

Markey's Denial to Cope Grief in Niven's *All the Bright Places*

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Abstract

The object of this study is *All the Bright Places* (2015), a young adult fiction novel that tells a story about two teenagers and their problems related to their mental illness. The interesting topic which became the main discussion in this study is how the female character of this novel, Violet Markey, uses denial as her defence mechanism to cope with the grief of her sister and boyfriend's death. To examine this topic, the researchers used the descriptive qualitative method. This study found that in order to cope with Markey's sister's death, Markey used the self-protective function of denial, while to cope with Finch's death, her form of denial is by refusing to acknowledge his death.

Keywords: *All the Bright Places*, defence mechanism, denial, psychoanalysis

Introduction

The idea of denial in defense mechanisms is first proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1923. Freud (as cited in Telford, Kralik, & Koch, 2006) defines denial as a rejection to accept the existence of unendurable feelings or situations and views it as one of the defense mechanisms that work as a protector of the ego from anxiety. The first step of the use of denial is by preventing the distressing thoughts and emotions from entering the consciousness, which gave time for the ego to adapt to the situation and make it strong enough to deal with the distressing reality. Denial is more likely related to the idea of "I say it and I do not say it" or "It is true and it is not true" (Freud as cited in Litowitz, 1998). In one of his papers, Freud (as cited in Litowitz, 1998) also defines denial as an extension beyond psychoses to "apply to other states more like neuroses and, finally, to the neuroses themselves". While denial could be helpful for those who want to overcome their difficulties, in fact, it is not quite a good option for long-term use. Freud (as cited in Telford, Kralik, & Koch, 2006) argues that at a certain point, denial could be a functional defense mechanism, but if it were extended over a long period, denial would lead to pathology. Moreover,



Freud (as cited in Wheeler, 1999) also categorizes denial as a maladaptive defense mechanism as it works to guard an individual both from real and imagined threats, conflict, or frustrations. Besides can be found in real cases, defense mechanisms as a part of psychology can also be found in literary texts such as novels. It is because literature is a written form that deals with human experience, so the experiences examined in literature and the aspects of life defined in such literature are often closely related to the main concerns of psychology (Moghaddam, 2004). In other words, as literature originated from the reflection of human experience in the real life and psychology is related to human experience, therefore psychological approach can be a suitable theory to examine psychological problems in literary texts. An example of the use of denial as a defense mechanism can be seen through Violet Markey, one of the main characters in *All the Bright Places* written by Jennifer Niven, as her way to cope with grief.

All the Bright Places is a young adult fiction novel written by Jennifer Niven. This novel was first published in 2015 and immediately won several awards afterward. *All the Bright Places* tells a story between two high school students named Theodore Finch and Violet Markey. Both of them are portrayed as teenagers that have problems related to mental illness. Finch is described as a weird teenager that has a tendency to look for troubles and is astonished by death, while Markey used to be a bright girl that has no big problems before her sister's death happened. Their fate collides when both of them accidentally met at the tower of their school with suicidal thoughts in their minds. However, instead of dying, they eventually became each other's cure to their crises.

One of the key elements to examine *All the Bright Places* in this study is grief. Grief is a response to the disappearance in totality, including the physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, or spiritual manifestations of someone, and it is considered as a natural reaction to loss (Hall, 2014). In a simpler way, Lund (2020) describes grief as a universal and part of human life that is intrinsic, which everyone must encounter in their life. Interestingly, Hall (2014) views grief as a price and consequences that we should pay for creating emotional bonds with others. Related to this statement, Brinkmann (2018) claims that grief is not only about losing someone but also about the reality that someone no longer exists. Furthermore, Freud (as cited in Hall, 2014) explains that a process of separating the ties that bound the survivor to the deceased is called 'grief work'. Freud states there are three elements in grief work, which are: (1) freeing the bereaved from bondage to the deceased; (2) readjustment to new life circumstances without the deceased; and (3) building of new relationships. He stresses that the requirements of this separation between the survivor and the deceased are acknowledging and expressing painful emotions.

