

Comparing Drug Addiction Portrayed in Hubert Selby Jr's *Requiem for a Dream* and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*

Cindy Dwi Andary^{1*}

¹Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Abstract. This article aims to compare two literary works from two different countries with a similar motif, which is drug addiction. This study attempts to find out the portrayal of drug addiction in both literary works by comparing the symptoms, causes, and impacts experienced by the main characters. Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that the two literary works show similarities and differences regarding drug addiction that happen to the main characters. The writer found four symptoms, one cause, and four impacts of drug addiction in *Requiem for a Dream*, while in *Trainspotting*, the writer found three symptoms, two causes, and four impacts of drug addiction. Despite having the same number of impacts, those four impacts are described differently in both literary works.

Keywords: *Drug addiction, Comparative Literature, Requiem for a Dream, Trainspotting, Hubert Selby Jr, Irvine Welsh*

Received [22 Jun 2022] | Revised [23 Jan 2023] | Accepted [26 Jan 2023]

1 Introduction

Technology has been changing human life in many ways throughout history. Everything now is faster, better, and more accessible. Information can be acquired in a blink of an eye. Communication is just one touch away. Machines are now a man's best friend. In a world full of technological advancement, humans are expected to keep up with the speed of technology. People must be more innovative and valuable to survive in this modern world because now humans can be easily replaced by machines. Unbeknownst to us, we all live in a fast-paced world where the pace of life seems to be getting faster and faster that we sometimes forget the concept of time. This modern, fast-paced world can be stressful to some people that they may feel that life is so relentless and unbearable. Therefore, some people need distraction as a break from their routines and an escape from reality.

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

E-mail address: cindydwandary@gmail.com

Some people cannot stand the reality that they need an escape to stay alive despite knowing that these escapes are temporary. Some people choose healthy ways to escape reality, such as watching movies, reading books, listening to music, playing video games, etc. In contrast, others choose the opposite, using mind-altering substances such as drugs and alcohol. Drugs and alcohol give people relief until the effect is gone and forces them to return to their dreadful reality. If someone keeps using drugs to escape, their body will build up a tolerance as they become dependent on the substance. The more they turn to drugs for relief, the higher their risk of developing an addiction.

National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) defined addiction as "a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences. [1]". It is considered a brain disease because drugs change the brain and its structure and how it works. These brain changes can be long-lasting and can lead to the harmful behaviors seen in people who abuse drugs, especially illicit drugs such as heroin, marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, and meth. Drugs can also cause diseases such as heart or lung disease, cancer, mental illness, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and even death.

Not everyone who uses drugs becomes addicted, but substance abuse can cause problems for individuals, whether technically addicted or not. Addiction itself is a disease that includes symptoms such as craving, loss of control, physical dependence, and tolerance [2]. Craving is a strong and often overpowering urge to use a psychoactive drug. Craving then followed by loss of control, which refers to the inability not being able to stop using once a drug has been introduced to the body. After that, comes physical dependence, which refers to the need to maintain the level of drugs in the body in order to avoid withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety. Finally, tolerance, which is the need to use increasingly large quantities of a drug to get the same sensation. In addition, Erich Goode in [3] says that the three factors of why people use and abuse drugs are biological factors, psychological factors, and sociological factors. Each focuses on a different range of factors that determine why people use and abuse psychoactive substances. Of course, within each broad type is a range of specific theories.

Addiction is considered a "biopsychosocial" disorder, in which biological (physical), psychological (mental), and social (interpersonal) factors are intertwined. Physical dependency on a chemical can lead to extremely painful behavior for the substance abusers and all those connected to them. Sometimes, a preexisting mental or psychological problem can cause an individual to self-medicate with an addictive drug. A social aspect of the disorder can refer to the impact of family on addiction and vice versa. Since in today's world, "society" extends way beyond one's home, a wide range of influences, including the media, impact attitudes and addiction—and substance abusers can affect a wide range of social groups. Therefore, abusing drugs and becoming an addict has some harmful effects such as effect on health [2], effect on family and community [4], effect on crime rate [5], and effect on work and employment [6].

