

GREG HEFFLEY'S ROLE CONFUSION IN THE *DIARY OF A WIMPY KID* (2007): A PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Literary psychological scholars see psychological problems faced by a fictional character in a literary work as a reflection of the author's awareness of similar phenomena that happen to a real person in real life. It becomes a trigger to why this research is conducted. This research aims to analyze the psychological condition of Greg Heffley, the protagonist in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007), in his early teenage year. The theory used in this research is Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This research method is qualitative descriptive, where data is analyzed and presented in the discussion in detailed descriptions. Meanwhile, the primary data is text in the novel. The results show that Greg Heffley, as the protagonist, experiences role confusion due to the transition from childhood to teenage. He does not adapt well with his new environment. The situation is worsened by his unsupportive best friend, who still acts like a child when interacting with him. It is also found that Greg Heffley, at this stage, begins to be aware of his sexual and occupational identity. It is concluded that Greg Heffley finds it challenging and difficult to migrate from childhood to teenage with all his situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Novels, like many other genres of literature, often tell stories about human life (Destelita et al., 2022). Instead of fully covering imaginative stories, they bring stories that frequently connect with daily life situations. Brotherhood, friendship, family, and childhood are some popular topics in novels. It is like what is manifested in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007).

Diary of a Wimpy Kid (2007) is the first novel of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* novel series comprising the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007), *Rodrick Rules* (2008), *The Last Straw* (2009), *Dog Days* (2009), *The Ugly Truth* (2010), *Cabin Fever* (2011), *The Third Wheel* (2012), *Hard Luck* (2013), *The Long Haul* (2014), *Old School* (2015), *Double Down* (2016), *The Getaway* (2017), *The Meltdown* (2018), *Wrecking Ball* (2019), *The Deep End* (2020), *Big Shot* (2021), and *Diper Överlöd* (2022). Some of those titles have been adapted into movies.

This first sequel of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is chosen as the material object of the study with a consideration that this sequel presents us with the detail depiction of Greg Heffley's transition of psychosocial stages. The sequel also describes in detail about the relations between



characters in the story. By reading completely the first sequel, readers will be able to map the situation in the story prior to reading the following sequels.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid (2007) shows us how kids grow and interact with each other. Greg Heffley, Rodrick Heffley, Manny Heffley, and Rowley Jefferson frequently appear in the novel and drive the plot. This title is part of a novel series that presents the same characters but with different conflicts.

This novel is relevant to analyze using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, dealing with the fact that there is a character, exactly the central character, in the story that is described as having some problems related to how he adapts to the situation surrounding him at his age. The problems also concern the transitions he experiences from a particular stage of psychosocial development to a higher stage.

The central character in this novel is Gregory Heffley (Greg), a 12-year-old boy entering middle school. Psychologically, this boy has personality features that become his minus points, such as being lazy, cowardly, and egoistic, which often contribute towards his actions and responses to any situation he faces. This kind of personality is easy to find in real life, especially given that a boy at this age is transitioning between childhood and teenage, a critical and most crucial period of life a person can have. If not taken care of properly, a person in such a situation can experience psychological problems.

The question of the research deals with how Greg Heffley as the central character in the story copes with the transition of psychosocial development from childhood to teenage. The research purpose aims at answering such a question. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development is a relevant theory to use, in accordance with the hypothesis that what Greg Heffley experiences corresponds to the concept of identity confusion proposed by Erikson.

Psychologist Erik Erikson has tried to identify and classify these kinds of problems and thus has formulated the psychosocial theory, which breaks down one's psychosocial development into eight stages (Batra, 2013; Samsanovich, 2021; Yuliyani et al., 2021). That is why this study is conducted using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory to understand and explain the problem that the central character, Greg Heffley, faces as depicted in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned in the previous section, the theory used in this study is Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory. Like many other psychological theories, this theory applies to literary studies concerning the principle that literature reflects society (Borah, 2018; Nazriani, 2018; Udoh, 2021). It means the story in a literary work often represents or is inspired by real-life situations. It includes the characters that frequently have features of personalities similar to those of human beings.

