

## The discussion of body in *Every Day* by David Levithan

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><b>Article History:</b> Received 22 May 2021 Approved 27 September 2021 Published 30 October 2021</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Every Day</i>, David Levithan, representation, the social body</p>	<p>In the novel <i>Every Day</i> by David Levithan, there exists a profound discussion about body through its protagonist A's life, its plot, dialogues, and events that unfold. This paper uses qualitative textual analysis as its methods in order to obtain relevant data to be further analyzed using the theoretical framework from Stuart Hall (theory of representation (2013)) and Chris Shilling (<i>The Body and Social Theory</i> (2003)). Through the indexical signs from the text, there are discussions of how the body is represented, which are as something superficial, as a mask, and as something temporary. Through the analysis of the social body, it is also found that the body has become a social asset in which it could also contribute to one's self-identity, creating the body as a project that one could work on throughout one's life. Consequently, the metaphor of body as a machine appears, as well as the revelation that there is also a close relation between death and the body. Through death, the social body is reduced into individual body, where the living often avoids the dead, fearing subconsciously of their own. These aspects could be observed from A's life and Rhiannon's response towards it.</p>

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## INTRODUCTION

Among the myriad of books that are published in the literary world, there are several particular ones that really stood out, making itself known and remembered even after all these years. In the hustle and bustle of the ever-changing world of literature, some stories may be prone to drowning into the white noise of mainstream and predictable premises. However, one particular story is proven to be exceptional, and it is entitled *Every Day* by David Levithan, a young adult romance and fantasy novel published in 2012 by the American publisher Knopf Books for Young Readers. It has generated praises and positive reviews from *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *The Boston Globe*, among

others (Bruni, 2012; Carpenter, 2012; Levithan, 2012; Philpot, 2012).

Young adult fiction is usually intended for adolescents aged 12 to 18 years, but more than half of its readers are actually adults. One of the reasons is because of the universal coming-of-age experience, a journey to maturity that actually people with all ages go through (Kitchener, 2017), which could certainly be found in *Every Day*. Other than that, the one-of-a-kind theme that this novel possesses really hooked the readers from the first time they read its synopsis as this kind of premise had never been encountered before. There are many books that have similar concepts and clichéd stories that they begin to feel repetitive, predictable, and stale. However, *Every Day* came like a breath

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of fresh air by offering a compelling story about someone who always changes body every single day, along with the challenges that follow this condition.

In *Every Day*, the protagonist, A, never experienced dwelling in the same body ever since they were born (henceforth, the writer would use 'they' as A's pronoun as it could also be a singular and gender-neutral pronoun (Bjorkman, 2017)). A came to accept their unique nature, learned so many things about life from the lives of other people, including respecting the body they were in and not interfering so much into the body's life because after all, A would still leave the next day. One day, however, A fell head-over-heels in love with a girl called Rhiannon while A was inside Rhiannon's boyfriend's body. For once, A wanted to stay, and both of them tried so hard to make this relationship work. However, fate had another thing to say, and it seemed impossible to maintain a relationship with A's unique condition, so A and Rhiannon parted ways even when they still loved each other. This novel has also been adapted into a 2018 movie directed by Michael Sucsy, starring Angourie Rice as Rhiannon, and various actors and actresses as A, namely Justice Smith, Lucas Jade Zumann, Katie Douglas, Jacob Batalon, Karena Evans, and Owen Teague, among others.

As the premise was extensively developed in this novel by Levithan, there surfaced some issues that could be analyzed further. To mention some are issues about young adults' relationships with their parents, peers, and fellow teenagers, about gender, human nature, human development, and others. Nevertheless, one issue that this paper would focus on is how prominent the discussion of body is. Because A changed bodies every day, they resided in bodies with various shapes, sizes, races, sexual orientations, genders, and backgrounds. This particular issue about body has not been specifically discussed yet. Previous studies focused on other topics, namely analyzing the literary aspects of the book, such as its theme, characters, point of view, and the ending (Budiyanti, 2017). Furthermore, studies by Giyasurrahman (2018) as well as Nurarafah & Mintarsih (2020) focused on the discussion of gender, namely gender

ambiguity, queerness, and gender construction. In the field of psychology, Ramadhani (2019) applied mindfulness techniques in analyzing the process of self-acceptance of the main character A.

