

The Emotional Maturity of Jesse Aaron in *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson

Lu'luin Nihaayah
English Education Department
Universitas Islam Indonesia
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
luluinnihaya5@gmail.com

Ianatul Khoiriyah
English Education Department
Universitas Islam Indonesia
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
ianna6612@gmail.com

Adam Anshori
English Education Department
Universitas Islam Indonesia
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
adam.asnhori@uii.ac.id

Abstract—The existence of children literature cannot be separated with character education. One way to promote children's character is by using literature. *Bridge to Terabithia* is an appropriate children literature that may provide good character education. This study is an attempt to discuss the personality of Jesse Aarons, a fiction character in the novel *Bridge to Terabithia*. The aim of this study is to investigate the process of emotional maturity in Jesse's personality for educational aims. It is a qualitative research. Content analysis technique is employed in this study. The researchers are the instrument of this study. The psychological theory from Kevin Everett Fitz Maurice's - Six Level of Emotional Maturity in his book *The Secret of Maturity: Or How Not to be Codependent* (1989) and *Self-Concept: The Enemy Within* (1989) is used in this research. The finding reveals that Jesse encounters the entire of six levels of emotional maturity. Jesse is able to acknowledge his feeling (level 1), to tell honestly about his feeling (level 2), being open about his thought and feeling (level 3), he can ask for and receive nurturing from himself and others (level 4) also he is capable to realize his good abilities (level 5) as well as to learn a value from incident (level 6).

Keywords— *emotional maturity, bridge to terabithia, content analysis*

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Lesnik-Oberstein [1], children literature is books which are good for children, especially good in terms of moral values and emotions. Regarding to this, books for children must be different with adult's book because both are written for different audience with different skill, different need, and different way of reading [2]. The books are characterized good for children when it contains strong materials like using important themes, good plots, rich settings, well-developed characters, and imaginative language.

Integrating children literature must be related with character education. Kilpatrick, et al. [3] revealed that using literature as a way to integrate character education is important because it provides role models in order to develop the moral life. In addition, using literature, or specifically using stories to promote children's character is more effective than using such explanation because their minds are full of imagination. "Stories are an irreplaceable medium for this kind of moral education—that is, the education of character" [4, p. 20]

A wide variety of children's book can be used for character education as long as these books are beneficial and containing moral values. According to O'Sullivan [5], the types of children's book that include character education consist of: 'well-written books containing moral dilemmas, books with enough depth to allow moving beyond literal comprehension, books with admirable but believable characters about the same age as students, and books across a wide range of cultures and with both boys and girls as lead characters'. For instance, *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson is one of children's books that include character education. This book provides personality traits (i.e. positive traits and negative traits) which allow the children to distinguish between good personality and bad personality [5].

Based on the explanation above, the writer wants to do the research focused on the character's personality in *Bridge to Terabithia* novel. The aim of study is to investigate the process of Jess's emotional maturity in *Bridge to Terabithia* novel. The writer is concern on choosing a good book for children especially related with character education.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research is content analysis research. "Content analysis is about a systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter, which not necessary from an author's or user's perspective" [6, p. 10]. The subject of the research is a novel written by Katherine Paterson entitled *Bridge to Terabithia*. Mainly, the data of this study were taken from Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*. In addition, the theories were taken from Kevin Everett FitzMaurice's *The Secret of Maturity: or How Not to be Codependent* [7] and *Self-Concept: The Enemy Within* [8]. The writer focused the analysis on the intrinsic element relating to Jess Aaron's personality based on six levels by Kevin Everett FitzMaurice.

1. Level 1 of Emotional Maturity – Emotional Responsibility

In level one of Fitz Maurice's emotional maturity, a person must realize that they can no longer view their emotional states clearly as the responsibility of external forces such as people, places, things, forces, fate, and spirits. Being and having less of hope is not a choice at this stage. Learning to acknowledge and recognize feelings instead of only being a helpless victim. This level is focusing on openly express feelings to others.

2. Level 2 of Emotional Maturity – Emotional Honesty

Emotional honesty concerns about one's willingness to know and own their feelings, which is intangible and complex. It discusses the necessary step of self-understanding and acceptance. The issues of resistance to self-discovery are dealt with at this level. Here, one's conscious and unconscious states are solely related. It means that he/she regards himself/herself as someone whose feeling is always true so that he/she does not need to hide, to suppress, or to repress what he/she feels.

3. Level 3 of Emotional Maturity – Emotional Openness

Sharing is a part of care that shows someone's openness. This level concerns on the willingness and skills in sharing feelings in an appropriate manner and at appropriate times. We face and learn to ventilate feelings value, and the dangers involved when they hide their feelings from self and others. Self-disclosure is the important issue at this level. The willingness to be open is much more important than the self-disclose. To experience all of feelings as they arise without the critical voices that they can hear inside them and trying to change, control, or condemn them. Suppressing feeling and the values inherent in exploring and allowing all feelings internal expression are investigated further will become the danger as consequence. At this level, openness allows people of having the freedom to experience any emotion without the need, the compulsion to suppress or repress it.

