

NIHILISM IN POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICA AND ITS EFFECT TOWARD ESTHER'S VIEW IN PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*

Karina Claudya Wulandari (karina_claudyawulandari@yahoo.co.id)

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Yogyakarta State University

Abstract

The aims of the research are (1) to find out what aspects of nihilism presented in Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and (2) to reveal how they affect Esther's view toward her life. To answer the objectives of the research, the researcher used Nihilism theory by Nietzsche and background of American condition in Post-World War II.

The method of the research is descriptive qualitative. The object of the research was *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. The data were in the form of clauses and sentences. The data were gathered from reading and re-reading the novel, taking notes, classifying the data, collecting the data, labeling the data and categorizing the data. The researcher used four steps in analyzing data which were reading and re-reading the categorized data from the table of datasheet, analyzing the categorized data based on the related theory, making an interpretation and adding description, and applying the measure of trustworthiness of the data by doing triangulation. To gain the credibility data, transferability, dependability and confirmability, the researcher did *peer debriefing*.

The findings show that there are three nihilism aspects in the novel i.e. consumer culture, sex revolution, and technological inventions. It shows that society creates their idols and falls into the gate of nihilism. Then, this condition affects Esther's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The researcher found two attitudes toward nihilism which are negative self-image as passive attitude of nihilism and gaining freedom as an active attitude of nihilism.

Key words: nihilism, passive, active, America, *The Bell Jar*

INTRODUCTION

Nietzsche, a German philosopher, saw the development of science and knowledge grown radically. He predicted that there would be a crisis of human life in the next two centuries. It was a cultural crisis called nihilism that Nietzsche felt at the end of the 19th century especially in European culture. He mentioned that nihilism is the collapse of all aspects of the world including religion (moral) and knowledge (Sunardi, 2011: 33-35). This was against Christian morals that had been hold up by Western people.

Furthermore, seeing the danger of nihilism, Nietzsche (1968: 17) says in his book, *The Will to Power*, there are two attitudes of nihilism. First is to be passive or to accept nihilism by living with pessimism. Second is to be active which reverses the highest values by reconstructing it.

The nihilists or those who do not believe in the moral and value concept feel their lives are meaningless and have no purpose. In such condition, they begin to feel pessimistic about their lives. Many factors which come from internal and

external make people become pessimistic and take them to the gates of nihilism. The fall of person into nihilism can be seen from the desire or the act of suicide. Nietzsche (1968: 143) says that suicide is an act of nihilism. Woodward (2002: 52) states in his paper, nihilism is not only an existential and psychological state that an individual can experience but also a symptom of society. The nihilistic condition is the condition of society in particular time. It refers to symptomatic of the decline of the West culture, for example is the condition in Post-World War II in America.

American had magnificence and high technology goods. At the same time, media like newspaper and television were also growing rapidly. Many labors went to work to fulfill their needs meanwhile young people went to college. The reason that they worked and went to college was to get money and to afford a high living. People changed their life style with such as fine eating, drinking, parties, and shopping.

In traditional family, father is the breadwinner while mother should take care for the children. Although the mother could work, she was restricted by domestic responsibilities. When traditional family's standard is difficult to fulfill, it brings people into nihilism abyss. It makes them no longer conformed to social values and becomes pessimistic and even rebellious.

Thus, many people become depressed and commit suicide.

Postmodernists believe that facts are simply interpretation and truth is not absolute. Knowledge is known as mediated by culture. It makes people determine their way of life such as values, attitudes, and thoughts without the traditional values or religious course. The values of religion begin to fade and are no longer to be the main things in their life. Finally, they live against religious thoughts which they have known. It can be signified that American society becomes a nihilistic society.

