

Traumatic Experiences in Three Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

The aims of this study are to analyze trauma issue represented in three selected short stories and to analyze how the main characters deal with the traumatic experience. The first short story in this study is Vanka by Anton Chekhov (1886), the second short story is Alyosha the Pot by Leo Tolstoy (1905), and the third story is A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father by Henry Lawson (1902). This study applies qualitative research because the analysis is presented in the form of text. In order to guide this study, the writer uses defense mechanism theory defined by Freud (1894). The result of this analysis shows that the traumatic experiences that were received by the main characters of the three selected short stories were child abuse. These abuses were physical abuse, mental or emotional abuse, and neglect. The next result of this analysis shows that different person has their own way of dealing with the trauma they experienced, these are regression and compensation. Regression happens when the person psychologically goes back in time when the person feels safe, and compensation happens when the person overachieves at something they are good at to compensate for their weakness.

Keywords: *defense mechanism, narrative elements, short story, trauma.*

A. Introduction

Trauma could affect a person immediately or later in their life. For example, Dele Alli, a soccer superstar in the UK was in a rehabilitation center for a trauma that had happened twenty years ago (CNN News, 2023). Alli was in rehab because he was molested at six years old, started smoking at seven years old, and started dealing drugs at eight years old. The trauma continues to haunt him for two decades because Alli, when he was a child, was afraid of other people, and also because there is a stigma about going to rehab. This stigma exists because other people believe that trauma is not a serious issue and that going to rehab is a waste of money. This trend of thought about trauma is the reason why people looked down on other people's trauma. In lined with Caruth's (1996) theory of trauma related to memory, Alli's case is a proof that traumatic events are saved deep within the memory unconsciously and will reappear later in life in a form of flashbacks or nightmares that can affect Alli's health.

Similarly in real life, trauma could also happen in literature, as literature is the criticism of real life. Trauma in literature has been analyzed since the 1990s using Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Freud's theory has been expanded from time to time by experts such as Caruth, Felman, Hartman, etc. Trauma could also be found in short stories. For example, *Vanka* by Chekhov (1886) told a story about Vanka who experienced child separation from his family and was abused by his master. The next example is *Alyosha the Pot* by Tolstoy (1905), told a story about Alyosha who also experienced child separation from his family and was abused by his father and employer. The last example, *A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father* by Lawson (1902), told a story about Sonny who was abused by his parents, especially by his mother. These three short stories were selected because the writer believed that traumatic experiences occurred in the story.

Based on the examples above, the writer is interested in studying about traumatic experience that occurred in the short story *Vanka* by Anton Chekhov (1886), *Alyosha the Pot* by Leo Tolstoy (1905), and *A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father* by Henry Lawson (1902). Therefore the title of this study is "Traumatic Experiences in Three Selected Short Stories".

B. Method

This study applied the descriptive qualitative approach because this study tried to analyze traumatic experience in the form of short story text. These data are a part of descriptive qualitative data as they are in the form of words and based on the phenomenon. The data used in this study were based on three short stories written by Anton Chekhov titled *Vanka* (1886); Leo Tolstoy titled *Alyosha the Pot* (1905); Henry Lawson titled *A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father* (1902). The writer analyzed the narration and the dialogues of the three selected short stories as the data source for this study. After collecting the objects, the writer did some steps. First, the writer read the text several times to understand the whole story. Second, after understanding the story, the writer identified the issue related to the issue. Next, the writer marked and highlighted the content of the text which relates to the topic of analysis that is trauma. The data that had been collected were identified into traumatic experience to answer the first statement of the problem about how traumatic experience is represented and analyzed how the main character deal with traumatic experience in the three selected short stories by using the defense mechanism theory.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Traumatic Experience Represented in the Three Selected Short Stories

1.1 *Vanka*

The main character of the first short story, *Vanka*, was physically abused by the Master. Alyahin, *Vanka's* master, was a terrible lord and parent. Alyahin was portrayed in the story with anger issue as he often beat *Vanka* physically. ". . .

yesterday [Vanka] had a wiggling. The master pulled me out into the yard by my hair, and whacked me with a boot-stretcher because I accidentally fell asleep while I was rocking their [child] in the cradle” (Chekhov, 1886). This means that Alyahin was easily angered by mistakes and preferred to punish Vanka with physical beatings as Vanka could not defend himself. This also indicates that the master did not care about Vanka’s safety and feelings.