4. Level 4 of Emotional Maturity – Emotional Assertiveness

Positive self-expression is the next stage of people's development. The goal is mainly to be able to ask for and to receive the nurturing that one needs and wants. The first is from self and then from others. As the secondary goal, we should learn how to express any feeling depending the situation and time appropriately, i.e., without aggressive overtones. We create time for the feelings to arise and respect the process in doing so. The connection between suppressed feelings, stress, and illness is clear.

5. Level 5 of Emotional Maturity – Emotional Understanding

On this level, we understand what is called as responsibility. We become aware of actual cause and effect process of emotional responsibility and irresponsibility. Self-concepts are known as "the" problem. A complimentary bad self-concept will trigger to possibility of good self-concept. This experience is firsthand, because of the nature of knowledge and the formation of self-concepts, that all self-concepts contain their opposites. Knowing that we may hide one half which is in darkness (unconsciousness), it is still active in us. At this level, we know the potential that we possessed and the reaction we choose determine what kind of people we are.

6. Level 6 of Emotional Maturity – Emotional Detachment

At this level, we live freely from the burden and snare of self-concepts, self-images, self-constructs, and all group-concepts and thing-concepts. They become aware of self as process only, it reflected as a sensing being, as an experiencing being, as a living vessel, as unknowable and not trappable. It is alive and dynamic or not fixed. They have lacked to the life of

self as self-concepts. True detachment from all self-concepts has occurred at this stage. Thus true detachment from others has done similarly. It has meaning that absolute emotional responsibility has been gained.

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Bridge to Terabithia is a friendship story of two children namely Jess and Leslie. Jess as the main character is the only boy among four sisters who lacks affection from his parents. At first, Jess is described as a very ordinary boy then he experiences a significant life changing after he meets Leslie, a girl who becomes his neighbor. As a kid, they share time together in daily basis. They build a fantasy world across the creek in the woods called "Terabithia" as a place to escape from any problems.

The processes of maturity in this paper are based on Fitz Maurice's six levels of emotional maturity categorization. It analyzes the character of Jesse Aaron's personality based on its development.

Jess is described as poor boy. His parents discriminate him with other siblings so he feels lonely most of the time. His parents give little affection to him, not as much as what is given to his four sisters. Moreover, his two older sisters also do not like him. They often treat him badly. His little sister, May Belle is the only one in his family who really cares about him.

He tiptoed out of the house. The place was so rattly that it screeched whenever you put your foot down, but Jess had found that if you tiptoed, it gave only a low moan, and could usually get outdoors without waking Momma or Ellie or Brenda or Joyce Ann. May Belle was another matter. She was going on seven, and she worshiped him, which was OK sometimes. (Paterson, 1977: 2)

Jess likes to draw and run. However, his father expects him in different way. Drawing is not an option for Jess because for his father, it is less masculine. Only running is possible. Jess runs every morning. He aims to be the fastest runner in his school, Lark Creek Elementary. He believes that winning the race would attract the attention of his parents, especially his father.

He had gotten up early every day all summer to run. He figured if he worked at it—and Lord, had he worked—he could be the fastest runner in the fifth grade when school opened up. He had to be the fastest—not one of the fastest or next to the fastest, but the fastest. The very best. [9, p. 2]

Jess is entering the **first level of emotional maturity** after he proves that he can win the running races. His attempt to run every morning before his mother wakes up finally paid off. He becomes the fastest runner at his school. Even, he is able to beat his senior although he is still in fourth grade.

For the rest of that day, and until after lunch on the next, he had been "the fastest kid in the third, fourth, and fifth grades," and he only a fourth grader. On Tuesday, Wayne Pettis had won again as usual. But this year Wayne Pettis would be in the sixth grade. He'd play football until Christmas and baseball until June with the rest of the big guys. Anybody had a chance to be the fastest runner, and

by Miss Bessie, this year it was going to be Jesse Oliver Aarons, Jr. [9, p. 5]

Furthermore, Jess's father works away from home and his mother does the whole household task including taking care of their children. Jess helps to take over some of his father's work during the absence.

Which left Jess to do the work as usual. Momma never sent the babies out to help, although if he worked it right he could usually get May Belle to do something... The flies were buzzing around his sweating face and shoulders. He dropped the beans into the bucket and swatted with both hands. [9, pp. 9, 10]

Jess's life changing begins when he meets Leslie. At the beginning, he always ignores Leslie though they are in the same class and live as neighbor. Jess does not show any interest on her. Jess and Leslie pass the same route to go home and ride the same bus, but they still do not care each other. One day, Miss Edmunds as art teacher asks Leslie to sing in front of class. At that moment, Jess started to pay attention to Leslie out of sudden. Here, Jess is entering the **second level of emotional maturity**.