While *All the Bright Places* seems like a regular young adult novel, the interesting event that can be analyzed thoroughly is how Markey deals with the two deaths of her loved ones in this novel. People cope with grief in many different ways; in this case, Markey adopts a defense mechanism, denial, as her way to cope with two traumatizing deaths that happened in her life. Therefore, this study aims to reveal Markey's form of denial to cope with two deaths of people who are close to her.

There are several previous studies related to defense mechanisms in novel characters. The first is entitled "Defense Mechanism of the Main Character in



Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* Novel" by Zulfaisya and Hasra (2020). This research aims to reveal how Melinda, the main character of *Speak*, used defense mechanisms to overcome her anxiety caused by being bullied at school. The researchers then found that Melinda has repression, rationalization, regression, reaction-formation, projection, replacement, isolation, identification, and sublimation as her defense mechanisms to cope with her anxiety. Next, in 2022, Febriana and Darma also conducted research using the defense mechanism theory titled "Defense Mechanism as a Strategy to Overcome Jacob's Anxiety in William Landay's *Defending Jacob*". Based on this research, the researchers found that Jacob experienced neurotic, moral, and realistic anxiety. Thus, Jacob used five types of defense mechanisms to cope with his anxiety, namely denial, projection, displacement, rationalization, and reaction formation.

Different from the two previous studies which focused on defense mechanisms to overcome anxiety, this study is going to focus on Markey's behaviors which show her denial to cope with grief using Freud's theory of denial in defense mechanism. By conducting this study, the researchers hope to give an insight related to denial as a defense mechanism, especially to give an understanding of whether an act of denial is still considered healthy or not, which expectantly can be useful for the readers. Furthermore, the discussion in this study is divided based on the two major events, which are Eleanor's death and Finch's death.

Method

This study employs descriptive qualitative method. This method is chosen because descriptive qualitative is a very useful when the researchers want to know about who and what was involved, also where did things take place, in a particular work or event (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). In gathering the data, the researchers google some reliable information on the Internet to support this study. The data is mainly from the words, phrases, and sentences from *All the Bright Places* which indicate Violet Markey's denial as her way to cope with grief.

There are several steps in the data collecting process of this study. The first is reading and re-reading the novel entitled *All the Bright Places* thoroughly to understand the story. Then, the second is collecting both primary and secondary data which related to Violet Markey's psychological element named denial. Next, it is reducing the unnecessary data which are not needed to support this study. The last is categorizing the gained data into several different groups in the data collection table.

After collecting the data, then, the researchers interpret and analyze Markey's form of denial in the novel based on Freud's theory of denial in defense mechanisms. Data are deciphered to get the significant meaning in order to explain the denial experienced by Markey. In analyzing, supporting data are used to strengthen the findings. Finally, the researchers made a conclusion as the last step of this study.

Findings and discussion

Markey's Denial in Eleanor's Death

Violet Markey's denial in *All the Bright Places* is first shown in her way to cope with grief after her sister's death. In this novel, Markey and Eleanor are portrayed



as very close siblings. Both of them have a blog together and a similar circle of friends. Even on the day of Eleanor's death, Markey was right beside her sister, sat in the passenger seat when the crash happened. Therefore, it is no wonder Eleanor's death left a huge wound in Markey's life. Markey's form of denial related to her sister's death is not necessarily by not believing that she is already gone, but by refusing to do all the things that might trigger her to remember Eleanor. Markey's denial is first shown when she has a conversation with a school counselor, Mrs. Kresney. The dialogue is as follows:

"Have you [Markey] driven yet?"

'No.'

'Have you allowed yourself to ride in the car with your parents?'

'No.'

She [Mrs. Kresney] leans forward. 'Have you thought about returning to cheerleading?'

'No.'

'Student council?'