This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to the analysis of the novel *Every Day* by exploring the research question of how body is represented in this novel. This would be analyzed in depth and further developed using Stuart Hall's theory of representation (2013) as well as Chris Shilling's *The Body and Social Theory* (2003). By doing so, this paper attempts to discuss the many representations of body and its deeper meaning derived from the literary and cultural aspects that appear in this novel.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Hall's Theory of Representation (2013)

Stuart Hall, in the second edition of *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (2013), explained that representation is how humans produce meaning of all the concepts within their minds by the use of language. Through all the things that are either perceivable or unperceivable, human minds create mental representations of them, and to create a shared conceptual map with other humans, language is used. With language, humans could correlate those mental images by means of written words, spoken sounds, or visual images, which could also be called signs.

Upon knowing this, it could be concluded that there is a system of representation which includes two elements: a shared conceptual image and language that stands for or represents said concepts. Together, they create meaning. However, meanings sometimes could not be fixed, and some meanings towards a certain concept might differ from one culture to another, or even from one individual to another. That is why codes are there to fix the relationships between concepts and signs, to set boundaries so meanings are stabilized within different languages and cultures. Codes could indicate which concept is being referred to when one sees or hears certain signs (Hall, Evans & Nixon, 2013).

### **The Body and Social Theory (2003)**

In his book entitled *The Body and Social Theory* (second edition, 2003), Chris Shilling, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent at Canterbury, expressed his argument that as time becomes more modern, the tangible body of a modern person becomes progressively central to their sense of self-identity. Besides that, it could be observed that there has been a substantial increase in academic interest regarding the body (aside from the medical field).

Due to the high modernity in our society, where religious notions about the body that initially determine one's sense of self have begun to recede, humans try to find another firm foundation to determine their sense of self. This turns out to be something really close to themselves, which is their own body. Consequently, the body is treated as some kind of project which should be worked at and accomplished to be included as part of one's self-identity; for instance, if a person wants to be seen as someone health-conscious, they would take meticulous care of their body, such as spending fortunes at the gym, on bodily care, healthy foods and drinks, and body treatments. What they do to their body then becomes their own responsibility.

Subsequently, this understanding also sparked the notion of 'social body', in which social significance of the body began to change. Instead of being given meaning by religious authorities and/or governments, the body is then reclaimed by the people themselves as individual possessions which are related to their self-identities, one that they themselves could control. This paper would include the discussion of body as a machine and the death of the body.

### **METHODS**

As the novel *Every Day* by David Levithan serves as the primary data source for this paper, the writer uses qualitative textual analysis for its methods. First published in 2012, *Every Day* rose into popularity and became the New York Times' bestseller. As a novel for young adults, it is recommended for, but not limited to, readers aged fourteen to eighteen. Following its popularity,

Levithan published a prequel novella titled *Six Days Earlier* (2012), a companion novel titled *Another Day* (2015), and a sequel titled *Someday* (2018).

Subsequently, the data obtained are analyzed using the theory of representation by Stuart Hall (2013) and *The Body and Social Theory* by Chris Shilling (2003). Said data consist of the novel's characters, plot, events, and dialogues. From the two theories that are applied in the analysis, this paper scrutinizes the text from two viewpoints: firstly, it examines how the human body is represented in the book; and secondly, it examines how the body is related to society and modern social life.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **The Body as Something Superficial**

Written words are considered as an indexical sign, and by using it in this novel, readers could find that there are several representations of the body that are shown. Firstly, the body is represented as something superficial. Superficial here could mean something existing on the surface, something lacking in depth and substance. From the extensive reading into this novel, it is found that the plot and premise deliver a notion of although a body is tangible, if without a soul that is intangible, it does not have any significant purpose. It could not move freely as nothing prompts it to, it could not think for itself, and it could not take care of itself. Furthermore, it is also seen that soul is something detached from a body, just like A's soul that never stuck to a certain body, and the souls of the bodies A inhabited that were temporarily 'gone', unclear of where they went when A's soul occupied their bodies. Still, whenever A's soul left a certain body, the body's original soul returned, so as to ensure the body to continue living.