Several previous studies on literary works that focus on psychosocial development issues have been conducted. One of the studies is conducted by Yuliani et al. (2021). They analyze the psychosocial development of a character named Badiuzzaman Said Nursi in El Shirazy's *Api*



Tauhid novel. The character is uniquely illustrated from early childhood to elderly age, which covers nearly all stages of psychosocial development according to Erik Erikson.

According to Erikson, a human's psychological development concerning his/her relation to social life is divided into 8 (eight) stages, namely stage 1 (hope), stage 2 (will), stage 3 (purpose), stage 4 (competence), stage 5 (fidelity), stage 6 (love), stage 7 (care), stage 8 (wisdom). The details are explained in the following (Erskine, 2019; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Wijaya, 2022).

2.1 Stage 1: Hope (basic trust vs basic mistrust)

The very first stage of the psychosocial development of a human being deals with hope. According to Erikson, it happens at the age of 0 to 1½ years or in the phase of infancy (Asmara, 2020; Samsanovich, 2021). A baby girl or a baby boy in this period will develop her/his very early personality by beginning to trust others. She/he will start by trusting a person she/he thinks is the closest, the mother. It deals with how the mother (the parents in an androgyny family) takes care of her/him (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). A baby needs constant and consistent care by the mother, who will share her value, trustworthiness, and things like that with the baby. If it is successful, the baby will begin the early trust in others and vice versa.

2.2 Stage 2: Will (Autonomy vs shame)

The second stage of one's psychosocial development deals with "will". It happens at the age of between 1½ months and three years (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). In such an early childhood, a child begins to develop her/his will. A child in this age period needs to be facilitated, especially by the parents, for example, by letting the child explore her/his sense of independence when doing some basic tasks. Too often, prohibiting a child from doing something can make her/him hesitate with her/his potency. Success at this stage will make a child autonomous, while failure can make her/him feel ashamed when asked to do something independently (Afrija et al., 2022; Asmara, 2020).

2.3 Stage 3: Purpose (Initiative vs guilt)

According to Erik Erikson, the third stage of psychosocial development is related to purpose. It occurs at the age of between 3 and 5 years old. Children at this stage will learn to decide things on their own. A child who can make decisions will develop her/his initiative, and those who are not supported will develop a sense of guilt (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

2.4 Stage 4: Competence (Industry vs inferiority)

This stage occurs at the age of 5-12 years old. This stage is usually a school age where a person will develop her/his competence by learning at school and socializing with others. Success at this stage will create an industrious kid, while failure can make a person feel inferior (Kinanti & Daulay, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2022; Yuliyani et al., 2021).

2.5 Stage 5: Fidelity (Identity vs role confusion)

Stage 5 deals with fidelity. It happens from 12 to 18 years old when a person is entering a teenage. At this stage, a person becomes aware of her/his sexual and occupational identity (Chávez, 2016;



Dollinger et al., 2009). The search for identity will happen during this period (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

2.6 Stage 6: Love (Intimacy vs isolation)

It happens from 18 years old through 40 years old. Typically, people at this stage will begin to have relationships, which include friendship, marriage, and family. If one is successful at this stage, intimacy can be reached, while those who fail will feel isolated.

2.7 Stage 7: Care (Generativity vs stagnation)

This stage happens at 40-65 years old (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). People who already have settled will be aware of their positions, relations, and responsibilities dealing with the status in the family, at work, and in the community. They begin to think about what contributions they can give to the communities.

2.8 Stage 8: Wisdom (Ego integrity vs despair)

This is the final stage, which starts from the age of 65 years old when a person should begin to accept her/his life, whatever it is. The inability to accept life will lead to a feeling of desperation (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

The type of this research is library research, focusing on studying literary psychology with Erik Erikson's Psychosocial theory. The type of this research is qualitative descriptive research. Qualitative descriptive research is research where the researchers provide a detailed description of the issue being analyzed (Yuliani, 2018). The data are divided into primary data, which is the novel, and secondary data, which include references from books and journal articles related to this study.