1.2. Alyosha the Pot

The main character of the second short story, Alyosha, was physically abused by his mother back when he was a child. When Alyosha was young, he was tasked by his mother to send a pot of milk, but he fell and broke the pot, “[Alyosha’s mother] had once sent [Alyosha] with a pot of milk to the deacon’s wife, and he had stumbled against something and broken it. His mother had beaten him, and the children had teased him” (Tolstoy, 1905). This statement explained that although Alyosha was young and weak, his mother gave him a task that was impossible for his body, as he was described as “a tiny, thin fellow” (Tolstoy, 1905). Yet his mother still demanded Alyosha to do the assignment. This also means that Alyosha was not seen as her son, rather as a boy who does errand for her.

Alyosha was physically abused by his employer and colleagues when he was working as a yard porter for the merchant. Alyosha was nineteen years old when his father sent him to the town to substitute his brother’s job as a yard porter. During his time as a yard porter, Alyosha was given endless task by the merchant’s family and Alyosha’s colleagues, such as the cook and the clerk. The story mentioned that,

“they sent [Alyosha] on all sorts of errands, but he did everything quickly and readily, going from one task to another without stopping. And so here, just as at home, all the work was put upon his shoulders. The more he did, the more he was given to do”

(Tolstoy,1905)

This statement means that Alyosha was ready and willing to do hard work when he was working for the merchant. Alyosha did not sigh nor complain when he was given a lot of heavy physical tasks, however, this attitude would be exploited by the merchant’s family and Alyosha’s colleagues. The family and Alyosha’s colleagues exploited Alyosha because they wanted to give Alyosha most of their work responsibility. In addition, because Alyosha was willing and never complained, Alyosha was punished by his own work attitude and character.

1.3. A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father

The main character of the third short story, Sonny, was physically abused by his mother. Sonny talked to his father about what he did that day,

“I couldn’t lift the saddle of the harness on to the peg, father. I had to leave the scrubbing [floors] to make some tea and cook some eggs for mother, and put baby to bed, and then I felt too bad to go on with the scrubbing”

(Lawson, 1902)

This means that Sonny was doing some heavy chores as he was lifting a harness saddle that is used to ride a horse on to a peg, and was scrubbing the floor before doing the other chores that was supposed to be done by his mother, such as cooking and putting the baby to bed. Sonny was forced to do the heavy chores because the mother refused to do so. Sonny was physically abused by his mother because she refused to do her chores and then forced Sonny to do them, which resulted with Sonny fell sick and could have potentially harmed Sonny in the process.

2. How the Main Characters Deal with Traumatic Experience

2.1 Regression

2.1.1 Regression in *Vanka*

The writer believed that the main character of the first short story, Vanka, dealt with traumatic experiences by using a defense mechanism called regression. When Vanka was writing his letter, Vanka was repeatedly shown to remember his past when he was still with his grandfather before he was moved to the shoemaker’s house. “[Vanka] remembered how his grandfather always went into the forest to get the Christmas tree for his master’s family, and took [Vanka] with him. It was a merry time!” (Chekhov, 1886) This statement means that when Vanka was venting off his trauma and stress writing the letter, Vanka remembered the past when he was feeling safe from the stress and trauma. This statement made the writer believe that the main character, Vanka, dealt with trauma by using a defense mechanism called regression.

2.2 Compensation

2.2.1 Compensation in *Alyosha the Pot*

The writer believed that the main character of the second short story, Alyosha, dealt with child abuse by using a defense mechanism called compensation. In the story, Alyosha was shown to be hardworking and positive when he was mistreated by his father and the merchant’s family and employees. One of the occasions in the story mentioned that when Alyosha was scolded by his father, “when his father scolded him, he would stand mute and listen attentively, and as soon as the scolding was over, [he] would smile and go on with his work” (Tolstoy, 1905). This means that when Alyosha was being yelled at by his father, he would listen respectfully and learned from his father because Alyosha knew his father was more knowledgeable, and then Alyosha would continue his work without feeling down, instead he would happily continue to do his work. This attitude led the writer to believe that Alyosha dealt with

the stress by compensating his weak body and low intellect by working harder than everyone else because Alyosha believe that the only thing that Alyosha could do right is to work.