In this study, the writer is interested in analyzing drug addiction as a motif because drug addiction lives among us. The depiction of drug addiction can be found everywhere, starting from movies, music, literature, etc. Due to the development of technology, everything is easy to access, including these drug-related movies and music. Films and music often glorify the use of drugs. Many Hollywood movies depict drug use, especially among teenagers, as something trendy and usual. Similarly, music also promotes drug use, especially Hip-hop or Rap music. Rappers often mention the use of drugs in their music, which is usually based on their experience with drugs. Most Rappers openly admit that they use drugs and are even addicted to them, leading to the countless deaths of rappers. Literature is no exception to the depiction of drug use. The depiction of drugs in literature can be found in the earliest examples of written stories like the classical Greek poet Homer depicts Helen of Troy using the opium derivative nepenthe as an antidote to her grief. Western writers, including Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, mention drugs in their works. Not only do they depict drugs in their works, but some well-known writers also use drugs, just like those Rappers. The works of Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and Robert Louis Stevenson *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* both have been affected by their personal experiences with the effects of cocaine.

Based on the drug-related phenomena mentioned before, the writer is interested in seeing how these phenomena are portrayed in literary works. The writer chooses the two novels as an object because both novels have the same motif and are also written by authors who have real drug experience. Irvine Welsh, the author of *Trainspotting*, has first-hand experience of drug addiction and poverty, as his novels often deal with. Drugs were part of his everyday landscape when he was growing up. He was a heroin addict in his early 20s, which made him get into the dark world of scams and multiple giro claims, petty shoplifting, and theft. Meanwhile, Hubert Selby Jr, the author of *Requiem for a Dream*, wrote his book inspired by his near-death drug experience. Thus, the writer is interested in this topic because the writer wants to know whether the depiction of drug addiction in literary works is following the theory of drug addiction or not.

There are some related studies about addiction portrayed in literature which become references to this study. First is the thesis Katherine Lynn Brandt entitled “Uneasy Corners of Consciousness”: Addiction as Dis-ease in Victorian Realism and an essay by Guðmundur Ásgeir Sveinsson entitled “Ah Choose not tae Choose Life”: The Downsides of Heroin Use as Represented in *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh.

2 Method

In this study, the writer applies a qualitative method to interpret and analyze the data because the writer considers explanation and description are significant in analyzing this kind of study. The

reason to use the qualitative method is to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations in literary works. It provides insights into the problem or helps develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. Qualitative research is also used to uncover trends in thought and opinions and dive deeper into the problem. This type of research answers questions about why or how a particular phenomenon may occur rather than how often it occurs. that qualitative descriptive is a kind of research method that focuses on descriptions and interpretations, concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena [7].

To find the data as the reference for writing this article, the writer uses library research and internet research. The writer collects the data from books, the internet, journals, and many other resources related to analyzing the subject matter. The writer will do the following steps: collecting, selecting, analyzing the data, interpreting them, and doing the conclusion drawing to get the best result.

3 Result and Discussion

Drug addiction can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender, race, social status, and occupation. Drug addiction is depicted in literature because literature reflects human civilization, which consists of culture and society. Literature is never just mere entertainment. With all of its form, it has historically performed as an expression of culture and civilization. Based on the theory of drug addiction that the writer has elaborated on in the previous chapter, the writer found four symptoms in Hubert Selby Jr's *Requiem for a Dream*, whereas in *Trainspotting*, the writer only found three symptoms.

Harry Goldfarb, the main character in *Requiem for a Dream* experienced all the drug addiction four symptoms mentioned in the previous chapter, namely craving, loss of control, physical dependence, and tolerance meanwhile, Mark Renton, the main character in *Trainspotting*, only experienced three drug addiction symptoms namely craving, loss of control, and physical dependence.

For the cause of drug addiction, the writer found only one cause in *Requiem for a Dream*, which is sociological factors, while in *Trainspotting*, the writer found two causes which are sociological and psychological factors. The cause of the drug addiction of Harry Goldfarb, the main character in *Requiem for a Dream*, is Sociological factors such as family and friends. The first one that may cause his addiction is his mother. His relationship with his mother is somewhat complicated. Other factors which cause Harry's drug addiction are friends and the environment. In the novel, it is mentioned of a place where all the junkies gather together and use drugs is called *the Morgue*. As for the causes of drug addiction of Mark Renton, the main character in *Trainspotting* is a sociological factor such as friends and psychological factor such as the loss of a brother.