*Every Day* shows that if there is no soul that resides in said body, it could not live. Whatever form the body has, the soul is still independent, and it is what gives the body its meaning, its substance. It gives the body character, it makes the body want and/or need something. The body would not dress

a certain way if the soul feels like it does not want to, or a body would not act upon something if the soul deems it unnecessary. Hence, it could be concluded that the body only does something, thinks of something, does a particular thing when the soul asks it to, not the other way around. In some cases, it could be that the body is the one prompting the soul to do something; for instance, an overweight body makes the soul think that it needs to go on a diet to return to a healthy lifestyle and ideal weight. However, if the soul chooses to just embrace the body's condition, there is nothing the body could do anymore, just like the case of Lizzo, a plus size American singer who advocates body positivity and self-confidence (Rosa, 2019), indicating that the last decision always depends on the soul. To take another example, an electric toy robot could not operate without some source of energy charged within it, such as batteries, solar power, or electricity. It becomes meaningless if it is rid of its source energy as it could not move, and it loses its meaning of a toy that could be played with. Like a battery-less toy, without a soul, a body is just a vessel.

In *Every Day*, the bodies never really affected A's identity as they only acted as a vessel for A to go about their day. The bodies neither influenced A's decision nor gave lingering effects to them, and if there was any, it was A's own independent feelings and decisions. Moreover, A could not access the body's feelings, and this shows that the soul was the one holding those feelings. This is established early in the book.

I can access facts, not feelings. I know this is Justin's room, but I have no idea if he likes it or not. Does he want to kill his parents in the next room? Or would he be lost without his mother coming in to make sure he's awake? It's impossible to tell. It's as if that part of me replaces the same part of whatever person I'm in. (Levithan, 2012, p. 2)

In the body of a vegetarian, A, who was not one, admitted that they had eaten meat by accident.

I don't tell her how many times I've accidentally eaten meat while I've been in a vegetarian's body. It's just not something I remember to check for. It's usually the friends' reactions that alert me. (Levithan, 2012, p. 152)

Another instance is when A resided in the body of a suicidal girl called Kelsea. Instead of being lured into also feeling suicidal, A's common sense still remained strong, and A even went out of their way to ask for help from Kelsea's father, preventing her from committing suicide. Even though Kelsea's father was initially hesitant, A managed to convince him that her suicidal tendency was serious, and Kelsea desperately needed help. A made sure that Kelsea's father still reached out to her the next day when A no longer inhabited her body because it was feared that her suicidal soul would finally end her life. This act saved Kelsea's life.

"I'm not going to do anything tonight. But tomorrow you have to watch me. You have to force me if I change my mind. I might change my mind. I might pretend that this whole conversation didn't happen. Keep that notebook. It's the truth. If I fight you, fight me back. Call an ambulance." (Levithan, 2012, p. 136)

The concept of a superficial body could also be seen when A was discussing about gender. When A was in the body of Vic, A realized that Vic was a transgender: biologically female, gendered male. A then went on to discuss how awful it was to be born in a wrong body, how it became an everyday battle, and it caused different reactions from different people (Levithan, 2012, pp. 253-255). This proves that the soul was the one that decided the identity of the body, not the other way around. One's soul could decide that they are female born in a male body, or the opposite. However, because of the norms that the society has planted into people's heads that one is expected act like their assigned sex at birth, gender norms become so prominent in dictating how an individual should perform (Hentschel, Heilman & Peus, 2019), and transgender people encounter challenges in their lives trying to break said norms, just like Vic in this story. A even said that when it came to gender, A was both and neither, indicating that the body's gender does not affect them after being inside bodies with various genders. Furthermore, it proves that gender is a socially constructed idea because A had no one dictating what gender they should base their actions and

identity upon throughout their developmental phase.

