



**SUICIDAL NARRATIVE IN KATHLEEN GLASGOW'S *GIRL IN PIECES***

**Anita Melati**

Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia

E-mail: [anitamelati@gmail.com](mailto:anitamelati@gmail.com)

**Rachmat Nurcahyo**

Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia

E-mail: [rachmatnurcahyo@gmail.com](mailto:rachmatnurcahyo@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This research breaks down into two main goals: first, it aims to reveal the suicidal acts of the characters in Kathleen Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces*; second, it will examine how the characters' suicidal narrative is constructed. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and narratology were employed in this study to address the research objectives. *Girl in Pieces*, a novel by Kathleen Glasgow, serves as the data source for this qualitative investigation. This study demonstrates how the interaction between outside factors and internal conflicts illuminates the reasons behind suicide. The presence of ambivalent emotions, the impact of the superego's influence, and the regular reaction of loss to the withdrawal of libido caused the complex five characters to experience melancholy and mourning. This condition demonstrates how the novel's suicidal narrative is represented by the characters' psychological suffering. The manifestation of melancholy and its effects highlight the crucial role the superego plays in encouraging self-destructive behavior. The superego functions as a metaphorical "Thanatos," driving people toward self-destruction, including the potential for suicide, because of its punitive nature and internalized critical voice. With its intense sadness, self-loathing, and conflicting feelings about oneself, melancholia seriously jeopardizes people's well-being. The weight of melancholy and the destructive influence of the superego draw attention to how dangerous this mental state is.

**Keywords:** *suicidal narrative, psychoanalysis, melancholia, mourning*

**INTRODUCTION**

The ultimate end of human life is death, regardless of the form it takes or the causes behind it. Every human being is fully aware that death is the ultimate point of living on Earth and that it is ultimately unavoidable. But regardless of how natural it is, loved ones always experience pain and sorrow after death. Nobody is prepared to lose loved ones and have them pass from one life to the next. There are two types of death: unnatural and natural. Barek and Haque (2014) point out in their study that the main causes of natural death are aging, illness, and disease. On the other hand, unnatural death refers to events that come from suicides, murders, or accidents (Barek & Haque, 2014:34). Although there are an incredible amount of deaths every day from diseases, accidents, crimes, and war or conflict victims, there is always an unsolved question regarding suicide deaths.

Worldwide, the problem of suicide is still a hot topic for research and an important aspect of public health. Globally, about 800,000 people commit suicide each year, according to data from the World Health Organization (WHO) from 2017. The World Health Organization (WHO) projects that the age-standardized death rate from suicide will not change until 2030, with an estimated 11.4 deaths per 100,000 people worldwide. In the United States, 44,965 people committed suicide in 2016. (AAS, 2017). Furthermore, it is stated that in the same year (2016), there were 745 suicides in Minnesota and 1,271 suicides in Arizona.

A fascinating lens through which to examine the mechanisms of the human mind is provided by Freud's psychoanalytic theory. This method can provide a significant understanding of the nature of storytelling by probing the human mind and analyzing the underlying motives that underlie behavior and thought patterns. One can obtain a deeper comprehension of an individual's inner world and the motivations behind their actions by

closely examining their dialogue, behavior, and background. This viewpoint allows us to see the underlying narrative threads that contribute to these tragic outcomes, which makes it especially insightful when examining issues like suicide. The cause-and-effect explanation that came before makes it abundantly evident that narrative is at the core of the suicidal person's problem.

Poems, plays, short stories, and novels are examples of literary works that fall under the umbrella of literature and apply to the expression of human/author emotions and thoughts. A literary work is a representation of the universe and human life, according to Pradopo (1994: 26), and its main standard is truth, or whatever the author wishes to convey. The world and human existence are imitated, reflected, and represented in the work. There is a real-life connection to the author's work. He invented a fictional persona, whose behavior, mindset, and outward look are all influenced by psychology. To examine and analyze literary works based on psychoanalytic theory, the researchers employ psychoanalysis criticism theory.

This novel is an example of prose that aims to convey a broad idea. Kathleen Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces* was released in 2016. The primary character and the other characters are described in the story. Charlie Davis, the primary character, has experienced a lot of hardship in her life. Blue, Ellis, Louisa, and Charlie's father are the other characters.

The researchers focus on the suicidal acts and narratives of the five characters in this study. The individuals depicted in the characters are multifaceted, dealing with various obstacles and hardships that affect their physical and psychological welfare. Throughout the narrative, the characters go through several traumatic experiences and present-day struggles, including bereavement, homelessness, domestic and sexual abuse, drug addiction, hopelessness, and the prospect of being forced into prostitution. Their experiences with trauma have had a lasting effect on them, leaving them to struggle with hopelessness and an overwhelming desire to give up. As a result, this study investigates the characters' stories and behaviors. It makes readers aware of the depressing possibilities that individuals in hostile environments and with fragile psyches may face.

