



ANALYSIS OF MALINGERING DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER BY AARON STAMPLER IN THE FILM PRIMAL FEAR BY GREGORY HOBLIT (1996)

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses about the characteristics of malingering dissociative identity disorder by Aaron Stampler in the film *Primal Fear* (1996). In order to analyze the data, the writer uses qualitative descriptive method and intrinsic and extrinsic approach. The writer uses psychological approach from Wellek and Werren theory and the characteristics of DID by using the theory of Halgin and Whitbourne (2010), and Malingering by using the theory of Rogers (2008) and the depiction of Aaron Stampler's DID and describe his true personality by using theory of character by Boogs and Petrie (2008). The result of this research shows that Aaron Stampler malingered the characteristics of DID. The writer found that there are 5 characteristics of DID malingered by Aaron Stampler consisting of amnesia, depersonalization, derealization, identity confusion and identity alteration. Based on character analysis, Aaron's malingering DID is depicted through his appearance, dialogue, his external actions and the reactions of other characters in the film.

Keywords: *Malingering, Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), Characters.*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas tentang karakteristik gangguan identitas disosiatif malingering oleh Aaron Stampler dalam film *Primal Fear* (1996). Untuk menganalisis data, penulis menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan pendekatan intrinsik dan ekstrinsik. Penulis menggunakan pendekatan psikologis dari teori Wellek dan Werren dan karakteristik DID dengan menggunakan teori Halgin dan Whitbourne (2010), dan Malingering dengan menggunakan teori Rogers (2008) serta penggambaran DID Aaron Stampler dan menggambarkan kepribadiannya yang sebenarnya dengan menggunakan teori karakter dari Boogs dan Petrie (2008). Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Aaron Stampler memalsukan karakteristik DID. Penulis menemukan bahwa terdapat 5 karakteristik DID yang dipalsukan oleh Aaron Stampler yang terdiri dari amnesia, depersonalisasi, derealisasi, kebingungan identitas, dan perubahan identitas. Berdasarkan analisis karakter, DID malingering Aaron digambarkan melalui penampilan, dialog, tindakan eksternal dan reaksi karakter lain dalam film.

Keywords: *Malingering, Gangguan Identitas Disosiatif, Karakter.*

INTRODUCTION

Primal Fear (Hoblit, 1996) is a critically acclaimed western psychological thriller film released in 1996 directed by Gregory Hoblit, based on the novel of the same name by William

Diehl. The film follows Martin Vail (Richard Gere), a brilliant but arrogant defense attorney in Chicago who takes on a highly publicized case pro bono. His client is Aaron Stampler (Edward Norton in his film debut), a shy, stuttering altar boy accused of brutally murdering an influential Catholic Archbishop. While the evidence against Aaron seems overwhelming, Vail becomes convinced there's more to the case than meets the eye. The film follows his investigation alongside psychologist Dr. Molly Arrington (Frances McDormand) as they dig deeper examining the character Aaron Stampler's side of the story and his relationship with the Archbishop.

Characters and characters are things that cannot be separated from movies. According to Corrigan (2004:43) character is another common topic for analysis in literature, drama and film. Character can be analyzed through costumes, conversations or anything that is close to the character. Literary works such as films, novels, plays and poems in modern times are full of psychological elements in manifestation: the psychology of the author, the fictional characters in the story and the reader. According to Roberts (1963:55), character in literature is an extension of the verbal representation of human beings, especially the mind that determines thought, speech and behavior where things in life "just happen". In analyzing the psychological problems of Aaron Stampler's character in the film *Primal Fear*, the writer uses a literary psychology approach.

Literary psychology is a branch of literary science that is used to approach (study) a literary work from a psychological point of view. According to Wellek and Warren (1993), literary psychology is the study of authors as types or as individuals, studying the creative process. Psychology and literature have a functional relationship, both of which study a person's mental state and study its impact. Additionally, literary psychology is a branch of science that studies the interaction between psychology and literature (Hirsch, 1976). In this research the writer will focus on analyzing the literary psychology of Aaron Stampler.

Aaron Stampler (played by Edward Norton) is a young altar boy accused of brutally murdering an archbishop. What makes his case unique is his claimed diagnosis of Dissociative Identity Disorder, which becomes a crucial element of his legal defense. However, as the movie reveals, Aaron's portrayal of DID is actually an elaborate manipulation in the form of Malingering his mental illness designed to avoid criminal prosecution.

