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The manifestation of death as seen in Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*: A psychological approach

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ABSTRACT

When Breath Becomes Air was written by Paul Kalanithi. Death is the major thing discussed in the novel. This research investigated the manifestation of death in the novel *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. Perspective and attitude are the manifestation of death. It gives an impact on the main character's life. The research proves that someone who is dying will experience a change of feeling and develop two attitudes (positive and negative). Negative attitudes include kind's fear of death, and the positive attitudes are about what makes life worth living in spite of suffering and death anxiety.



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1. Introduction

In this life, there are cycles of life that absolutely happen to us; we were born, then we live; and death finishes our journey. Moreover, death has been fearful for most people in this world. Among the most frequently discussed subjects in literary analysis death becomes one of the outstanding topics in the writing of modern poets, dramatists, and novelists (Alsudairy, 2018: 75). One of literary works that put death as the major topic in its storyline is *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. Besides, the novel is interesting because it is the real-life story of the author.

The novel begins with the main character, Kalanithi, diagnosed with a terminal illness, which is lung cancer. While he lies dying, he inhabits a particular perspective and attitude toward death. He always thinks about life, whether it is worth living before the face of death. The conflict arises when the main character tries to figure out what to do with his life. The attitude toward death is common in psychological study. According to Subhan (2015: 53), psychology approach refers to the study of literary works using the science of psychology. It is to help the readers understand, explain, interpret, or illuminate the psychological aspects (of the author, of the character, of the society) implied in the work under study.

1.1 The Manifestation of Death

Death is inevitable; it comes to each human in turn (Natasha, 2014: 259). In a psychological study, death emphasizes the attitude on how people accept mortality in life. The attitude gives a sense of order and control; allowing them to shape their worldly perception and identity, give people a sense of order and control and help them build their world perception and their identity (Braun, Gordon & Uzieli, 2010: E43).

It shows the attitude of an individual in experiencing mortality; each human has different perception and attitude. Personal meaning of death is related to objective death. It generates a

consequence to an individual's life, which can be positive or negative. It can be relaxing or emotionally problematic (Cicirelli, 1998: 714).

1) ⁴ Negative Attitudes

Negative defensive life focuses on anxiety, terror and the unconsciousness (Wong & Tomer, 2011: 101). In the book *Psychology Death, Dying and Bereavement* Schulz (1978: 19-20) mentions several kinds of fear of death: fear of physical suffering, fear of physical humiliation, interruption of goals, impact on survivors, fear of punishment, fear of not being, and fear of the death of others.

2) ⁴ Positive Attitudes

The positive orientation focuses on growth, authenticity, and meanings. It means that besides the feeling of fear and anxiety, an individual has a hope to live in a good or positive thought or action. However, it depends on the influence of others around the individual. Therefore, a positive attitude is a willingness to feel the comfort or submission to mortality (Wong & Tomer, 2011: 101-102).

Furthermore, in ⁵ site of the negative and positive attitudes, there are five-stages of dying of death. Those are (1) denial and isolation, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression, and (5) acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1970). The five stages describe the changes of feeling of the main character, the grief upon the fate of his life. In one of the stages, it is possible that an individual will experience a severe illness.

2. Research Method

The research is categorized into library research, consisting of the primary data and secondary data. The primary data is the novel entitled *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, while the secondary includes books, journals, e-books, articles, as well as internet sources. The subject of the research is the work. The data were collected through several steps: visiting libraries, reading the sources, writing the data, and categorizing the data.

In analyzing the manifestation of death in the novel, the researcher uses psychological approach. Based on the view of researchers, a psychological study has an extensive knowledge to be used as a theoretical approach.

3. Findings and Discussion

The research is intended to discuss the manifestation of death found in the novel *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, observed psychologically. It begins with the main character's perspective of death and his negative and positive attitudes towards death.