The research begins with the data collection, followed with the data analysis and the data presentation. The data collection technique involves underlining, highlighting, and notetaking to find the issue related to the formula. Meanwhile, the data analysis technique analyses the issue related to at least the characteristics of the characters and plot. The data is presented in the form of quotations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis begins with the description of Greg Heffley following his age and position in his family. Using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, this description is important to analyze the psychological issue.

Greg Heffley is a boy aged 12 years old and a middle school student. He is the second son and has one older brother, Rodrick Heffley, and one younger brother, Manny Heffley.



He comes from a harmonious family with a father, a mother, and two brothers. He does not have any major conflicts with his parents but with his brothers, either the younger or older one. Greg Heffley has the habit of playing with Rowley Jefferson, who has become his best friend for years.

The relations between Greg Heffley and his two siblings are unique and typical. As the second child, he has some conflicts within those relationships, with Rodrick as his older brother and Manny as the younger one. Greg occasionally becomes the ‘victim’ of Rodrick’s dominance, that likes to ‘oppress’ Greg and Manny, who frequently plays the victim when conflicting with Greg, which can be seen in the quotation below describing how Rodrick tricks him,

You might think I was pretty dumb for falling for that one, but Rodrick was dressed up in his school clothes and he set my alarm clock ahead to make it look like it was the morning. Plus, he closed my curtains so I couldn’t see that it was still dark out.

After Rodrick woke me up, I just got dressed and went downstairs to make myself some breakfast, like I do every morning on a school day.

After I did, I told Dad that Rodrick had played a trick on me, and HE was the one that should be getting yelled at.

(Kinney, 2007, p. 11)

Meanwhile, here is how Manny is in Greg’s point of view,

Mom and Dad protect Manny like he’s a prince or something. And he never gets in trouble, even if really deserves it.

(Kinney, 2007, p. 21)

The above quotation shows how Rodrick, the eldest child in the Heffley family, uses his power to bully or oppress his younger brother, in this context Greg Heffley. He tricks Greg in order to satisfy his wimpy nature as well as to annoy Greg.

Such treatment and many other treatments done by Rodrick to Greg happens at the time when Greg is in the period of transition of ego development, using Erikson’s terms, from childhood to teenage. Thus, the situation faced by Greg becomes more and more complex. In the story of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007), Greg Heffley is also pictured as a boy entering a new phase of life, represented in his new enrolment at a middle school. Struggling to adapt to the new environment is the biggest and most difficult challenge he is facing.



3.1. Greg Heffley's Difficulty during the Transition to the Fifth Stage of Psychosocial Development

Greg Heffley is an example of a person who is in the position of shifting from the fourth stage of ego (age 5-12): "industry vs inferiority", through the fifth stage of ego (age 12-18), which is "identity vs role confusion", according to the psychosocial theory by Erik Erikson (McLeod, 2018; Wulandari et al., 2022).

This shift or transition is very reluctant to create an identity crisis where a person in this phase has two potencies. The first potency is that the person will be able to learn and understand his or her identity. On the other side, the second potency is that he or she can be confused with the role in society. The fifth stage is also the transition between childhood and adulthood, the so-called teenage.

In the context of what Greg Heffley experiences at the beginning of this new higher stage, he looks like he is struggling to adjust to his new role as a teenager, as shown in the following quotation.

Let me just say for the record that I think middle school is the dumbest idea ever invented. You got kids like me who haven't hit their growth spurt yet mixed with these gorillas who need to shave twice a day.

And then they wonder why bullying is such a big problem in middle school.

(Kinney, 2007, p. 5)

The quotation above shows that Greg Heffley feels uncomfortable in middle school. He feels he barely fits with the environment firstly due to his physicality and his small posture, which has to be in the same place with bigger boys that he calls with the term "gorillas". And then the second factor of his discomfort is bullying that bigger students do as a response toward kids with small postures and younger ages, including him.

It is assumed that entering the new phase of life, indicated by the school enrollment at a higher level where he is forced to meet and interact with new people, some of whom are older and bigger physically, makes him get confused and seemingly unready to deal with such a situation. His inferiority feeling complicates the role confusion of Greg Heffley due to his small posture and the bullying done by physically taller and bigger students considering his physicality at school. Besides, at home, he does not get enough support psychologically by his brothers.

