

**SELF DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN OBESITY
AS REFLECTED IN MEG CABOT' *SIZE 12 IS NOT FAT*
(A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS)****Agasta Sonya Pase**✉

English Department, Faculty of Languages and Arts, State University of Semarang, Indonesia

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analysis.****Abstract***

This study is aimed at explaining the main character's personality as reflected in the story, the obesity problem in terms of the main character's psychology and the process of self defense mechanism in the main character's psychological problem as reflected in Meg Cabot' Size 12 Is Not Fat. The writer employed Meg Cabot's Size 12 Is Not Fat as the object of this study. This study is a descriptive qualitative study based on the theory of psychological analysis and new criticism theory as the approaches. It is a descriptive qualitative research since each data is in the form of words, phrases, sentences, narrations and dialogues. The data are collected by reading the novel and references dealing with the topic analysis. The data then written in descriptive and in order to answer the research questions. The investigation of this research resulted in several findings. From the analysis it may be concluded that first, dealing with the obesity problem, the main character's personality is described as an irritable and rude person. Second, obesity as the main character's problem has affected her psychological conditions. On the one hand the main character tried to be confident with her new body size, but on the other hand, she felt desperate with her body. Third, the writer found that the self defense mechanism worked in the main character's psychological problem.

It is found there are five varieties of defense mechanisms that are conducted by the main character to protect herself against obesity stigma. In this study, the writer explored the five varieties of defense mechanisms which deal with the problems, as follows: (1) denial, (2) reaction-formation, (3) rationalization, (4) displacement, and (5) compensation. To the students of English Department, this study shows that feminism approach could be used to analyze the literary work.

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✉ Correspondent Address:

B3 Building FBS Unnes

Sekaran, Gunungpati, Semarang, 50229

E-mail: fbs@unnes.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

In this globalization era, the media has portrayed a “thin” body ideal for women for the past several decades. The cultural ideal of thinness negatively impacts women’s body image (Richins, 1991). For women in America, body weight has become a special issue. Previous research has shown that overweight women tend to date less, marry less often and earn lower salaries than thin women which make them feel guilty and receive an error about their appearances (Crocker, 1993).

Many women are attempting to meet this media ideal of thinness. They are struggling in vain to lose weight in order to get this thin body standards. Some women tend to feel ashamed and guilty when they cannot measure up this beauty standards. They more likely to experience and report discrimination based on their excess weight. Previous research has shown that many obese women deal with negative stigma in many ways.

Many of them prefer not to go out in public because they feel self-conscious or they simply cannot enjoy activities that most people take for granted, like going to the movies, taking the subway, or going on vacation because the seats are too small, the turnstiles are too narrow, or the accommodations are too uncomfortable to them. All of these experiences, repeated day after day for years, can lead them to great depression, anxiety, or low self esteem. Obese women should not be looked down because they are actually suffer terribly from stigma of obesity. Some of them may react to obesity stigma by accepting negative attitudes against them, which may in turn increase their vulnerability to low self-esteem.

THEORY AND APPROACH

Michael Groden (2005) in his book entitled *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary*

Theory and Criticism, new criticism is a name of an approach applied to a varied and extremely energetic effort among Anglo-American writers to focus critical attention on literature itself. It emphasized close reading to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object.

Michael Groden (2005) then states that the most ambitious attempt to articulate a theory for New Criticism, *Theory of Literature* (1949) Rene Wellek and Austin Warren distinguish between the “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” study of literature. The former concentrates on the work as a “stratified system of norms”, whereas the latter relegates literary biography, history, psychology, and sociology to the “extrinsic” domain, a move that incurred the ire of literary historians, scholars, sociologist and so on.

Rene Wellek points out the erroneous nature of this criticism by nothing that a number of the New Critics outlined their theoretical aesthetics in stark contrast to the “objectivity” of the sciences (Wellek, 1978 : 611). Studying a passage of story in New Critical style required careful, exacting scrutiny of the passage itself. Intrinsic elements such as setting, characterization and plot were used to identify the theme of the text. In addition to the theme, the New Critics also looked for irony and tension.