There were days I felt like a girl and days I felt like a boy, and those days wouldn't always correspond with the body I was in. I still believed everyone when they said I had to be one or the other. Nobody was telling me a different story, and I was too young to think for myself. I had yet to learn that when it came to gender, I was both and neither. (Levithan, 2012, p. 254)

However, even though the body is seen as something superficial, it does not mean that humans do not want to take care of it. Due to the notion that appears in the modern society that the body is an ongoing project, people try their best to give their utmost care to the vessel they are in so they could show to others how successful their projects are (Shilling, 2003).

Shilling (2003) explained that machines could be finely tuned, cared for, reconstructed, carefully presented and even replaced its broken parts, and this also could be applied in bodies. A body is seen as these extremely complex machines whose performance could be enhanced, appearance could be customized, but still prone to breaking down and needing maintenance and repair, just like any other machines. Furthermore, this metaphor suggests that the body is radically 'other' to the self, something they have control over, just like other things like computers, cars, smartphones, something they could fine tune to fit their own unique needs. People could take such measures to get involved in regular physical exercise, personal health programs, skincare regimen, healthy diet, and even do something as extreme as plastic surgeries and transplants. Young and new machines are preferred and surely could perform much better than old ones, which then would be treated and maintained meticulously to prevent it from breaking, and push away aging and decrease in performance as much as possible. The social definitions of bodies have now entered the general concept of 'youth' and 'aged' with different symbolic values attached to them. In contemporary consumer culture, society has spread the image of being young, slim, taut, and beautiful as desirable bodies through media,

whereas aging bodies tend to be hidden from attention.

Through the bodies represented in *Every Day*, it could be observed that Levithan was also affected by this notion that he created a protagonist as young as sixteen, along with the concept of changing only to the bodies with the same age as them; hence, the characters in each chapter are always young.

From what I can tell, every person I inhabit is the same age as me. I don't hop from being sixteen to being sixty. Right now, it's only sixteen. (Levithan, 2012, p. 2)

In a way, Levithan 'sells' the notion of being young and by being this young, the protagonist is able to experience such exciting romance that even makes them want to defy destiny. Older age is not needed to experience life to the fullest because being young enables one to also experience that and even learn a lot of things along the way, sending a message that age and maturity do not always correlate.

Other than that, it could also be seen that A treated the body as 'other' to themselves. A had committed that they would only do what was in best interest towards the body they were in; they never brought the body in the way of harm, and they even sat out of physical education classes in fear of injuring the body because they did not possess adequate physical skills and the knowledge (Levithan, 2012, p. 49). Initially thinking they could learn it as they went, injuring the body was what A caused. Bearing the guilt of harming the body which was seen as precious and other to them, A then decided to just take it easy in being involved in physical activities. After all, even though like machine bodies could be repaired, it is far better to maintain its performance and protect it rather than experiencing damage.

### **The Body as a Mask**

The second representation of the body that could be observed in the book is seeing it as a mask. Usually, a mask is used to hide something beneath it, commonly a face. It is also a metaphor of generally hiding something under a pretense of something otherwise; for instance, putting on a happy face when one really feels sad inside.

Someone who has bad intentions could also use a mask of kindness before committing their vile act in order to gain trust from their victims.

In the context of this novel, a body is used to hide who one is really inside. This is basically A's whole life, as they needed to use the body as a mask in order not to give away that someone different was residing in certain bodies. A tried to go through a day being as invisible and as normal as possible, unlike when A were younger. Back then, A tried to make lasting connections, they longed for true friendship and closeness, and internalized other people's lives into A's own heart, such as regarding the body's friends as A's own friends, the body's parents as their parents. However, A learned the hard way that nothing would ever last, and no matter how strong the relationship was, it would always end for A as they would switch bodies the next day.

At first it was hard to go through each day without making any lasting connections, leaving any life-changing effects. ... I would make bonds without acknowledging how quickly and permanently they would break. ... But after a while, I had to stop. It was too heartbreaking to live with so many separations. (Levithan, 2012, p. 7)

That is why A decided that they would just be as discreet as possible in navigating through other people's body and life, and tried to keep hold of as few everyday memories as possible. A accessed the memories and facts of the body each day, knew its name, its on-the-surface family background, its routine in order to navigate through their day, without A interfering with their own desire or volition. Even when A was in the body of someone they did not like, A still respected it, putting on a mask of acceptance themselves.