The fact that he experiences role confusion causes anxiety that needs to be solved. In this story, to deal with his role confusion, on the first day of school, he blames the system of school that makes it possible for middle school to exist. He thinks it is ideal if school levelling is based on pupil height. With this system, she does not have to be in the same school as bigger students,



so he can escape from being bullied. To a certain extent, it can repress his anxiety concerning that issue.

An issue that complicates Greg Heffley's transition difficulty that leads the role confusion is the unsupportive best friend. It is discussed in the following section.

3.2. The 'Unsupportive' Best Friend

Given the above situation, Greg Heffley has difficulty entering his new psychosocial phase. It is worsened by the unsupportive closest circumstance due to his relationship with his best friend, in the context of how this closest circumstance supports Greg's adaptation.

Greg has a best friend named Rowley, whom he has had befriended during his childhood. However, Rowley's manner, behavior, and personality characteristics do not fit what Greg wants, which is to blend easily and quickly with the new environment. Rowley's presence does not help him much due to Rowley's preference to behave and act like a kid instead of learning to become a teenager.

I have told Rowley at least a billion times that now that we're in the middle school, you're supposed to say "hang out," not "play." But no matter how many noogies I give him, he always forgets the next time.

(Kinney, 2007, p. 18)

The quotation above shows how Greg works hard to adapt to the new environment. Greg looks ashamed of how Rowley speaks, especially his word choices that do not match what Greg expects and maybe others expect to hear in middle-school age.

3.3. Greg's Sexual and Occupational Identity

Based on Erikson's theory, at Greg's age, he is supposed to have developed his sexual and occupational identities. Sexual identity deals with the awareness of someone about his or her sex. Meanwhile, occupational identity deals with the awareness of someone about his occupational status; for instance, as a student or a worker.

In this novel, this situation is found. As for the sexual one, the first indication of Greg's sexual identity is shown in the following quotation:

Tuesday

I realized Rowley's injury thing is a pretty good racket, so I decided it was time for me to have an injury of my own.

I took some gauze from home, and I wrapped up my hand to make it look like it was hurt.



I couldn't figure out why the girls weren't swarming me like they swarmed Rowley, but then I realized what the problem was.

See, the cast is a gimmick because everyone wants to sign their name on it. But it's not exactly easy to sign gauze with a pen.

(Kinney, 2007, p. 143)

Greg Heffley shows how he has begun to show an attraction to girls, indicating that he already realizes his sexual interest in the opposite. At the age of 12, it is normal for a boy to be attracted to a girl or girls. Boys at these ages like to express their attraction to girls in many ways, one of those is by seeking attention, sometimes done exaggeratively. The way Greg shows attracting to girls in this novel is shown by seeking attention from girls. He wraps his hand to make it look like it was hurt, using a cast after he sees girls swarm around Rowley, who is injured and wrapped with a cast. He does that to get sympathy from the girls.

Besides his sexual identity, the occupational identity, or school identity, is found in the character of Greg Heffley. In this case, it can be understood by analyzing his awareness of his status as a middle school student, no more a primary school student, who has to behave the way middle school students do.

I've been trying to be a lot more careful about my image ever since I got to middle school....

(Kinney, 2007, p. 18)

The above quotation shows how Greg Heffley tries to act and be seen as a 'normal' middle school student. He tries to show others the 'proper' image of a middle school student. It indicates an awareness of Greg's occupational identity, in which he identifies himself as a middle school student.

5. CONCLUSION

The role confusion is experienced by Greg Heffley dealing with his enrollment in middle school, which signifies the transition of his childhood time to teenage. The environment that does not help him to adapt to the new status, such as the treatment of his brothers as well as the child-like personality of his best friend Rowley, worsens the crisis that Greg Heffley has to face. At his age also, he begins to be aware of his sexual and occupational identity, something that he does not experience before. Besides its popularity among children, this novel has become a perfect example of how to handle kids, especially those transitioning to teenage.



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