It is only natural for us to associate narrative discussions in the modern era with literary storytelling formats. As per the definition provided by Susan Onega and Jose Angel Garcia Landa (2014:3), the narrative is the symbolic portrayal of a series of interconnected events that have significance. It suggests that stories have a deliberate order of events with the intention of expressing a deeper meaning. There are many different semiotic tools available for creating narratives, such as spoken or written language, visual images, gestures, and performances. These tools are frequently used in combination to create compelling stories.

Psychoanalytic theories place a strong emphasis on the importance of story and desire. The psychoanalytic pioneer Sigmund Freud was instrumental in starting this framework's investigation of narrative functions. Freud's identification of the narrative structure that underpins both the psychoanalytic therapeutic process and the process of self-development is his most important contribution to the field of narrative analysis.

Psychoanalysis is based on particular theories regarding how the mind works, what makes human instincts human, and how sexuality influences behavior. In psychoanalysis, the intricate relationship between conscious and unconscious mental processes is examined. The primary concept of Freud "depends upon the notion of unconscious, which is part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions" (Barry, 2002: 97).

Unconscious motivations and emotions that are concealed from conscious awareness are subjects of great interest to Freud. According to Bus and Larsen (2002: 170), Freud emphasizes that the unconscious plays a major role in influencing consciousness by hiding desires, suppressed thoughts, and suppressed emotions. Feelings, images, and thoughts are all visible to the conscious mind. Sensible and unconscious notions alone are insufficient to

comprehend the nature of man. Thus, the "Tripartite Psyche" or "Three Fundamental Structures of the Human Mind" is the name given by Freud to his three-part model of the psyche. They are known as the superego, ego, and id. The meaning behind actions and thought processes is revealed by this term.

Numerous psychological issues stem from a complex and highly personal past. Suicide and attempted suicide reveal a deep struggle within people to effectively address a significant emotional problem. It represents the incapacity to successfully negotiate particular psychological and personal circumstances (Michel & Valach, 2011). Even though factors have an impact on people's views of themselves and their current circumstances, people who engage in suicidal behavior frequently demonstrate a noteworthy degree of narrative competency.

The phenomenon of suicide is multifaceted and devoid of a singular, obvious cause. Suicide is usually the consequence of a cascade of life events and experiences that have developed into a developmental history over time. Leenaars (1988) noted that although an individual's suicide may appear to be a reaction to the interpersonal circumstances of the moment, it is heavily impacted by their personal history. People who are thinking about killing themselves frequently describe experiencing excruciating mental anguish or unbearable emotional pain.

One concept that is presented in this research is the suicidal narrative. Suicidal thoughts, attempts, or completion are depicted in literature through stories, characters, or situations. This type of literature is known as a suicidal narrative. Individuals build their identities by assimilating their experiences into a dynamic personal story that shapes who they are on the inside (McAdams, 2001).

## METHOD

The goal of this qualitative study is to uncover phenomena related to the research topic. For this study, literary works with made-up people, places, and experiences were analyzed. The researchers used a qualitative research design as a result. Furthermore, this research was descriptive in nature because the results were presented in paragraphs. The 416-page novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow, which was published in 2016, served as the source of data for this study. In order to respond to the research questions, the researchers employed knowledge and interpretation to analyze the data. The datasheet, which serves as a secondary instrument and lists the quantity, type, and justification of the data gathered, is another tool utilized in this study. A datasheet was used as an additional tool by the researcher. The researchers arranged and interpreted the data into a table list to make data identification easier. This allowed the researchers to assess the data. Whereas the narrative data ought to offer clear justifications for the phenomena the text describes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

Table 1. Characters and their suicidal behavior in the novel

| No | Name of the Characters | Causes   | Attempts            |
|----|------------------------|--|---------------------|
| 1  | Charlie                | Traumas, domestic and sexual abuses and losses | Self-injury         |
| 2  | Charlie's father       | Substance abuse                                | drowning            |
| 3  | Ellis                  | Loss, toxic relationship                       | Cutting             |
| 4  | Louisa                 | Loss, dysfunctional family                     | Self burning        |
| 5  | Blue                   | Sexual abuse                                   | Cutting and burning |

### ***Attempts committed by the characters***

Each of the five characters in this story uses a unique strategy to carry out their suicidal acts as they make their way through the darkness of their inner worlds. The main character, Charlie, uses self-inflicted wounds as a painful release from her internal struggle and finds solace in the act of cutting. Charlie's father is drowning and trying to find a way out. Ellis, struggling with her mental suffering, uses cutting as a way to temporarily escape her pain and find an outlet for her emotions. Louisa accepts the power of fire and decides to take the excruciating pain of burning as a means of getting away. In an attempt to end her life, Blue, the last character, also turns to self-harming behaviors like burning and cutting.