It's hard being in the body of someone you don't like, because you still have to respect it. I've harmed people's lives in the past, and I've found that every time I slip up, it haunts me. So I try to be careful. (Levithan, 2012, p. 2)

This could be compared to a closeted LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and "plus" to encompass spectrums of various genders and sexualities) people. In a lot of societies, it is deemed normal to be sexually attracted to the opposite gender and

perform their gender roles according to their assigned sex at birth. Consequently, those who do not conform to these norms are seen as deviants; for instance, someone who is sexually attracted to the same gender, or someone who decides they do not belong to their biological sex. In an unaccepting society, bullying and discrimination become some of the responses; hence, these people who do not act in accordance with the heteronormativity are forced to hide themselves underneath a mask of 'normalcy' in order not to be shunned or excommunicated. Worse, their mental health becomes negatively impacted (Johnson, Oxendine, Taub & Robertson, 2013).

In *Every Day*, Levithan delivers the description of the mental hardship of someone being born in the wrong body when A was inhabiting the body of a transgender called Vic, who certainly had gone through difficulties fellow LGBTQ+ people experienced.

It is an awful thing to be betrayed by your body. And it's lonely, because you feel you can't talk about it. you feel it's something between you and the body. You feel it's a battle you will never win... and yet you fight it day after day, and it wears you down. Even if you try to ignore it, the energy it takes to ignore it will exhaust you. (Levithan, 2012, p. 254)

This could lead to some people hiding their true selves. For instance, those who are gay hide beneath a mask indicating they are straight, and are even involved in a heterosexual relationship they do not want at all. Here, their body is used as a mask in order to hide who they actually are so that they could be accepted in the society.

### **The Body as Something Temporary**

The temporariness of the body is clearly shown through the concept of everyday change in A's life. In A's case, temporariness went by fast in the blink of an eye, in the matter of days. This is also similar to the philosophy that life is temporary, where humans are born, they live their lives and someday eventually die. In this life, nothing is really permanent, including the body. It would age, slowly deteriorate, and someday completely loses its function, just like a machine (Shilling, 2003). Tangible things, especially, degenerate fast: all living things would die, machines would wear out,

clothes would become brittle, and even something as simple as liquid water would evaporate. Intangible things are all the more temporary, such as feelings: love could be replaced by hate, which then could be replaced by regret, which could then turn into desperation; good things or bad things would not last forever, that is why there is a saying that life is like a wheel, sometimes one would be at the top, sometimes the bottom, and it is always moving.

In the novel, this temporariness could be seen through the progressing numbers put as the title of each chapter, signifying the days A has been alive, and also how many times they have switched bodies. Events in *Every Day* transpire in the span of forty days (day 5994 to day 6034), which also indicates that A had resided in forty different bodies in that span, and 6034 bodies in their whole life (Levithan, 2012).

The idea of temporariness is also included in Chris Shilling's discussion of the body and death (2003). No matter how advanced the technology and the medical field, death remains a biological inevitability which humans could not at all control. As the body's role in the social world gets increasingly important, its death marks the end of its value and the project that has been continuously applied on it. Initially a social body, it is now private and limited. When death occurs, it indicates a disturbance to the social body rather than the demise of an individual body. Due to this idea, instead of being an open and communal event, death is relatively hidden; it has become a form of private and limited experience which is indicated by the intensifying uneasiness between the bodies of the living and the dead (Shilling, 2003). To give an example, it could be observed that the funeral homes are often times private, limiting the sight of the deceased, and in some, children are prohibited to enter in order to 'shield' them from the death itself, as children are seen as a kind of new life, the very definition of its rambunctiousness. Shilling (2003) explained that it is because of the presence of death that the period between birth and death is seen as something that should be filled with meaning, something that should be filled with social importance, which

makes death an actually significant part to the process of finding self-identity through bodies.