Like philosophy, literature also examines a human life including values and morals. Since literature is media that the authors use to convey their ideas, it may contain their philosophy and view of life. Sylvia Plath, an American poet and novelist, is one of the authors whose works have nihilistic theme. *The Bell Jar* describes the state of nihilism experienced by a brilliant, talented, 19-year-old girl who is falling into a nihilism abyss. The novel is set in the life of American society in the 1950s. Esther Greenwood, the main character, comes to New York from Boston. In fact, the environment in Esther's hometown that forces her to endure traditional values also gives some burden to her. Therefore, after a long time of dilemma, Esther realizes that the traditional values do not guarantee her

life. She also feels that her life is meaningless.

Regarding to the facts, the researcher is eager to find the issue of nihilism in the novel. The researcher would like to know the aspects of nihilism that are presented in the novel and how nihilism affects the main character's point of view.

Nietzsche's theory of Nihilism focuses on the rejection of values, meanings, and desires and also revaluation of values. It is an idea of the decline of the meanings of life. The reason is because there is no answer and no aim of life. Nihilism can also be defined as the collapse of all values and meanings which encompass all areas of human life. The whole aspects can be divided into two: religion (including morals) and knowledge (Sunardi, 2011: 35). The causes of nihilism are value, moral, and decadence. Nihilism does not only affect one's psychology but also the society. Nietzsche (1968: 17) says that nihilism attitude is ambiguous. There are two kinds of attitudes which are passive and active nihilism. Passive nihilism is a decline of the power of the spirit. It is followed with depression and suicide attitude. Meanwhile, active nihilism is a sign of an increased power of the spirit. The attitude is to reverse a value.

RESEARCH METHOD

Since the researcher analyzed Nihilism in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* that brought out the phenomena of Nihilism aspect and its effects, the researcher assumed the qualitative method was most suitable method to give deeper understanding in the form of textual description. In this research, the source of data was Plath's *The Bell Jar* in which the data were in the form of clauses and sentences. *The Bell Jar* is a modern classic novel that was written by an American novelist, Sylvia Plath. It was published in 2005 by Harper Collin and had 20 chapters and 244 pages.

The research also used additional references which were in the form of books, e-books, journals, and websites related to the topic of the research. The research used Nihilism theory which was taken from Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* (1968), some additional books, as well as journals about nihilism and American condition to support the analysis.

The researcher used at least four steps in analyzing the data in this research which were reading and re-reading the categorized data from the table of datasheet, analyzing the categorized data based on the related theory, making an interpretation and adding description, and applying the measure of trustworthiness of the data by doing triangulation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher found that there are nihilism aspects in the novel i.e. consumer culture, sex revolution, and technological invention.

Consumer Culture

Since the end of World War II, economic development has influenced people's thought and behavior to become consumptive. They spend their money to buy good products and services in order to fulfill the high standard of living (Sitkoff, 2000: 77-78). From the novel, it can be seen that people have desire both in products and services that later become their new idols.

In 1950s, the developments of fashion grew rapidly. New York was a place that becomes center of fashion at that time. The narration below tells that Esther comes to New York from her hometown, Boston as she won writing contest held by fashion magazine company. There, she lives in hotel with other eleven girls who also won the contest. The company gives them prizes such as internship, payment, ballet ticket, fashion show ticket, hair styling and chances to meet successful people. This condition influences Esther and the other girls to become possessive in the products and services.

There were twelve of us at the hotel. We had all won a fashion magazine contest, by rewriting essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs, and **as prizes they gave us jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to**

fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of our desire and advice about what to do with our particular complexion. (Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 3)

Besides leading to consumptive behavior, the economic development also leads people to be materialistic. People think how to get money or how to live well because it will bring them pleasure and happiness. Money becomes a new idol of people. Lundberg and Pollak (2015:30) state that the reason people go to college and get a job is to earn money. Esther is persuaded by her mother to study shorthand because it can make a lot of money. Esther's mother knows that Esther likes to write so Esther's mother thinks if Esther studies shorthand, she can write and also can make a lot of money.