2.2.2 Compensation in *A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father*

The writer believed that the main character of the third short story, Sonny, also dealt with trauma and stress by compensation. Many occasions in the story mentioned that Sonny would often fall sick, but kept on doing the chores until he could not continue. One of the occasions in the story mentioned that Sonny was sick and pale, however, he kept saying that he was fine and he would recover quickly to his father. When the father was worried about Sonny's condition, Sonny answered, "*oh, nothing much, father. I felt sick, but I feel better now*" (Lawson, 1902). In addition to that statement, another time when the father asked about Sonny's condition, Sonny replied, "*[it is] nothing father, I'll be alright directly. Don't you worry, father*" (Lawson, 1902). These statements mean that although Sonny was sick, he tried to convince his father that he is fine and did not need to worry about him. Sonny was resilient towards his sickness because he needs to be ready to do his next chores. This attitude led the writer to believe that Sonny dealt with trauma by compensating his weak body by working and doing chores every day against his sickness.

In conclusion, this study showed that the three main characters used two different defense mechanisms to defend themselves from their trauma of abuse. The main character of the first short story, Vanka, dealt with trauma using a defense mechanism called regression. While the main character of the second and third short stories, Alyosha and Sonny, dealt with trauma and abuse using a defense mechanism called compensation. On the other hand, in a study conducted by Ariesta in 2019 as her thesis, she discovered that the main character used a defense mechanism called projection. Ariesta (2019) concluded that the main character of the novel *Peculiar Children* by Riggs (2011) used projection because the main character in the novel projects a fantasy of an imaginary world to substitute his loss and trauma.

D. Conclusion

Based on the analysis in the previous chapter, the writer concluded that there are three types of child abuse that was analyzed as traumatic experiences in the three selected short stories. These types are physical abuse, mental or emotional abuse, and neglect. In *Vanka* short story, physical abuse was identified because the master actively beat Vanka on any occasion when Vanka did a small mistake. Mental or emotional abuse was observed from what the workmen did to Vanka, the workmen looked down on Vanka, laughed at him and forced him to do things that are illegal towards his master. And lastly, neglect was indicated by Vanka's lack of food, rest, and, education. Vanka did not get a proper sleeping place and bed, he was

malnourished because he only ate bread and porridge everyday, and he was not educated for his future.

In *Alyosha the Pot* short story, physical abuse was detected when the father and the merchant's family and employees gave Alyosha a large numbers of tasks with no time to rest. Mental or emotional abuse was identified in the father's view of Alyosha, because the father only looked Alyosha as a tool. Neglect was shown through Alyosha's clothing when he went to the town with the merchant, Alyosha was only given old clothes and boots by his father, and Alyosha was emotionally neglected because the father refused to form a loving bond with his son. Lastly, neglect was identified from the father did not give Alyosha a proper clothing when he moved to the town, and Alyosha was not given a proper education by his father because he would rather have him to work.

In *A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father* short story, physical abuse was identified from the mother refused to do house chores and heavy work such as cooking, cleaning, etc. and forced it to Sonny instead. Mental or emotional abuse was observed when the mother would talk aggressively towards the father even though the children could hear them. Lastly, neglect was shown when the mother did not fulfill Sonny's needs of food and education, even though the mother was smart and reads a lot.

The main characters of the three selected short stories dealt with traumatic experiences in two different defense mechanisms. One of the mechanism is regression, regression happened when the person psychologically went back in time to when the person felt safe. The first main character, Vanka, dealt with trauma by regression. Vanka when he was writing the letter to his grandfather, he sometimes regressed back to a memory when he was with his grandfather because he felt safe. The second mechanism is compensation, compensation happened when the person knew their weakness and instead of working to fix their weakness, they only focus on doing what they are good at. The main character of the second and the third short story, Alyosha and Sonny, dealt with trauma and stress through compensation. Alyosha was shown multiple times to be hard working and positive after being yelled at by his father or the merchant's family because he knew the only thing he could do is work. Sonny was also shown multiple times to be hard working despite his sick body and forced himself to continue to do chores until his body gave up and could not move. The writer acknowledged that this study is far from perfect. This study was focused on the traumatic experiences and how the characters deal with them. The next study of child abuse issue could cover deeper into the long-term damages that could affect the children who was effected by the traumatic experiences. Lastly, the writer expected that this study can be useful not only for the writer himself, but also to the new insights and broaden the reader's understanding of trauma.

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