteristics of Kemal Basmaci that represent his obsessive behaviours, and explained the causes of his behaviours. In analysing the issue, Dimitri has employed the theory of obsessive love written by Susan Peabody and Susan Forward. Even though the issue discussed in this study is the same, there is a difference that distinguishes my study and the aforementioned study above. The previous study by Dimitri has used the theory of obsessive love by Susan Peabody to present the main character's behaviours that showed his obsession. Meanwhile, in this study the family communication theory and attachment theory are chosen to answer the research question.

Other than compared to the previous study by Dimitri that has different theory on analysing the issue, there is another gap I would like to point. In general, the study about obsessive behaviours can be easily found. However, the kind of obsessive behaviours that much talked about is the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or commonly known as OCD. Therefore, the different kind of obsessive behaviours that is Obsessive Love has been chosen as the topic of this study. In attempt to further discuss the topic, the triggers that caused Johannes Betzler's obsessive love in *Caging Skies* (2004) has taken as the research question to be answered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Obsessive love

As defined by Brittany VanDerBill (2022), obsession is a recurring thought of something or someone, where it always seems to be in a person's mind. In another definition, it is the state of being obsessed with someone or something. Apparently, most people has already been aware about one type of obsession as explained by Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder that is Obsessive Compulsive Disorder generally known as OCD. The DSM-IV defines it as recurrent and persistent thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate and that cause marked anxiety or distress, not simply excessive worries about real life problems, and make the person attempt to ignore or suppress them with some other thoughts and actions (Lee & Kwon, 2003). However, there is also a type of obsession over another human being commonly defined as Obsessive Love which is frequently referred as "immature love." Curtis has mentioned that immature love has three elements which are possession, pity, and perversion (1983, as cited in Ahmadi et al., 2013).

Family communication pattern

The word communication came from a Latin word *communicare* which means to share (Partridge, 1966). If we are to define it deeper, it is the process through which communicators involved in the communication process exchange messages and interpret their meaning (Salma & Ramadhana, 2021). The process of communication itself consists of the communicator sending signals to the receiver in the form of words or gestures, and the receiver interpreting those messages.

Family communication pattern theory is originally developed by McLeod and Chaffee on 1972 and 1973. They defined the theory as the family tendencies' to develop ways of communicating with one another (as cited in Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Moreover, Koerner also defines family communication pattern theory as the theory that focuses on communication between children and parents and how it influences family members' interactions with one another (as cited in Salma & Ramadhana, 2021).

According to McLeod and Chaffee (1972), family communication is divided into two major concepts which are Conversation Orientation and Conformity Orientation. The two major concepts are total opposite but known to be interacting with each other, resulting into four types of family: (1) consensual, (2) pluralistic, (3) protective, and (4) laissez-faire (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Each types of family based on the communication concept has its own traits that differ one to the other. After analysing the novel, the researcher assumes that the type of Johannes' family in *Caging Skies* (2004) is protective type. The traits of protective type of family are: (1) low on conversation but high on conformity, (2) communication is done by an emphasis on obedience to parental authority and by little concern for conceptual matters or for open communication within the family, and (3) the parents must be the one who make decisions and do not have to explain the reasons to the children (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Attachment theory

Attachment theory is based on the collaborative work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. It is a theory concerning the emotional tie that exists between infants and their caregivers. Bowlby's theory focuses on mother-child separation, but Ainsworth's theory focuses on the children's distress as a result of the separation and aims to make Bowlby's argument more compelling.

Ainsworth's most important contribution to the theory was the experiment held by her called as *Strange Situation*. The experiment is a mini-drama which is conducted in an attempt to see infants' responses and behaviours when: their caregiver presents, a stranger arrives, their caregiver leaves, and their caregiver returns (Stevens, 2019). Bretherton has stated that from this experiment, Ainsworth named the three types of attachment style as: (1) secure attachment, (2) avoidant attachment, and (3) ambivalent attachment (as cited in Berghaus, 2011).

Each type of attachment style stated by Ainsworth have its own characteristics. After analysing the novel, it is assumed that Johannes' attachment style with his parents in *Caging Skies* (2004) is ambivalent attachment. This attachment style has characteristics such as: (1) may be wary of strangers, (2) become greatly distressed when the parents leave, and (3) do not appear to be comforted by the return of the parents (Lees-oakes, 2011).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In conducting this research, the descriptive qualitative method is used to present the findings. As explained by Gay, Mills, & Airasian, qualitative research is a research in which descriptive data is collected to provide insights about the topic (Gay et al., 2012). Therefore, the interpretation of the descriptive data that have been collected will be the focus of this research. Since the aim of this research is to point out the aspects that caused Johannes obsessive love, the dialogues and the narratives in the novel *Caging Skies* (2004) especially the ones showed his communication and interaction with his parents will be the source of the data for this research.