Malingering, the intentional fabrication of symptoms for external gain, poses significant challenges in clinical settings (Dent & Simpson, 2020). Its prevalence may be higher than previously thought, with considerable societal costs (Singh et al., 2007). Malingering of psychiatric disorders is difficult to detect and more prevalent than previously thought.

Detection is difficult, requiring multiple inputs including clinical and psychometric methods (Singh et al., 2007).

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is a complex mental disorder characterized by the presence of multiple distinct identities or personality states within an individual (Kluft, 1999). Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder, is one of the most complex mental disorders and a frequent concern in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. Each of the Identities or personalities has different behavior, memories, and perceptions. The disorder is often triggered by severe trauma, especially that experienced in childhood. This research will use Halgin and Whitbourne's Theory of Dissociative Identity Disorder Characteristics (2010).

There are several main reasons for the writer to examine the malingering of dissociative identity disorder by the character Aaron Stampler in *Primal Fear* by Gregory Hoblit (1996) as the main object of this research. First, most research focuses on real cases of malingering and dissociative identity disorder. However, studies analyzing how malingering is portrayed in films or remain limited. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing the character of Aaron Stampler in *Primal Fear*. Secondly, Edward Norton's performance in *Primal Fear* (1996) earned him a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination because of his exceptional portrayal of Aaron Stampler.

METHODOLOGY

The writer uses Wellek and Warren Intrinsic theory of literary Psychology (1993), Wellek and Warren's psychology and literature approach (1993), Roger's theory of Malingering (2008), Halgin and Whitbourne's Theory of Dissociative Identity Disorder Characteristics (2010), and Characterization Theory by Boggs and Petrie (2008).

This research employs a qualitative descriptive methodology, which offers the writer the flexibility necessary for adaptability in handling data. By embracing qualitative paradigms, the writer is empowered to utilize the qualitative approach, which allows for a nuanced exploration of data (Neuman, 2014:96).

In this stage, the writer prepared some tools used to collect data such as books, pens, smartphone and laptop. First, the writer will download the film *Primal Fear* through the internet in the form MP4 file. *Primal Fear* has a runtime of 2 hours and 9 minutes. Then, the writer gathered secondary data, obtained through literature studies in the form of the novel *Primal Fear* (1993) by William Diehl. Additionally, the writer read and understand some

research from e-books, articles, websites, and other sources on topics related to Malingering and Dissociative Identity Disorder. The writer of this research watched the film *Primal Fear* in order to perform in-depth analysis. Then, the writer identified and analyzed every scene in which Aaron Stampler appears. The writer then selected and captured dialogue and screenshots from the scenes that showed the characteristics of malingering dissociative identity disorder and Aaron Stampler's true personality, which constitute the basis of the problem that has been formulated.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

There are two parts for answering the research questions. First, identifying the characteristics of Dissociative Identity Disorder by Aaron Stampler. Second, Analyzing the Malingering Dissociative Identity Disorder and the True Personality of Aaron Stampler.

Overview Of the Characteristics of Dissociative Identity Disorder by Aaron Stampler

In this section, the writer identifies the characteristics of dissociative identity disorder by Aaron Stampler in the movie *Primal Fear* (1996). The author used the dissociative identity disorder characteristic theory of Halgin and Whitbourne (2010) and the theory of Malingering by Rogers (2008). In the theory of dissociative identity disorder characteristics by Halgin and Whitbourne (2010) there are 5 symptoms, namely amnesia, depersonalization, derealization, identity confusion and identity alteration (change). According to Rogers (2008), Malingering refers to the intentional feigning of illness for personal gain. The author has taken the parts that describe the characteristics of malingering dissociative identity disorder found in Aaron Stampler's character, namely:

1. Amnesia

Amnesia is a condition where a person is unable to remember events or information in their life. In amnesia, a person's memories can still be stored and the memories can come back after being triggered by something around them. This dissociative amnesia is identity-specific, with different alter personalities having varying access to memories, creating "time loss" for the individual. The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stampler that showed this characteristic:

"I bla... I blacked out. It happens to me sometimes. I have...
..spells. I have spells. I lose time. I can't remember nothing."