Caught in the pure delight of it, Jess turned and his eyes met Leslie's. He smiled at her. What the heck? There wasn't any reason he couldn't. What was he scared of anyhow? Lord. Sometimes he acted like the original yellow-bellied sapsucker. He nodded and smiled again. She smiled back. He felt there in the teachers' room that it was the beginning of a new season in his life, and he chose deliberately to make it so. [9, p. 39]

Jess and Leslie build their secret place across the creek named 'Terabithia'. In Terabithia, their imagination grows. They imagine themselves to be in a castle where they have power to govern the castle. Since that day, both of them are getting closer. For Jess, Leslie is the only one who cares him a lot. He talks everything with Leslie. In this part, Jess is entering the **third level of emotional Maturity**

"We need a place," she said, "just for us. It would be so secret that we would never tell anyone in the whole world about it." Jess came swinging back and dragged his feet to stop. She lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "It might be a whole secret country," she continued, "and you and I would be the rulers of it." [9, p. 49]

Christmas is coming soon. Jess wants to give a gift to Leslie. He wants to give something special to his special person in this special day. For him, Leslie means everything. Although he does not have much money, he still wants to present a gift for Leslie. Consequently, The Jess's effort to express his feeling is included in the **fourth level of emotional maturity**

He was angry, too, because it would soon be Christmas and he had nothing to give Leslie. It was not that she would expect something expensive; it was that he needed to give her something as much as he needed to eat when he was hungry. [9, p. 74]

In the school, there is a kid who makes trouble to Jess and Leslie. She is Janice Avery. One day, Jess and Leslie see her

crying in the toilet due to her complicated problem in home and school. Instead of ignoring her, Jess feels empathy for her. Here, Jess is encountering the **fifth level of emotional maturity**.

Lord, what was the matter with him? Janice Avery had given him nothing but trouble, and now he was feeling responsible for her—like one of the Burkes' timber wolves or beached whales. "She didn't even cry when kids teased her 'bout Willard after the note." [9, p. 92]

Then, Jess is starting to enter the **sixth level of emotional maturity** when Leslie passes away. Leslie dies after fell from a swing because the rope is broken. Jess devastates by the death of Leslie who cares to him. He feels so lonely at that time. However, it is just a while. Jess finally understands that crying over Leslie's death is useless. He is grateful for being good friend with Leslie. He realizes that he should accept this unhappy fact and continue his life.

He thought about it all day, how before Leslie came, he had been a nothing—a stupid, weird little kid who drew funny pictures and chased around a cow field trying to act big—trying to hide a whole mob of foolish little fears running riot inside his gut. [9, p. 160]

IV. CONCLUSION

From Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, Jess encounters all of emotional maturity level proposed by Fitz Maurice. In order to get attention from his family, especially his father, Jess has a dream to be the fastest runner in his school. He always practices running every morning until his effort paid off. He becomes the fastest runner between the third, fourth, and fifth grade students eventually. (Level 1 of emotional maturity – emotional responsibility)

Jess who feels so lonely both at home and at school finally meet Leslie—a girl who lives near his house. At first, Jess always ignores her until the moment when he watches Leslie sing in front of the class. That was the first time he got interested with Leslie. (Level 2 of emotional maturity – emotional honesty)

Jess and Leslie becomes a close friend in short time. They even build an imaginary world across the creek called 'Terabithia'. They consider it as a place to escape from their daily problems in life. At that place, Jess starts liking to talk about everything with Leslie. They share some stories and experience to each other. (Level 3 of emotional maturity – emotional openness)

In order to express his feeling, Jess wants to present a gift for Leslie when Christmas comes. He wants to give a simple and precious thing though he does not have much money. (Level 4 of emotional maturity – emotional assertiveness)

Jess realizes that he needs to use good self-concept instead of bad self-concept. If he usually prefers to fight against his enemies, now he consciously cares about his enemies. (Level 5 of emotional maturity – emotional understanding)

Jess finally releases thing-concepts and be aware of self as a process. He has to keep his life going on although Leslie has abandoned him forever. Since getting to know Leslie, he has

discovered his identity that is better than before. It means that absolute emotional responsibility has been achieved (Level 6 of emotional maturity – emotional detachment).

The whole process of emotional maturity experienced by Jess in this book may provide insight for readers as aim of children character education. It makes this book a great example for children to learn from Jess character in his process to achieve his emotional maturity and to relate it in real life. The writer suggests this book as an alternative reading material for children to support character education.

REFERENCES

- [1] K. Lesnik-Oberstein, "Essentials: What is Children's Literature? What is Childhood?," in *Understanding Children's Literature*, P. Hunt, Ed., New York, Routledge, 1999.
- [2] P. Hunt, "Introduction: The World of Children's Literature Studies," in *Understanding Children's Literature*, P. Hunt, Ed., New York, Routledge, 1999.
- [3] W. Kilpatrick, G. Wolfe and S. Wolfe, *Books that Build Character: A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values Through Stories*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- [4] V. Gurian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [5] S. O'Sullivan, "Books to Live by: Using Children's Literature for Character Education," *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 57, no. 7, pp. 640-645, 2004.
- [6] K. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 3rd ed., Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013.
- [7] K. E. FitzMaurice, *The Secret of Maturity*, FitzMaurice Publishers, 1989.
- [8] K. E. FitzMaurice, *Self-Concept: The Enemy Within*, FitzMaurice Publishers, 1989.
- [9] K. Paterson, *Bridge to Terabithia*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1977.
- [10] J. Glazer and G. Williams, *Introduction to Children's Literature*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979.