By the end of supper my mother had convinced me I should study shorthand in the evenings. Then I would be killing two birds with one stone, writing a novel and learning something practical as well. **I would also be saving a whole lot of money.** (Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 121)

Sex Revolution

From the novel, it can be seen that American society slowly moves toward revolution which is sex revolution. There are two types of sex revolution which are the premarital sex relationship and the same sex relationship.

People who believe in religion thoughts and traditional values are not allowed to have sex before marriage. However, because of development of knowledge and culture, some people cannot keep their belief. Below, there is conversation held by Esther and her boyfriend, Buddy. From the narration, it can be seen that Buddy teases Esther to see him naked. Esther is surprised because Buddy is known as a good boy who is obedient to traditional values and religious thought. In addition, Buddy comes from the family that also believes in traditional values and religion. Even Esther's grandmother and mother always praise him like a role model.

Suddenly, after I finished a poem, **he said, "Esther, have you ever seen a man?" The way he said it I knew he didn't mean a regular man or a man in general, I knew he meant a man naked. "No," I said. "Only statues."**
"Well, don't you think you would like to see me?"

I didn't know what to say. My mother and my grandmother had started hinting around to me a lot lately about what a fine, clean boy Buddy Willard was, coming from such fine, clean family, and how everybody at church thought he was a model person, so kind to his parents and to older people, as well as so athletic and so handsome and so intelligent. (Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 68)

The same sex relationship means the relationship between same gender or sex. Esther remembers the scandal in her dorm.

She knows that there are girls in her dorm who have the same sex relationships.

And as she stretched out on my bed with a silly smile, **I remember a minor scandal at our college dormitory when a fat, matronly-breasted senior, homely as a grandmother and a pious Religion major, and a tall, gawky freshman with a history of being deserted at an early hour in all sorts of ingenious ways by her blind dates, started seeing too much each other. They were always together, and one somebody had come upon them embracing, the story went, in the fat girl's room.**

"But what were they doing?" I had asked. Whenever I thought about men and men, and women and women, I could never really imagine what they would be actually doing. (Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 219-220)

Technological Invention

Actually, Post-World War II can be said as incredible era where the development of economy, culture, and knowledge grew rapidly. However, the development can lead people into the gate of nihilism. Technological inventions in that era were transportation, mass media, and advance treatment. There, people have new idols such as mass media and advance medical treatment.

Media includes television, the cinema, video, radio, photography, advertising, newspapers and magazines, recorded music, computer games and the internet. Mass media implies that it reaches large audiences (Buckingham, 2003: 1). Media is one of

technological inventions that function as a medium of communication or source of information for people. In Post-World War II, mass media were in the form of billboard, magazine, newspaper, radio and television.

Joan who reads Esther's suicide case in a newspaper also tries to follow her by attempting suicide. They have the same case, i.e. they are interested to commit suicide after reading suicide stories in newspapers.

"I read about you," Joan went on. "Not how they found you, but everything up to that, and I put all my money together and took the first plane to New York."

"Why New York?"

"Oh, I thought it would be easier to kill myself in New York."
(Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 199)

Besides mass media, advanced medical treatment must also be considered. The high rates of depression influence the experts to find ways to cure the patients. In the novel, the experts believe advanced treatment can heal or can give an improvement to patient.

The first kind of treatment is electroconvulsive therapy. It is a kind of treatment that sends electric currents to brain through the head. Esther experienced this therapy at Doctor Gordon's hospital. The doctor asks Esther to undergo the electroconvulsive therapy not only once but for several times.

This condition illustrates that people become crazy about knowledge. From this point, it shows that people fall into decadence where they choose what is good or bad like Dr. Gordon who keeps telling Esther to undergo the electroconvulsive therapy without knowing Esther's condition. Dr. Gordon uses the advanced treatment without considering Esther's condition because he loves and praises the technology.