2. Depersonalization

Depersonalization is a condition where a person feels disconnected or detached from themselves and feels like an observer. According to Psychiatrist Steinberg in the book Halgin and Whitbourne (2010) explains that someone who experiences depersonalization feels as if they are two different people, one going through the motions of life, and the other part quietly observing. Like they are experiencing a conversation between the observing self and the participating self. The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stampler that showed this characteristic:

“Aaron’s crying off in some corner somewhere. You scared him off! You got to deal with me now, boy. I ought to give you a beating on principle.”

3. Derealization

Derealization is a characteristic when a person feels that the world or environment feels foreign or unreal. According to psychiatrist Steinberg in Richard and Whitbourne's book (2010), someone who experiences derealization will feel as if familiar surroundings or people you know seem foreign or unreal. Derealization frequently occurs during transitions between identity states or during stressful situations that might trigger switching, serving as both a warning sign of impending identity shifts and a psychological buffer against overwhelming emotional experiences that might otherwise overwhelm the person's coping capacity. The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stampler that showed this characteristic:

“Don’t you show that to a goddamn person. Do you understand me?
Mist... Mister Vail?”

4. Identity Confusion

Identity confusion represents the internal struggle and uncertainty regarding who one is, manifesting as profound confusion about one's roles, values, goals, and relationships. The individual experiences dramatic shifts in how they view themselves, with inconsistent self-perception that can change dramatically without obvious external triggers. They often report internal dialogue or hearing different "voices" or thought patterns that represent competing aspects of self, along with conflicting impulses and desires that seem to come from different parts of themselves. This confusion extends to their life narrative, as they struggle to construct

a coherent autobiographical account due to fragmentary memories and shifting self-states. The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stampler that showed this characteristic:

“No! What do you want from me now? Quit crying! I can't understand a word you're saying. You little sissy! You make me sick!”

5. Identity Alteration

Identity Alteration (change) is when a person's feelings or behavior become very different from other parts of oneself and according to psychiatrist Steinberg in Halgin and Whitbourne's book (2010) says that a person experiencing identity change will act as if he is a completely different person. These shifts are often observable to others through changes in voice, vocabulary, mannerisms, posture, and even physiological functions when switching between identities. Different identity states typically have distinct names, ages, genders, and personal histories that they experience as genuinely their own. These alters may possess different abilities, knowledge bases, and competencies, with some being able to perform tasks that others cannot.

The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stampler that showed this characteristic:

“Hell no! Jesus Christ, where did they find you? Haven't you listened to me? Aaron doesn't have guts to do nothing. It was me, boy.”.

Analysis of Malingering Dissociative Identity Disorder and the True Personality of Aaron Stampler

In this section, the writer will answer the second problem formulation using the the theory of Malingering by Rogers (2008) and the theory of Characterization by Boggs and Petrie (2008) in his book entitled “The art of Watching Films”. The writer uses both of those theory to analyze the character of Aaron Stampler depicted in the film *Primal Fear* (1996). According to Rogers (2008), Malingering refers to the intentional feigning of illness for personal gain. Boogs and Petrie suggest that in seeing a character there are 8 methods, namely Characterization through appearance, dialogue, external action, internal action, reaction of other characters, contrast (dramatic foil), caricature and leitmotif, and choice of name. In these 8 methods, the author uses 4 methods, namely characterization through appearance, characterization through

dialogue, characterization through external action and characterization through other characters' reactions.

1. Malingering Dissociative Identity Disorder through Appearance

The first malingering dissociative identity disorder depiction method is through appearance. According to Boogs and Petrie (2008), characters as the main aspect are visually revealed which makes us assume about them because of their facial features, clothing, and behavior. The following is the depiction of malingering dissociative identity disorder through appearance. In this first part, the writer analyzed Aaron's choice of clothes. Aaron Stampler wore simple, modest, and somewhat disheveled clothing, Aaron's clothing style reflects his lower socioeconomic background. The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stampler that depicted Malingering dissociative identity disorder:

"I don't... I don't have no money, and I'd surely be grateful for anything you can do to me."