During the process of data collection, the researcher divided the data collected into several categories based on the two key points that assumed to be the root of his obsession. The first point is the communication style between Johannes and his parents that will be analysed using family communication pattern by McLeod and Chaffee, and the second point is the attachment issue showed by Johannes as the result of his attachment style that will be analysed using attachment theory by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After analysing the issue, it is revealed that the act of obsession is not something that can happen for no reasons. According to Sissons & Villines, obsessive love has not been listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5)* thus not considered as a mental health condition (2022). In that case, obsessive love might be a condition prompted by prior events that result in obsession as a long-term effect or simply occurred as the result of the sufferer's mental health condition.

The Causing Aspects of Johannes Betzler's Obsessive Love

In *Caging Skies* (2004), Johannes' obsessive love is apparently caused by two aspects: 1) the communication pattern with his parents, 2) attachment issue due to his attachment style.

Family communication pattern

According to Jennifer L. Near (2007), the bond between a father and his son is one of the most impactful relationships between two males. She also quoted Floyd & Morman (2003) who stated that it will also affect the son's developments, including his emotional health and communication behaviour. Therefore, the communication between Johannes and his father will be analysed as it is correlated with his future relationship satisfaction.

The communication between Johannes and his father are showed in several parts of the novel. The first one in the earlier part of the novel showing the exchange between them at the start of Hitler's reign. It is described as follows:

'Vater,' I asked, 'who was that man up there?'
'That man,' he answered, putting his arm around me
without looking in my direction, squeezing on and off
affectionately, 'doesn't concern little boys like you,
Johannes.' (Leunens, 2004)

On the quotation above, it is showed when Johannes' father was trying not to give him an answer when he asked a question about a commotion that was praising Hitler. Apparently, Johannes' father was written to be anti-Nazi, so when Johannes started displaying interest to Hitler, he was not pleased. If we look back to the traits of family types based on Conversation Orientation and Conformity Orientation, one of the traits of a protective form of family is a lack of concern for conceptual matters or free conversation within the family about the topics (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). In protective family, the communication between family members was not as free as the pluralistic or consensual family. The family is likely to be hierarchical in which the parents put themselves on a higher status than the children. Hence, the communication is high on conformity but low on conversation. As we can see through the quoted conversation above, Johannes' father not answering his question was the way he abused his status as a father. It seems that he does not want Johannes to support Hitler, henceforth

avoiding the question; making it clear that the type of the communication between Johannes' and his father was protective type which high on conformity but low on conversation.

In another occasion, Johannes' father has also seen to show his superiority over Johannes later in the novel when Johannes had been indoctrinated at school. After the reign of Hitler, a lot of changes were made including the schools in Vienna. The changes ranged from the map of Austria that scratched off into Ostmark, the books, even the teachers (Leunens, 2004). After all the old teachers had been replaced, the new ones started to spread the propaganda saying that life was a constant warfare, a struggle of each race against the others for territory, food, and supremacy (Leunens, 2004). However, their race, the Aryans, who are said to be the rarest and purest, did not have enough territory, and many were forced to live in exile. This propaganda was reinforced by the substitution of sports as the primary subject in schools, with the goal of developing strong and healthy adults in the children. These alterations were intended to brainwash the youngsters and prepare them for war. Johannes, who is still a youngster, was one of many students who had been indoctrinated. He began to feel sorry for his parents for not receiving this new knowledge and resolved to teach them later that evening once he returned home from school. Nonetheless, every time he attempted to teach his parents, he was met with antipathy, particularly from his father. It is described in the following passage:

"My new status wasn't accepted by my father either. He wasn't all grateful for my willingness to teach him important facts. He diminished my knowledge, called it nonsense." (Leunens, 2004)

Through the passage above, we can see the moment when Johannes' father once again showed the characteristic of protective type of family that is not welcoming Johannes' attempt to tell his father what he has been taught at school. According to Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006), family members in the protective type are expected not to have problems with one another and to behave in accordance with the family's interests and norms. In the story, Johannes' father was an anti-Nazi. He has stated that when he was communicating with Johannes, he felt like he was talking to "them" because he [Johannes] had been indoctrinated at school. He [Father] was so quick-tempered that their conversations always ended in a fight, which made Johannes' mother

concerned that if Johannes picked up his father's ideas, he would get in trouble (Leunens, 2004).

From the elaboration above, it is concluded that the communication between Johannes and his father was low on conversation but high on conformity. It is done by being obedience to the parental authority and there is no concern for open communication. Since low communication between father and son will lead into a low relationship satisfaction, this will have an impact on the son's communication behaviour as well as his future relationship as what has stated by Near (2007).