Charlie displays actions that point to a suicide attempt. She exhibits self-destructive behavior by being hard on herself and turning to self-harming behaviors like cutting herself and trying to commit suicide with broken glass. The damaging actions show how much the Thanatos instinct has influenced people.

On the other hand, Charlie's father has had suicidal thoughts and has considered drowning in a river to end his life. This sad circumstance highlights the Thanatos instinct's potent influence. Tragically, Charlie's father drowns in the river, taking his own life. Freud (1917) said that melancholy results from the loss of ideals that one once held dear. It is his duty as a father to support and uplift his family. His idealized self is retreating because he no longer aspires to be a good husband and father. His libido withdrew into his ego as a result. The shadow of his unfulfilled ideal caused him to feel hate and love in equal measure. He cannot shake the self-directed hatred that has plagued him, even though he is inherently loving of himself. He experienced overwhelming feelings of moral despicability and worthlessness as a husband and father, which were exacerbated by the punishing voice of his superego. In the end, the superego's influence from Thanatos drives him in the direction of self-destruction, where he accepts a life that is meaningless and lifeless, much like an inorganic existence. It fuels his destructive self-behavior. He committed suicide by drowning in the river.

Charlie's closest friend is Ellis. She once attempts to cut herself to death at home, but her parents are able to stop her. She therefore makes it through the attempted suicide. Cutting's destructive nature is a sign of the Thanatos instinct's strong hold. Ellis' parents then decide to relocate to a different area of Idaho. It makes it clear that Ellis is still living. This implies that she has experienced psychological distress as a result of her boyfriend, which has had a major influence on her life. Ellis goes through periods of depression as a result of losing her boyfriend and his departure. As a result of her boyfriend's careless actions, Ellis feels her libido retreat into her ego. Her ego is shadowed by her boyfriend's behavior, which leads to a complicated ambivalence in which she feels both love and hate for him at the same time, resulting in a narcissistic component. She has conflicting feelings and desires for her boyfriend, which leads to this internal conflict.

As a result of this internal conflict, the superego becomes more and more critical of her, making her feel unworthy and unable to build lasting relationships. Her emotional problems are made worse by this disruption in her sense of self, which also makes her melancholy state more intense. Ellis internalizes her pain and turns it inward, turning it against herself, as opposed to projecting her rage and directing it toward the source of her disappointment. She is overcome with feelings of worthlessness and self-blame as a result of the conflicting feelings of love and hate that consume her. Furthermore, it is possible to interpret Ellis' self-destructive behavior—such as cutting herself—as partly motivated by the death instinct or Thanatos.

In the other part of the novel, it is told that Charlie shares a room in Creeley with Louisa. She has a close relationship and profound concern for one another. Since Charlie is the only person Louisa can truly trust, she feels compelled to reveal to her the details

of her life. However, Charlie cannot stay in Creeley for very long, though, as her time there is limited. In the last chapter, Louisa, depressed beyond belief, makes the terrible choice to burn herself to death. The fact that she burned herself shows how much the Thanatos instinct has influenced her. Louisa's loss of her boyfriend is the cause of her melancholy. At first, she thinks well of him and finds him to be a suitable companion. Her opinion, though, is altered when she learns that he violated her trust by selling her photo on an unsuitable website. She withdrew her desire and emotional investment in her boyfriend into her ego as a result. As a result of this process, the shadow of her idealized object fell on her ego, resulting in an emotional state of conflict marked by ambivalence between feelings of love and hate for her own object. In addition to loving herself, she also harbors feelings of self-deprecation for perceived foolishness and self-directed frustration.

Another character, which is Charlie's friend Blue from Creeley says she tried suicide once before, but thankfully didn't end up dead. Her confession provides insight into the difficult and intensely personal struggles she has endured. The family setting in which Blue was raised is commonly recognized as an essential resource for assistance in overcoming obstacles in life. On the other hand, she faces notable difficulties in her family environment. Blue has gone through the horrific ordeal of experiencing her father's sexual abuse.