2. Malingering Dissociative Identity Disorder through Dialogue

The second Depiction of malingering dissociative identity disorder method is depicted through Dialogue. According to Boogs and Petrie (2008), characters naturally reveal a lot about themselves through what they say, that means what the character says as the character is talking or expressing something. Aaron lies about knowing Linda because he is deliberately maintaining his carefully constructed persona. The lie serves to reinforce his façade. Admitting any knowledge of Linda, especially if that knowledge is tied to deeper secrets about the archbishop's illicit activities, would unravel the narrative that Aaron is lying to his own lawyer, Martin. By claiming ignorance about Linda, Aaron is not just lying to Martin, but actively controlling the narrative to keep his secrets hidden. His false innocence is essential to avoid suspicion about his true role in the murder of Archbishop Rushman. This scene depicts malingering dissociative identity disorder through appearance, that can be seen through the dialogue between Martin and Aaron.

"I don't-don't know where she is, I'm telling you the truth."

3. Malingering Dissociative Identity Disorder through External Actions

The third depiction of malingering dissociative identity disorder method is depicted through external actions. According to Boogs and Petrie (2008), in a movie external actions are what they do for a purpose, which means there must be a clear connection between the character and their actions. After the murder of the archbishop, Aaron disappears, and it's discovered that he was at the crime scene. A witness claims to have seen him fleeing, covered in blood. This leads to a manhunt. Captain Abel Stenner, the lead investigator for this case, is then notified by the other detective, that they got Aaron live on the run. Aaron is eventually found hiding in a train yard, cowering and covered in blood. He does not resist arrest but appears disoriented, frightened, and traumatized. The police detain him as the prime suspect. This ties to Aaron's story to Martin, that he woke up already covered in blood, and that he ran because he didn't know what to do, that he was frightened. Aaron's true intentions is to make it look like he doesn't know what to do. The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stamper that depicted Malingering dissociative identity disorder:

"Four fingers severed. A symbol, "B32.156", is carved into the chest. Body temperature is still warm... Captain, we've got a live one on the run."

4. Malingering Dissociative Identity Disorder through Other Characters' Reactions

The fourth depiction of malingering dissociative identity disorder method is depicted through other characters' reactions. Boogs and Petrie (2008) state that another way of seeing characters is through the reactions of other characters. In reacting, we can capture from the way the character sees the events around them and interactions with other characters. During the confrontation, Aaron's alter ego, Roy, finally emerge. This is the first time Martin directly witnesses the transformation, and it is confusing for him. Up until this point, Roy had only appeared under extreme stress and primarily in Dr. Molly Arrington's sessions. When Roy comes out during Martin's confrontation, it confirms for Martin that Aaron may be suffering from a serious psychological disorder, specifically Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), previously known as multiple personality disorder. Martin is visibly shaken and confused, not only because he sees a new and violent persona take over Aaron, but because it forces him to reassess every single thing he thought he knew about the case and about his client. The following is data in the form of dialogue by Aaron Stamper that depicted Malingering dissociative identity disorder:

"This is my cell, Jack! Who the fuck are you?"

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, the writer draws the following conclusions: In identifying the characteristics of dissociative identity disorder shown by Aaron, the writer found that Aaron Stampler exhibits all the characteristics of dissociative identity disorder, that is: Amnesia, Depersonalization, derealization, identity confusion and identity alteration. The two dominant characteristics exhibited by Aaron Stampler are Amnesia and identity alteration.

Aaron malingered his dissociative identity disorder (DID) as a calculated strategy to avoid responsibility for the murder he committed. By malingered a mental illness, he aimed to create reasonable doubt in court and position himself as a victim rather than a criminal. Aaron understood the legal and emotional leverage that a mental illness defense could provide, particularly one as complex and difficult to disprove as DID. His performance was so convincing that not only did his lawyer, Martin Vail, believe him, but even Dr. Molly Arrington, a trained psychologist was misled.

The writer also found the true personality of Aaron Stampler. The writer found Aaron Stampler's true personality traits, and they are manipulative, deceptive, and dangerously intelligent. Aaron Stampler's character reveals the unsettling truth about the duality of human nature. His ability to hide his true self raises questions about how well we can ever truly know someone. Aaron's character ultimately represents the terrifying idea that evil can wear a mask of innocence. His decision to fake DID was not a product of desperation, but of cold strategy. The film warns against making quick moral judgments and illustrates that evil can exist even in those who seem most vulnerable.

Through these findings, the study concludes that *Where the Crawdads Sing* constructs its narrative through a complex interplay of temporal arrangement, perspective control, and narratorial stance. The analysis of narrative tense, mood, and voice reveal how Owens structures a non-linear yet cohesive story that unfolds gradually through shifts in time, focalization, and narrative position to uncover the layered structure of modern literary narratives.

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