Attachment issue

Attachment issue is a condition that affects people who were undiagnosed or did not manage their attachment disorder as children. Attachment disorder is a mood or behavioural problem that interferes with a person's capacity to develop and maintain relationships. It is typically developed in childhood, and if undetected or untreated, it will manifest as an attachment issue when they reach adulthood, as there is no specific attachment disorder diagnosis for adults (Morales-Brown, 2020). Other than that, attachment issue also occurs when a child is unable to maintain constant contact with their parents or primary caregiver (Smith et al., 2022).

Apparently, Johannes' bond with his parents in *Caging Skies* (2004) was inconsistent. Due to this problem, his attachment style was classified as ambivalent type by Mary Ainsworth. The characteristic of this attachment style that can be found in the novel is how Johannes became distressed when his parents leave yet does not appear to be comforted when they returned. In the novel, Johannes' interactions that showed the characteristic of this attachment style are more focused in his bond with his father. The first is described as follow:

"Afterwards, my father was absent for days on and whenever he wasn't, his mood was so sour I wished him gone again." (Leunens, 2004)

From the passage above, we can see the moment Johannes started to show his disinterest in meeting his father. The war situation had deteriorated at the moment, and Johannes was not permitted to leave the house. As a result, his father's absence at home is obvious. Nonetheless, as his father returns home, he does not appear to be

thrilled due to his father's gloomy disposition. As a result, rather than being delighted that his father is now present, he wishes for the opposite.

The next occasion where it shows that Johannes does not comforted by the return of his father is in the following passage:

"My father came home less from the factory, and when he did, it was usually at noon, in and out, just enough time to get some papers. ... Then he stopped coming home at all.

...

At last he showed up with a jigsaw puzzle under his arm, concealed behind a magazine. I knew it was for me and was glad because I was bored. ... He ran upstairs and hurried back down two steps at a time with some files. I thought he was checking the mail. To my bitter disappointment I realised he'd left again and had forgotten to give me my gift." (Leunens, 2004)

We can tell from the sentence above that Johannes has stopped caring whether or not his father returns home. When his father finally returned home, his focus was no longer on his father, but on the object he had brought with him at the time. On the final line, it is said that his disappointment was prompted by the fact that his father did not give him the puzzle he thought for him, rather than his father leaving the house without even speaking to him.

As previously stated, we can see how Johannes became detached from his father. He failed to constantly interact with his father, which led to the attachment issue he was experiencing. As what has explained before, attachment issue is a behavioural disorder that affects a person's ability to form and maintain relationship. Therefore, Johannes' failure to maintain a good relationship with Elsa in his future is the effect of his attachment issue in the past.

After discussing the two factors that triggered Johannes' obsession, it is evident that both communication patterns and attachment styles are related. Joanna Pantazi (2019) claims that in children, insecure attachment is often connected with anxious ambivalent attachment. It will grow into preoccupied attachment in adulthood in which the individual gets consumed with their romantic relationship, fears abandonment and rejection, and becomes the pursuer in the stated relationship (Pantazi, 2019). In *Caging Skies* (2004), all

the three signs above are portrayed through Johannes. Thus, it can be concluded that Johannes' obsession over Elsa is indeed assisted by his protective type of family and his ambivalent attachment style.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study aimed at pointing out the aspects that caused Johannes Betzler's obsession over Elsa in Christine Leunens' novel entitled *Caging Skies* (2004).

On analysing the issue, family communication pattern and attachment theory are used to analyse the aspects that caused Johannes' obsession. According to this analysis, it is found that Johannes' family type is protective family and his attachment style is ambivalent attachment. Protective family type means the communication values conformity over conversation, characterized by an emphasis on obedience to the parental authority, lacking of openness that resulted in topic restrictions during the communication process, and the hierarchical state in which the parents place themselves at the top. As for his ambivalent attachment is the attachment style characterized by the distress he showed due to the absence of his father, yet he does not seem to be comforted when his father is returned.

Furthermore, anxious ambivalent in children would develop into preoccupied attachment in adulthood. Preoccupied attachment is the kind of attachment when the individual becomes preoccupied with their romantic relationship, fears abandonment and rejection, and tends to be the pursuer in the aforementioned relationship. Johannes in *Caging Skies* (2004) has proven to be showing these signs of preoccupied attachment. Consequently, it can be concluded that Johannes' protective type of family and his ambivalent attachment are connected and aided his obsessive behaviour for Elsa in the future.

As this study is aimed to discover the causes of Johannes' obsession, the delimitations of this study included the lack of explanations about Johannes' behaviour that considered as his obsession. Thus, future related research is expected to address these limitations in order to substantiate more in-depth conclusions on this topic.

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