'No.'" (Niven, 2015, p. 21)

Based on the conversation above, it could be seen that Markey is rejecting to do the things that she normally did before Eleanor's death. This situation is categorized as the self-protective function of denial by Dorpat. As a modification of Freud's idea of denial in psychoanalytic, Dorpat (1987) claims that the self-protective function of denial is a process based on the denier's unconscious fantasies of destroying everything that is painful for them, and not including the real intention in their central attention. Furthermore, the example of the unconscious fantasy can be illustrated by Bion (1967). On an occasion, a patient claims she was bored and wished that she did not have to come to her analyst again. This happens after the patient knew that they will not meet again next week due to a vacation. As the response, the analyst concludes that it was a reaction of the patient to wipe out the analyst from her mind. By doing so, the patient also wishes to destroy sides of herself that are related to the analyst, and the emotions that are attached between them, so that she would not need to miss the analyst next week. In a nutshell, the unconscious fantasy in denial is a person's way to destroy, expel, and reject something which considered as unpleasant (Dorpat, 1987).

Therefore, Markey's denial related to Eleanor's death shown by her rejection to do any activities she joined before Eleanor passed away is because Markey's unconscious fantasy thought that those activities are not a pleasant thing to do. She counted it as unpleasant because the activities remind her of her deceased sister that triggered the guilty feeling inside Markey's mind. It is explained:

"... Maybe because I'm here [alive] and she [Eleanor] is not, and the whole thing—every big or small moment I've lived since last April [after Eleanor's death]—feels like cheating in some way." (Niven, 2015, p. 74)

The source of Markey's guilt is mainly because she was also in the car with her sister on the accident day. Moreover, she was the one who suggested the sister to go home by way of the bridge (Niven, 2015, p. 229). The piled-up guilt made her think that she was responsible for Eleanor's death, and was undeserving to be alive. To examine deeper about why Markey chooses to stop doing all her activities as her way to deny Eleanor's death, it is described in one of Markey and Finch's



conversations that she began to think the activities that she used to do are not important anymore. The dialogue is as follows:

“... The why is that none of it [the activities that Markey used to do; student council, cheerleading, writing] matters. Not school, not cheerleading, not boyfriends or friends or parties or creative writing programs or ...’ She [Markey] waves her arms at the world. ‘It’s all just time filler until we die.’” (Niven, 2015, p. 43)

Based on Markey’s statement above, the activities that are previously important to her shift into unimportant after Eleanor’s death. The reason behind this could be interpreted because the guilt that she has regarding to Eleanor’s death brings her to think that she has no right to be happy when she was surviving alone in the car crash, and her sister was not. As the result, the once joyful and exciting activities that Markey likes start to lose their meaning because the activities only act as a reminder of her guilt of Eleanor’s death now.

Just like what has been mentioned before, Markey also stopped writing, either it is for the blog or her assignment. She thought that there is no point to write in the blog anymore since the content of the blog is about sisters. Moreover, she claims that her words died too the moment when their car crashed (Niven, 2015, p. 20). The reason why Markey does not write anymore is exactly the same as why she stopped to ride in a car, joined cheerleading, or student council; the crippling guilt related to her sister’s death which possibly triggered Markey to remember about Eleanor. Therefore, Markey stopped doing it all as she believed it was her deserved punishment for her to be alive in the world, while Eleanor is not.

Markey’s Denial in Finch’s Death

Another denial of Violet Markey in *All the Bright Places* could be seen through the way she handles grief when she lost her boyfriend, Theodore Finch. Markey was the first person who realized that Finch might be on a verge of killing himself. Therefore, she tried to search for him based on the clues that are left behind. After she got a hunch about Finch’s whereabouts and she guessed it right, Markey shows a form of denial by contemplating to drive away from the location where she found Finch’s car. It is described:

“I can drive away right now. If I drive away, Theodore Finch is still somewhere in the world, living and wandering, even if it’s without me. My fingers are on the ignition key.” (Niven, 2015, p. 213)

The passage above contains meaning that some part of Markey noticed there is a possibility that Finch might be already gone by the time she arrived in the lake. Even though it is still her assumption, for she has not got concrete evidence, another part of her is way too afraid to find out about the truth. As the result, Markey rejected her assumption about Finch that might be drowning in the water and trying to move away from the lake. She also stayed in her position for a long time, as she believed that if she did not move, she will not find out the truth and Finch is still alive someplace (Niven, 2015, p. 214). This condition of Markey is similar to Freud’s definition of denial. Freud (as cited in Wheeler, 1999) defines denial as the refusal to acknowledge a situation in reality and creating a more tolerable reality. Based on Freud’s statement, a more tolerable reality which Markey create is by thinking that Finch is still alive and going around elsewhere. Although she herself



is still not sure about Finch's death, the situation in reality which contains the possibility of her seeing Finch's dead body is already way too terrifying for her. Therefore, she used denial as her defense mechanism that allows her to believe in a more bearable possibility. In Markey's view, thinking that Finch is currently living his life without her is better than knowing that he is already gone from this world.