As quoted by Michael Ryan (2012 : 4) in *An Introduction To Criticism* states that New Criticism argues that each text has a central unity. The goal was to describe the organic unity of work, the way form, and content cohered perfectly. The researcher’s job is to intepret the text, telling in what ways each of its parts contributes to the central unity. Judgements of the value of a text must be based on the richness of the attitude and the complexity and the balance of the text. The New Critics were therefore skeptical of the notion that writer’s intention determined what a work meant (the “intentional fallacy”)

and they opposed criticism that relied on a reader's emotional reaction to or impression of a work (the "affective fallacy").

Psychology was firstly believed as the clinical theories, now it might come to the field of lives, such as industry, law, education, and literature. Literary study that uses psychology as an approach is a study to search and to find the same concept or perception of psychological aspect of the characters in a literary work with certain theory of psychology. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren included "psychological" criticism as one of the five "extrinsic" approaches to literature that is written in *Theory of Literature* (1978 : 81). They mentioned that :

"Literature provides a psychological study of an individual writer; explore the nature of the creative process; generalize about "types and laws present within works of literature"; or theorize about the psychological "effects of literature upon its readers"

Wellek and Warren (1956 : 95) state that literature is an expression of society. By reading the literary works, the reader can understand how society and environment manage the rules of life. It means that literary work which is published at certain moment can be portrayal of peoples's culture, tradition, and character. The readers also know how the character ideas and opinion about many things through their dialogues. With psychological approach, people can understand various characters and behaviors found in the novel and automatically they will know and understand psychological world of the characters deeply.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

1. The Development of the Main Character's Personality

Heather Wells as the main character in this story was once a teen singing sensation. Her mother and her manager embezzled all the money she earned as a singer to live the good life in Argentina, while her father was in jail for passing blank checks. She had to face the fact that her career has fallen from the position of mega star because her label dropped her.

She also had to face another facts that her fiancé, Jordan, was cheating with her biggest rival, Tania, whose career was on the rise. Due to this matter, she decided to look for a job in order to survive.

Previously, Heather worked as a waitress at the manicurist in Manhattan with a very little salary. Then, in the first place she heard about a job vacancy in the residence hall from Magda, her customers, who had been complaining to anyone who would listen to her story about Justine , the last assistant director who had been fired. Magda was angry to Justine because he was embezzling seven thousand dollars from the building's petty cash where Magda worked as cafeteria's cashier at the residence hall. After heard the information about the job vacancy from Magda, Heather decided to fill the positions as an assistant director in the residence hall.

After severe things happened to her life, Heather must face another facts that she was overweight. She used to be in size eight but she is in size twelve now. It was because she always vent her depression and pain out on food when she was in uncomfortable mood related to her past memories. She ate more than usual and took her into obesity.

In the story, the author, Meg Cabot explicitly described Heather's figure as a kindhearted and brave person. She was a positive person with a positive characteristic. It made her surrounded by the people who loved and care for her. However, obesity problem has made her into a different person.

Heather became easily to get angry when people around her were talking about

her new size which was classified into obese. It is described in the novel, when the sales clerk at a clothing store said to the other customer that size 12 (Heather's body size) was categorized into obese. Heather was angry to his statement who stated implicitly that her size 12 was classified as obese. As a form of her anger, she pointed out to him that size 12 was the size of the average American woman. The sales clerk looked panicky and nervously after seeing Heather's anger and disagreement towards his statement.

Obesity stigma has become Heather's new problem she had to face after the depression swept over her. This stigma of obesity has affected her personality to be an irritable person, especially when someone put a subject on her weight that was categorized as obese. Although she considered her body was not fat because her size was the size of the average American woman, but still people around her felt that her size was categorized into obese.