Kalanithi, the main character, always has an ambition to find the meaning of life. He studies in English Department and decides to continue to take the medical department as part of his willingness to seek the meaning of life. After a long journey to achieve his career in neurosurgery, Kalanithi hears that his friend Jeff committed suicide. Jeff is Kalanithi's friend at the hospital he is working, which is also a doctor. Jeff gives up his life because he thinks he fails the job; sometimes he makes wrong diagnoses. In this case, Kalanithi builds his perception of death, shown in the following quotation.

"I wished I could have told Jeff what I had come to understand about life, and our chosen way of life, if only to hear his wise, clever counsel. Death comes for all of us. For us, for our patient: it is our fate as living, breathing, metabolizing organism. Most lives are lived with passivity toward death—it's something that happens to you and those around you." (Kalanithi, 2016: 114)

The quotation suggests that death happens to all human beings in the world. There is no exception and no one can avoid death. Kalanithi knows that fighting death is a losing battle and that death always wins upon the war with humans. If only he could speak to Jeff about it, Kalanithi thought Jeff would not commit suicide. Death is a form of struggle to gain the meaning of life. It is true that death comes at an uncertain time. It is not easy to understand the concept of mortality.

Various turmoil of life goes through despite the pain and suffering. We can relate to death by looking for the life we are living in. Death is manifested in negative and positive attitudes.

3.1. Negative Attitudes

Kalanithi develops a negative attitude when he is dying of cancer. He is diagnosed as having lung cancer when he is only 36 years old. It shocks him, for it never comes to his mind during his work at the hospital. The news brings negative effects on his attitude. Fear, worries, and all negative thoughts come to his mind, causing him to feel useless in the world. It is evident in the following except.

“My life had been building potential, potential that would now go unrealized. I had planned to do so close. I was physically debilitated, my imagined future and my personal identity collapsed, and I faced the same existential quandaries my patients faced. The lung cancer diagnosis was confirmed. My carefully planned and hard-won future no longer exist.” (Kalanithi, 2016: 120)

Here, it is clear that terminal cancer leads Kalanithi to think about his life as meaningless and aimless. He knows that his whole life has been set up by the Almighty. Even so, he builds his career and dedicates his life for several years to a neurosurgeon. And the illness buries him in pain. His future vanishes because of the situation, interrupting his goals. The pain has blocked his way in the pursuit of a dream. This way, he develops the fear of not being. He feels the same pain as his patients under his treatment. His life gets worse.

Apart from the negative attitude, death has in Kalanithi the positive attitude.

3.2. Positive Attitudes

According to Wong & Tomer (2012: 103), individuals with positive orientation are willing to confront any crisis, allowing them to create opportunities to grow. They have the tendency to take difficult task and risk their life to death to achieve their life goals. In this case, Kalanithi reaches a point where he wants to return to his life as a neurosurgeon and finds something worth to live the rest of his life. It can be seen in the quotation below.

“That morning, I made a decision: I would push myself to return to OR, Why? Because I could. Because that’s who I was. Because I would have to learn to live in a different way, seeing death as an imposing itinerant visitor but knowing that even if I’m dying, until I actually die, I am still living.” (Kalanithi, 2016: 149-150)

In the quotation, we can see another side of the main character. He releases his ambition for the future when he knows he is dying. He refuses to give up his ambition. He believes that he has made the right decision to get back to his work; he becomes optimistic. If there is a hope, we have to struggle to reach our dream. Kalanithi changes the feeling of fear and anxiety to comfort and enthusiasm. He focuses on the values of his life.

Those are things that prove the main character, Kalanithi, of the novel *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. He manifested death with negative and positive attitudes toward death. He also describes the perspective about death as long as he is through his life.

4. Conclusion

From the theory and discussion, it can be concluded that death gives us meaning of life and provides for what our life would be through. In this novel, the manifestation of death are negative and positive attitudes. This attitude toward death through the main character, Kalanithi. The negative attitudes from the story are fear of not being, interruption of goals and hopelessness and the positive attitudes are never give up and work hard to reach his dream with back as neurosurgeon even facing death and find the personal identity after Kalanithi felt of not being. The positive attitudes in this story appear to balance the negative attitudes that happen to Kalanithi where it could be life-shattered.

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