As for the impacts of drug addiction, both literary works possess the same four impacts: effect on health, effect on family and community, effect on crime rates, and effect on work and employment. However, despite having the same impacts, those four impacts are described differently in both literary works. In *Requiem for a Dream*, the impact on health experienced by the character is an infection due to heroin injection, while in *Trainspotting*, the main character's friend suffers from HIV, which leads to death. As for the impact on family and community, both main characters who suffered from drug addiction have an impact on their families. However, in *Requiem for a Dream*, Harry has a negative impact on his mother by stealing her TV, while in *Trainspotting*, Mark asks for money from his mother nicely. Mark's family has a significant role in dealing with Mark's addiction, and they often help him quit drugs multiple times, unlike Harry's family. This happens because Mark is open to his family while Harry is not. Harry and Mark are both reluctant to have a job because they prefer living without responsibility so they can use drugs daily. Even Mark has been intentionally sabotaging job interviews provided by the government to avoid working. Since they are unemployed, both characters often commit crimes to acquire money to buy drugs. Harry sells drugs to gain money, while Mark commits various crimes to gain money, such as stealing and giro fraud.

4 Conclusion

As far as this study is concerned, the similarities in symptoms of drug addiction portrayed in both literary works are caused by the fact that both authors have real experience with drug addiction. Irvine Welsh, the author of *Trainspotting*, has first-hand experience of drug addiction and poverty, as his novels often deal with. Drugs were part of his typical landscape when he was growing up. He was a heroin addict in his early 20s, which made him get into the dark world of scams and multiple giro claims, petty shoplifting, and theft, just like Mark Renton, the character in *Trainspotting*. Meanwhile, Hubert Selby Jr, the author of *Requiem for a Dream*, wrote his book inspired by his near-death drug experience. This is why the portrayal of drug addiction in these two literary works is accurate. All depiction of drug addiction in both literary works is in accordance with the theory of drug addiction.

The different portrayal of the causes and impacts of drug addiction in both literary works is caused by the different settings of places of each literary work. The setting of time and place isn't only about a certain place but also about the culture of the people in that place. In *Requiem for a Dream* which sets in Bronx, New York, United States, the people seem to be individualistic. This can be seen in the relationship between Harry and his mother. The relationship between Harry and his mother is not really close. They tend to keep their problems to themselves, which results in nothing but misery for both of them. This individualistic culture results in Harry being arrested by the police and getting his arm amputated. Had Harry and his mother been close, this might not happen because someone should rely on their family.

On the other hand, in *Trainspotting*, which sets in Edinburgh, Scotland, the people are the opposite of Americans. They seem to be sociable and know one another. This can be seen from how in the novel, it is described that they often go to the pub to drink together regardless of their age. In *Trainspotting*, Mark Renton has a good relationship with his family, who help him get sober multiple times. Mark's family seems to be involved in Mark's life. They accompany him when he gets called by the court because he is caught stealing and help him quit drugs. In *Requiem for a Dream*, nobody cares about the drug addicts and jobless people on the streets. When Harry got arrested, instead of being rehabilitated, he was put in jail, whereas, in *Trainspotting*, the government takes care of the junkies by providing them with rehabilitation programs. These cultural differences may be the reason why the two main characters' stories end differently. Harry's story ends tragically, whereas, in Mark's story, there is still hope for him to change.

REFERENCES

- [1] NIDA, 2018, July 20. [online]. *Drugs, Brains, and Behavior: The Science of Addiction*. Available: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction> [Accessed: January 2, 2020].
- [2] Lessa, Nicholas R. and Sara Dulaney Gilbert. 2009. *Living with Alcoholism and Drug Addiction*. New York: Checkmark Books.
- [3] Goode, Erich. 1988. *Drugs in American Society 3rd Edition*. United States: McGraw-Hill
- [4] Whitesell M, Bachand A, Peel J, Brown M. *Familial, social, and individual factors contributing to risk for adolescent substance use. Journal of Addiction*. <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jad/2013/579310/>. Published 2013. [Accessed June 4, 2022].
- [5] Ray, Oakley and Charles Ksir. 2004. *Drugs, Society, and Human Behavior, Tenth Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [6] CNN, 2013, November 26. [online]. *1 in 6 unemployed are substance abusers*. Retrieved from <https://money.cnn.com/2013/11/26/news/economy/drugs-unemployed/index.html> [Accessed: February 3, 2020].
- [7] Hancock.B, Ockleford, and Windridge.K. 2009. *An Introduction Qualitative Research*. Birmingham: NIHR RDS