Besides Heather's irritable personal traits, in the novel, it was also described that Heather was becoming a rude person, especially to Jordan, her ex fiancé who had an affair with Tania, her biggest rival. It happened when Jordan was trying to meet Heather after they broke up four months ago. Jordan was about to ask how Heather's conditions after the incident in her office. Through Jordan's statement, it was illustrated that Heather turned into a rude person by refusing and speaking harshly to him. Jordan thought that Heather became a rude person because she was once a polite person, but after they broke up and she has affected by excess weight, she becomes rude to him.

2. Obesity as the Main Character's Problem in Term of Main Character's Psychology

Heather's obesity indirectly has an impact on her psychological condition. The writer found there are two psychological conditions of Heather Wells that implicitly described in the novel. In one hand she tried to stay confident with her new size 12 shape. She was trying to be brave. She tried to ignore what people said to her that she was fat. However, on the other hand she felt uncomfortable with her new body size. She felt desperate because she would hard to get a boyfriend due to the fact that she was overweight.

Heather's form of confidence happened when she compared herself to the girls under her size, like her boss, Rachel. She felt that her body shape also had advantage than skinny girls body shape as in her boss body shape. She compared herself better than any girls under her size. According to her, girls with ultra thin bodies like her boss, were very uncomfortable to be hugged because they were so thin like stick.

Heather's statement showed that she wanted to stay confident with her new body size no matter what happened includes the way she had to do an exercise. It can be seen that actually Heather was too lazy to do exercise after gaining weight. However, she showed her form of confidence by claiming that woman like her also can burn just as many calories walking as running like she always did.

Another psychological impact that experienced by Heather after overweight was a form of Heather's desperation that has engulfed her. Although she tried to stay confident with her new body shape, but actually she also had a sense of grief over her desperation that implicitly delivered by Meg Cabot in this story.

Heather's form of desperation appeared when she was confronted by the criteria of Cooper's ideals type of woman. As described in the previous sub-chapter, Heather has an ambition to build a

relationship with Cooper. However, she did not feel much better when it was dealing with her weight. Although she was very eager to get Cooper as her lover, but on the other hand, Heather knew well that Cooper also had his own criteria for his prospective partner. Heather then became very desperate, when Sarah, her co-workers, was mentioning their boss's name, Rachel, as an example of women ideal type for Cooper. She became very uncomfortable when she consciously knew that her boss was very similar to Cooper's dream woman that has a slender body.

4.3 The Main Character's Self Defense Mechanism Towards Obesity

As noted in chapter two, according to Freud, defense mechanisms is like protection which comes naturally when people need, although each person performs different grade of defense mechanisms. Defense Mechanisms is really important in human beings, the more they have a better defense mechanism, the more they will be stronger and ready to face anything in their lives.

4.3.1 Denial

In this novel, denial as Heather's defense mechanism was portrayed when she denied the statement from a sales clerk stating that size 12 was a size for fat people. It happened when she was trying a new jeans at the clothing store. She felt strange with the jeans size she tried because it was too loose for her. Being in denial gave her mind the opportunity to unconsciously absorb shocking or distressing information at a pace that won't send her into a psychological down performance. She simply acted as nothing happened and made an excuse to protect her from deep emotional pain. She did not want to lose her self-confidence just because she was fat.

As described in the previous sub-chapter, Heather Wells used denial against

people who had negative stigma towards her weight. They were the sales clerk and Rachel (Heather's boss) who had the same opinion that size 12, Heather's size was classified as fat. As the writer can see here, Heather used denial as a form of her rejection related to her obesity. She felt that being a size 12 was not a matter for her. Denial played as an important role in Heather's life.