"A few more shock treatments, Mrs. Greenwood," I heard Doctor Gordon say, "and "I think you'll notice a wonderful improvement."
(Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 145)

The researcher found that nihilism aspects which are created by society affect Esther's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The researcher found that Esther has two attitudes of nihilism which are negative self-image as passive attitude of nihilism and gaining freedom as active attitude of nihilism.

Negative Self-Image as Passive Attitude of Nihilism

The first attitude toward nihilism showed by the character is passive nihilism where the decline and recession of the power of spirit lead people into an unacceptable decadence situation. Hence, decadence is the attitude of not daring to say "yes" in life. People live in turmoil, emptiness, and pessimism (Sunardi, 2011: 47). According to Barret (1997:18), postmodernists believe that facts are simply

interpretation and truth is not absolute. They believe that knowledge is known as mediated by culture. It can be said that there is no absolute moral and value since no absolute truth, then, this condition brings people being pessimistic in their life. Therefore, it leads people to have negative self-image like Esther Greenwood, the main character in the novel. Esther's negative self-image is influenced by aspect of nihilism in 1950s as described in below.

Esther's negative self-image can be seen in her indecisive attitude. Esther compares the story about fig trees given by the company with her life story.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. **I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose.** (Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 77)

When Esther has recovered from her depression, her attitude changes into active nihilism where she gains freedom. She changes to active nihilism when she thinks

that she has a freedom to marry the wrong person just because of sex. Furthermore, active nihilism does not only see through her thought but also through her action i.e. use a birth control, lose her virginity with a man she has just met, and also becomes a consumerist. Her life is still meaningless but she chooses to celebrate and enjoy it.

Gaining Freedom as Active Attitude of Nihilism

The second attitude toward nihilism is active nihilism in which it is a sign of an increased power of the spirit. It is the alternative that Nietzsche proposes against the nihilism without rejecting it.

In fact, Esther has passed passive nihilism which brings her into a deep depression. This deep depression is influenced by aspects of nihilism that are believed by society. Fortunately, her condition gets better when she receives mental treatments including electroshock therapy and talk therapy with doctor she believes.

Behind Doctor Nolan I could see the body of a woman wearing a rumpled black-and-white checked robe and flung out on a cot as if dropped from a great height. **But before I could take in any more, Doctor Nolan led me through a door into fresh, blue-skied air. All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air.**

(Printed in bold mine)

(Plath, 2005: 215)

CONCLUSION

The researcher found that there are nihilism aspects in the novel i.e. consumer culture, sex revolution, and technological invention. It can be said that nihilism aspects happened due to the high standard of living and then people create and worship their idol or god. People believe in morals and values and falls into decadence, then, this brings people into the gates nihilism which is meaningless life.

When Esther has recovered, her attitude changes into active nihilism in which she gains freedom. Since active nihilism is a form of celebration, Esther feels that the bell jar is risen up. It symbolizes that she wants to face the world. In other words, the advanced medical treatment also causes Esther to become an active nihilism.

REFERENCES

Printed References:

Barret, Terry. 1997. *Art Education: Content and Practice in a Postmodern Era*. Hutchens, J. and Marianne S. Eds. Washington, DC: NAEA.

Buckingham, David. 2003. "Questioning the Media: A Guide for Students". *A Media Education Curriculum for Teachers in the Mediterranean*, pp. 1-15.

Lundberg, Shelly and Robert A. Pollak. 2015. *The Evolving Role of Marriage: 1950-2010*. Future of Children. 25: 2. pp. 29-50.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968. *The Will To Power*. Kaufmann, W. ed. New York: Random House, Inc.

Sitkoff, Harvard. 2000. *Post War America A Student Companion*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Sunardi, St. 2011. *Nietzsche*. Yogyakarta: Lkis.

Woodward, Ashley. 2002. "Nihilism and The Postmodern in Vattimo's Nietzsche". *An Internet Journal of Philosophy*, no. 6. pp. 51-67.