Blue's melancholia stems from the profound loss of her personal freedom. This loss is directly linked to the traumatic experience of being sexually abused by her father, which has deeply disturbed her sense of self-regard. As a result, her libido, or sexual energy, has withdrawn from the object representing her liberty and has become invested in her ego. This transformation of the object into an abandoned object within her psyche gives rise to conflicting feelings of ambivalence, where love and hate intertwine. Blue is caught in the complex web of emotions caused by this internal conflict, further intensifying her melancholic state.

### ***Characters driven suicidal narrative***

Glasgow's poignant and powerful novel, *Girl in Pieces*, delves into the construction of a suicidal narrative via the experiences of its five characters. The suicide story demonstrates how the decision one makes affects the outcome of the suicide act. The five characters explain the story's recurring theme of suicidal behavior. Characters who contemplate or attempt suicide have deeper motivations or outside influences. Relationship problems, emotional distress, abuse, loss, dysfunctional families, stressful life events, imitation, and NSSI (non-suicidal self-injury) are just a few of the many causes of these behaviors. They start using suicide attempts as a coping mechanism to get control over and escape the chaos inside of them. The way those acts are portrayed creates a story that explores the depths of psychological states, enabling one to observe difficulties and identify with their journey.

### ***Losses and Trauma***

Charlie has gone through several major losses and traumas that have affected her mental and emotional health. These experiences include her father's death, her mother's domestic abuse, NSSI, Ellis's passing, being homeless and subjected to sexual abuse by a man in the underpass, being exploited by Frank, which led to her involvement in prostitution, her prior suicide attempt, the loss of Evan, Riley's passing, Louisa's death, negative beliefs, and mental anguish. The loss of her best friend plays a significant role in Charlie's melancholia. Research has shown that experiencing a significant loss is a significant risk factor that increases the likelihood of suicide. After the loss of Ellis, she, who heavily relies on others for her emotional well-being, experiences intensified feelings of distress. Since Ellis is her everything, she has no one else to provide her with affection.

While she faces bullying from others at school, Ellis becomes her one and only true friend who genuinely cares for her. She lacks a father and a mother, but she finds solace in having Ellis as her support and companion. Thus, when she loses Ellis, it becomes an extremely distressing situation for her life.

"If you try to make it by yourself, a guy tries to rape you in a tunnel and he's crazy high and strong. He gets his hands all the way down in your pants, his fingers inside you, his shoulder against your mouth so no one can hear you scream."

(Page 274)

The information above amply demonstrates her unfortunate circumstances. She suffered a horrific event when a man on the underpass sexually assaulted her while she was homeless. He is powerful and tall. She is unable to defend herself because she feels helpless and overwhelmed. A correlation has been observed between adverse life experiences, like sexual abuse, and suicide.

"I say, "No. No, he didn't get me."

Evan sighs, relieved. "Yeah, okay, that's good, yeah."

"Evan," I say.

"Yeah?"

"But he's part of why I did it. You know? Like, the straw and the camel.

Everything. Do you understand?"

Evan is quiet. Then he says, "Yeah."

(Page 54)

Here, when Evan gives her a call, she remembers her trauma. Trapped in Seed House, where girls go missing and are sold to men who come to the house for sex, she is coping with the trauma of her ordeal. Charlie's decision to attempt suicide was partly influenced by Frank's presence and the abusive relationship she is in with him. It's a scary place, the Seed House. She hides there in the attic, holding her breath to avoid being discovered. She makes one last attempt at suicide. She acknowledges that she injures herself, in part because of Frank.

The novel also describes Ellis' boyfriend who is portrayed as having a bad influence. He treats her badly, demonstrating utter disregard for her dignity and well-being. His abrupt disappearance without explanation after their sexual encounters in her parent's basement suggests that he didn't think about the emotional toll his actions would take on Ellis. She is devastated and emotionally impacted by this abandonment. This toxic relationship is seriously disrupting her sense of self-worth. There is ample evidence that going through a major loss raises the risk of suicide.

In the other part of the novel, readers can see how Louisa shares her life story with Charlie through a book that was written especially for her, a very personal act that is comparable to what happened to Ellis. This story highlights the dysfunctional nature of Louisa's family, as she had a difficult life due to her parents' heavy drinking. Her early-life and chronic stress experiences, especially those that occurred in her family, have been linked to a higher risk of acting suicidally. This shows that Louisa is vulnerable and that her family dynamics and past experiences may have shaped her suicidal thoughts.

"The first page of the first book begins, in small, neat black script: A girl life is the worst life in the world. A girl's life is: you are born, you bleed you burn."