4.3.2 Reaction Formation

Heather's reaction formation happened when she directly got a fat remark from Mrs. Allington, the wife's president. It was illustrated in the novel that Heather was helping Mrs. Allington, who was not feeling well to return to her room in the penthouse. Although she didn't realized if Heather worked to her husband she still acknowledged her as a teen pop star who used to sing in the malls. Unconsciously, she expressed a question which made Heather feels offended. It can be seen clearly that Heather was actually feeling upset to Mrs. Allington. The fat remark was a sensitive issue for her because she was very aware of her body and knows that she was heavier than she used to be. Heather certainly didn't need to hear the fat remark from Mrs. Allington because she would most probably be unhappy with the way she looked anyway. She managed to reduce her anger by taking up the opposite feeling to Mrs. Allington. She was afraid of being criticized and dismissed from her job if she showed her upset feeling towards Mrs. Allington. She ended up being particularly courteous and friendly towards her. Heather felt that she had to be kind to Mrs. Allington because she knew Mrs. Allington was still being the wife's president.

Based on the statement above, Heather's reaction formation as a form of her defense mechanism is happened to reduce her feelings of anxiety for being criticized and dismissed from her job. By engaging these defense mechanisms she was able to defend

herself against a feared social punishment and dismissal. She wanted to protect her fragile ego after having hard problems she had to face.

4.3.4 Rationalization

Heather's rationalization happened when she saw Rachel showed her a Pansy award for her outstanding service to the college. Heather actually felt jealous towards her boss's Pansy. She helped all Rachel's work alone, so she thought she also deserved a great appreciation for her work since she never received an award when she was still a teen pop star.

Heather knew well her position as the assistant director was to help her boss in carrying out her duties. She felt that she needed also a great appreciation for her efforts. Therefore, she compared her hard work which much heavier than her boss and thought she deserved to get something that was bigger than the Pansy award.

Heather used rationalization by making an excuse of her thought. Heather's rationalization took the form of comparison to justify her perception of an action's negative effects. Therefore, she used rationalization to rationalize her actions in order to protect her self-image. She used rationalization to avoid admitting disappointment of something that she could not accept such as job promotion. Rationalization was used as one of Heather's defense mechanisms to protect her from the uncomfortable situations.

4.3.4 Displacement

Heather used displacement as one of her defense mechanism. She was in the uncomfortable situation when Sarah surprised to know that she still maintains a good relationship with her ex-fiance, Jordan. She felt offended by Sarah's reaction and vent her depression out on food such as soda.

Heather used soda as a form of her displacement. She did not vent her discomfort on people around her but rather on soda that could give her a sense of relief. She did not want to remember her past when she was asked by the people around her. She might become angry, but she couldn't express her anger in any other hostile way toward them, so she displaced her anger by drinking soda. The emotions were replaced by the sensations of pleasurable flavors in the mouth and tongue, and followed by feelings of satisfaction in the stomach. Displacement became one of Heather's defense mechanisms as a way of dealing with her uncomfortable feelings.

4.3.5 Compensation

Heather's compensation happened when she wanted to compensate her weakness towards her crush's ideal woman. She thought that her crush's ideal woman was a woman like her boss, Rachel. She was afraid if her presumption was true, because she felt like she did not like Rachel. Although she had many shortcomings such as her weight was classified as obese and her life was considered miserable, she still has a positive compensation. She might not even be aware that she was doing it, but Cooper knew that Heather had positive personality that was the courage to continue her life and not give up on the circumstances.

According to Cooper, Heather was the bravest people he ever met because she had a courage to face all of her problems and pains. Although she was fat, she has a good personality that made people around her appreciate her. Compensation became one of

Heather's defense mechanisms as a way of dealing with her uncomfortable feelings related to her shortcomings.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis in the previous chapter, the writer presents the conclusion related to *Size 12 Is Not Fat* by Meg Cabot. Here the writer draws some points as the conclusion of the discussion.

In this study, the writer found that first, dealing with the obesity problem, the main character's personality was described as an irritable and rude person. Second, obesity as the main character's problem has affected her psychological conditions. On the one hand she tried to be confident with her new body size, but on the other hand, she felt desperate with her body.

Third, the writer found that the self defense mechanism worked in the main character's psychological problem. She performed the five varieties of defense mechanisms such as : (1) denial, (2) reaction formation (3) rationalization (4) displacement and (5) compensation that protect her from the obesity stigma.

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