In contrast, according to Shilling (2003), confronting the presence of death in other people's bodies could evoke insecurity in one's self-identity because it reminds them of their own inevitable demise. This could be seen from the unwillingness of the people in touching or even getting close to a dead body, as if fearing subconsciously that death is somehow contagious. Consequently, to push death as far as possible, there is a tremendous improvement in medicine, sanitation, diets, exercise regimes, even artificial enhancements, so that people who are involved in these could get a peace of mind that death is indeed so far away still. This has become some kind of survival strategy to keep death at bay. Besides that, the alleviation of death into an individual event with a certain cause contributes to the representation of the individualization and rationalization of the body, and also the alienation of death. Because of all the efforts to avoid death, an 'unexplained death' now becomes scandalous because people no longer recognize that death is inevitable and universal (Shilling, 2003).

In *Every Day*, it is found that death is in fact so much closer to the bodies although its discussion is not that prominent. This is shown from the very concept of A's life itself. As mentioned before, A's day to day life went fast in the blink of an eye, bearing similar concepts of life and death. It is as if A 'died' every day because their experience in a certain body ended once the day also ended. A could no longer go back to the body they once resided, and that is similar to the concept of the death of the body as it could not come back to life anymore. To make the period between birth and death meaningful, or in A's case, the period of waking and sleeping, A tried to stay hidden, not to cause disruptions and unwanted attention, to keep doing what the body had been doing through A's ability to access the body's memories, and to keep the precious body safe. Once the day was done, when A 'died', A repeated it all over again the next day. No one, not even A, knew how this condition came to be, the reasons behind A's inability to stay, bearing a similar concept of 'unexplained death'.

For this reason, for Rhiannon, encountering A was also, in a way, like encountering death, an unexplained one at that. As people are apprehensive at the presence of death, Rhiannon also responded in the same way. Because once she learned that A's life somehow resembled death, something that did not even occupied the back of her mind as she was still young, something that she surely did not ever want to experience, she subconsciously avoided A, avoided meeting them, avoided touching them, avoided talking about A's concept of life altogether.

When we get to the bench, Rhiannon lets me sit down first, so she can determine the distance that we'll sit apart, which is significant. (Levithan, 2012, p. 105)

I reach out again for her hand, but this time she says, "No. Don't."

I freeze. (Levithan, 2012, p. 108)

There is still no word from Rhiannon. Whether her silence is coming from her confusion or from a desire to be rid of me, I have no way of knowing. (Levithan, 2012, p. 172)

In the end, Rhiannon's attempt of accepting A's condition proved arduous as accepting death as something close to oneself is challenging. Even though she comes to love A, long for A, and learns how to navigate around A's unique condition, she still expresses her worry through an email she sends:

I want to see you, but I'm not sure if we should do that. I want to hear about what's going on, but I'm afraid that will only start everything again. I love you—I do—but I am afraid of making that love too important. Because you're always going to leave me, A. We can't deny it. You're always going to leave. (Levithan, 2012, p. 305)

This led to an eventual separation between the two. With A understanding that they could not be together, A willingly went away; A moved as far away as possible from Rhiannon, ending their ill-fated relationship once and for all.

## CONCLUSION

Upon extensive reading and understanding the text with the help of relevant theoretical framework, there exists a profound discussion about body in David Levithan's young adult novel *Every Day*. Through Stuart Hall's representation

theory, the indexical signs present all throughout this novel send across several meanings about the body; which are the body is represented as something superficial, a tangible vessel that needs a soul to give it meaning; as a mask, something that covers what or who one is really inside; and as something temporary, something that could never last, no matter how hard one tries to hold on to. Through the work of Chris Shilling, one could also understand that the body is increasingly important in the academic world as there are more and more discussions surrounding it. Through the analysis of the social body, it could be understood that the body has become a social asset in which it could also contribute to one's self-identity, creating the body as a project that one could work on throughout their life. Consequently, the metaphor of body as a machine appears, and it discusses the maintenance of 'youthful' and 'aged' body, where the young is often preferred, and this could be seen from the idea that the author created a sixteen-year-old protagonist and the adventures that follow when one is young. Other than that, there is also a close relation between death and the body, as through death that the social body is reduced into individual body, where the living often avoids the dead, fearing subconsciously of their own. This could be seen from Rhiannon's treatment towards A, whose life resembles death itself.

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