(Page 302)

Her past self-harming behavior dates back a great deal. Louisa uses self-harming behaviors like cutting and burning her skin as a coping mechanism, which is a reflection of how her family's issues have affected her. Louisa has been profoundly affected by the experience of betrayed trust, which has caused her to lose faith in men in general. Her experience with betrayal has left a deep mark, making her wary of believing in men in particular. Louisa's statement conveys a deep sense of hopelessness and disappointment. Louisa's negative impression of men is probably a holdover from her past. It suggests that she has painful past relationships with her ex-boyfriend, which has affected her outlook on love and dating men ever since.

### **Abuses**

Charlie's father is a major character who has struggled with substance abuse for a long time, which has had a significant negative impact on his behavior and general well-being. His substance abuse, unfavorable beliefs, and experiences with psychosis are some of the factors that lead to his suicidal thoughts. All of these things combine to affect his emotional condition and his ability to make decisions, which makes him consider ending his own life.

"My father was cigarettes and red-and-white cans of beer. He was dirty white T-shirts and a brown rocking chair and blue eyes and scratchy cheek stubble and "Oh, Misty," when my mother would frown at him. He was days of not getting out of that chair, of me on the floor by his feet, filling paper with suns, houses, cats faces, in crayon and pencil and pen. He was days of not changing those T-shirts, of sometimes silence and sometimes too much laughter, a strange laughter that seemed to crack him from the inside until there wasn't laughter, but crying, and tears that bled along my face as I climbed up and rocked with him, back and forth, back and forth, heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat as the light changed outside, as the world grew darker around us."

(Page 24)

Vivid detail is captured in this paragraph as seen through Charlie's early recollections. She notices that her father is constantly wearing the same T-shirts and that he doesn't seem to be able to get up from his chair, which suggests that he is still struggling with self-doubt. One way to define negative self-belief is as a person's negative self-perception, which leads to a negative self-image.

It describes an emotionally complex father, experiencing both silent and humorous moments that can occasionally result in tears. The father might have been abusing the drug. Charlie's father is showing signs of severe psychological distress, or psychache. The term "psychache" describes a condition of extreme and excruciating psychological suffering marked by emotions of hurt, agony, soreness, or aching. The intense and upsetting emotional suffering can sometimes get to the point where the person believes that suicide is the only way out of their inner turmoil. The repeated use of the word "heartbeat" in the given statement may be interpreted with regard to the physical effects of drug use on heart rate. Some drugs may cause a heart rate rise, which can be felt as a rapid or pounding heartbeat. Charlie's father clearly struggles with substance abuse.

In another context, Blue suffered sexual abuse.

"The Lumber King of Madison forked over the cash. He felt guilty, I guess, for fucking me all those years. And I can't fucking tell you how fucking goddamn painful it was, either, getting these teeth. Anyway."

(Page 258)

She tells the truth about her father in this quote. She speaks to her father as Lumber King of Madison. It is implied by the sentence that Blue gets money from her father. Blue believes that because her father had long-term sexual relations with her in the past, he gave her the money out of guilt. Suicidal thoughts and actions can be significantly influenced by child sexual abuse. Several research studies have demonstrated a robust correlation between child sexual abuse and a higher likelihood of suicide.

"Blue is a fancy bird with her pain; she has a little bit of everything: bad daddy, meth teeth, cigarette burns, razor slashes."

(Page 5)

This statement implies that she may have abused substances because it describes her as having "meth teeth," which are dental issues linked to chronic methamphetamine (meth) use. Blue's mention of her father's guilt at the book's conclusion suggests that the money is an apology of sorts for abusing her sexually. The color blue represents a shift in how negative emotions like sadness, grief, and frustration are expressed. It seems that she is reacting intensely to something that happened in the past and is connected to her psychological pain. The hallmark of psychoache is severe, unrelenting psychological pain, which is frequently felt as extreme mental agony, hurt, soreness, or aching. She doesn't talk about her trauma because it makes her very uncomfortable emotionally.

## CONCLUSION

A wider view of Charlie, Charlie's father, Ellis, Louisa, and Blue is offered by these suicidal acts. Those characters select various means of death, including burning, cutting, and drowning. They are experiencing sadness or bereavement. Disturbances in self-esteem can still arise because of the superego's influence, even if the libido does not completely withdraw into the ego or remain in the object. A person's self-esteem may be disturbed by the superego's internalized moral standards and values, which can cause feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and worthlessness. Furthermore, their suicidal behavior is influenced by death drives (Thanatos).

The narrative of suicide is interwoven with the characters' psychological issues. It illustrates how the psychological effects of traumas, losses, and abuse lead to suicidal thoughts in these people. In order to emphasize the psychological state, the cause-and-effect of characters is important. In light of the characters' psychological experiences being explored, this novel portrays a suicidal narrative. Importantly, the suicidal narrative is centered on how these characters interact with one another rather than just the suicidal character.

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