Even when she finally chooses to call 911 and reports the situation, Markey is still defending herself from the bitter circumstance by creating another new reality. If previously she believed that Finch is going somewhere else without mentioning a specific place, now she developing her new reality by mentioned a place called the other world. Markey tries to convince herself that Finch is not dead yet, he is just going to the other world (Niven, 2015, p. 214). The other world that she refers to is the world that Finch believes is located at the bottom of the lake. The mysterious world that is sucked the other missing people who previously dived into the lake, and take them to the alternate universe. Her belief about Finch going to the other world is unwavering. Here, Markey said:

"Men [the rescue team] are diving over and over, three or four of them—they all look the same. I want to tell them not to bother, they're not going to find anything, he [Finch] is not there. If anyone can make it to another world, it's Theodore Finch." (Niven, 2015, p. 215)

In defining denial in defense mechanism, Salamon (1994) states that denial is someone's effort to maximize the positive side and minimize the negative side, as their way to reject the reality. This definition is connected to Markey's belief that Finch goes to another world. When she first saw Finch's car parked near the lake, she tried to convince herself by believing that he is wandering somewhere else, not on the lake. However, after Markey saw her boyfriend's clothes, phone, and other belongings on the bank without the presence of the owner, she knew the possibility that Finch is not on the lake is nearly zero. Still, Markey is reluctant to admit that Finch is most likely already dead, for that reason, Markey is creating a new possibility that contains more positivity than Finch being dead; he is only going to the other world.

Furthermore, when the rescue team finally found Finch's body in the lake, Markey refused to believe that it was really her boyfriend. Instead, she claims that the dead body was someone she did not know. It is explained:

"Even when they [the rescue team] bring the body up, swollen and bloated and blue, I think: That's not him [Finch]. That's someone else. This swollen, bloated, blue thing with the dead, dead skin is not anyone I know or recognize. I tell them so. They ask me if I feel strong enough to identify him, and I say, 'That's not him. That is a swollen, bloated, dead, dead blue thing, and I can't identify it because I've never seen it before.' I turn my head away." (Niven, 2015, p. 215)

From the passage above, it could be seen that Markey once again guarded up herself by using denial as her tame to the painful reality. Now that the body of Finch has already been found, this can be concluded as concrete evidence of Finch's death. Nevertheless, she still does not want to acknowledge that the dead body is indeed her boyfriend. She denied the proof which she saw by her own eyes, with thinking that the physical appearance of Finch that she knows is far different from the body that the rescuers brought.

Markey's denial of Finch's death is similar to one of the cases in Freud's paper related to denial. In an example provided by Freud (as cited in Dorpat, 1987), he



mentioned there are two male patients that had lost their fathers. However, both of them denied the fact that their fathers are already gone by refusing to acknowledge the fact and disavowing several meanings in their father's death. If we applied Freud's example into Markey's case, then it could be analyzed that Markey is using the same type of denial as the first patient, which is by refusing to acknowledge the fact that already there. Furthermore, Markey's denial after she saw Finch's dead body could also be seen in the next passage, where she tried to convince herself that it is not Finch that she was looking right now, for the reason she believes a person like Finch is not going to die; he is only wandering (Niven, 2015, p. 215).

Considering how much Finch means to Markey and how shocking his death is for her; it is no wonder that Markey's grief did not completely vanish after around a month. In contrast, her condition is not getting any better. In the novel, there is a part when Markey has a counseling session with Mr. Embry, a former counselor of Finch. If a common counseling session should be full of conversation from both parties, Markey did not talk much and refuse to tell Mr. Embry about her story. Nonetheless, there is a reason behind her silence which could be seen in the passage below:

"The thing I can't, won't, mention to him [Mr. Embry] is that I see Finch everywhere—in the hallways at school, on the street, in my neighborhood. Someone's face will remind me of him, or someone's walk or someone's laugh. It's like being surrounded by a thousand different Finches. I wonder if this is normal, but I don't ask." (Niven, 2015, p. 221)

When a person using denial as their defense mechanism, they changed their central attention to less threatening and painful impulses, fantasies, or ideas, instead of stayed in their current state (Dorpat, 1987). Based on Markey's condition in the passage above, it could be identified that her form of denial is shown by shifting her view into a more pleasurable fantasy. This also indicates that the unconscious part of Markey is still cannot accept the fact that Finch has already died. Markey is protecting herself by denied the threatening fact, in this case, is Finch's death, and shifting it into a fantasy, which she claims to see her boyfriend everywhere. This situation happens because the reality where Finch is no longer exists is way too unbearable to be accepted by Markey; therefore, her unconscious side shifted the reality into a bearable fantasy where she could see Finch in every place she goes.

At the end of the story, Markey's form of denial towards Finch's death is still can be seen when she went to the last place that Finch visited before he died. After she parked the car and stand on the grassy shore of the Blue Hole, she said that she was half expecting to see him (Niven, 2015, p. 239). By saying that she expected to see her deceased boyfriend in the Blue Hole, it could indicate how she still being denial and keep holding on to her belief that has been previously mentioned; Finch is not dead yet, he is only wandering. This statement is supported by Markey's thought which is written in the novel:

"I kick off my shoes and cut through the water, diving deep. I'm looking for him [Finch] through my goggles. ... I like to think he's wandering in another world, seeing things no one can ever imagine." (Niven, 2015, p. 239)

Aside from being another proof that Markey's denial is in the form of believing that Finch is just wandering in an alternate world, the passage above also shows that Markey's denial could be categorized as a maladaptive defense mechanism.



Denial could be considered maladaptive when it starts to disturb a well-functioning individual or family (Kovach & Weiss, 1991). Moreover, this statement is supported by Freud (as cited in Telford, Kralik, & Koch, 2006), which states that although denial could work as an adaptive defense mechanism, but if it were extended for a long period, denial would lead to pathology. Seeing how Markey keeps searching for Finch and refusing to accept the fact that he already died even months after his death, is evidence that denial in Markey's condition is no longer works as an adaptive defense mechanism. This is because the denial starts to disarrange Markey's mind as a healthy human being.

Furthermore, although there is no exact normal duration for the bereaved to grief on the death of their loved ones, Lindemann (1963) claims that the length of the grief is heavily dependent on the mourning, and whether they would be able to succeed in the grief work or not. She also explains three grief works that the bereaved should pass, namely, emancipation from the bereaved to the deceased, readjustment to the new environment, and formatting new relationships. Based on this statement and the previous proof, Markey could not even pass the first step, as she could not sincerely let Finch go. This aspect can also affect the denial in Markey's defense mechanism to work as a maladaptive one because just like what Freud stated; a long period of denial would lead the individual to pathology.

Conclusion

To sum up, as literature originated from the reflection of human experience in the real life, thus psychoanalysis is used in this research to examine the findings. In *All the Bright Places*, Markey's form of denial as her way to cope with grief is shown through two major events, which are Eleanor's death and Finch's death. However, the kinds of denial in those two sorrowful events are portrayed differently. Markey's form of denial to cope with Eleanor's death is by rejecting to do all the activities that she used to do when her sister is still around. This situation is called the self-protective function of denial. Markey's unconscious fantasy claims the activities as unpleasant things because it is only going to remind her of Eleanor and triggered the guilty feeling inside Markey's mind. It also counted as Markey's attempt to give herself a punishment, as she believed that she was the one who was responsible for her sister's death.

While Markey's denial of Eleanor's death is not by the refusal to acknowledge that she is already gone, it is not the same in Finch's case. To cope with her boyfriend's death, she refused to acknowledge that he is no longer here. She chooses to believe that Finch is going to the other world; the alternate world located at the bottom of the lake. Though she already saw the concrete evidence of Finch's dead body, for Markey, the thought of Finch only wandering in another place is a much better option than he is being dead.

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