

HOW THE MAIN CHARACTER SEARCHES FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE IN SARAH PINBOROUGH'S *THE LANGUAGE OF DYING*

Sarah Christina

1611700066

Department of English Literature

Faculty of Cultural Science

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

sarahcchrstn@gmail.com

Abstract. This study deals with searches for the meaning of life experienced by the unnamed main character in Sarah Pinborough's *The Language of Dying*. Effort to pursue the meaning of human's life is called an essence as a human being. The writer is interested to analyze the book because it represents how human experiences an existential crisis which makes them to questioning what the meaning of their life is, and how human searches the meaning of their life. The objective of the study is to find out the meaning of the main character's life and how the main character searches for the meaning of her life. The writer uses qualitative research method for the research process, philosophical approach and Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of existentialism which states that in order to discover the meaning of life, humans are free to do anything once they were born to this world, but they have to be responsible to their own actions and decisions. From the research, the writer found that the main character searches for the meaning of life by choosing every decision in different situation throughout her life such as being married, got divorced and came back home, takes care of her dying father, and kills her father until she finally discovers the meaning of her life which represents the idea of atheistic existentialism.

Keywords: *existentialism, character, meaning of life, atheistic existentialism, existential crisis*

INTRODUCTION

Searching for meaning in life represents the essence of being human. According to existentialism by Hasbiansyah (2002: 254), lives have meaning, but only in the subjective way that they are considered to have meaning. This means that meaning of life depends on the decision that is made by the person. However, there are a lot of people lose their direction throughout their lives and live in an unclear purpose because different things happen in their lives. In the end, people are confused by their existence, which prompts them to ask questions like "what is the meaning of life?", "what is the purpose of human existence in the world?" that is known as existential crisis. According to Sartre (2015: 29), man is condemned to be free because he has not yet created himself. He is responsible for everything he does after he is released into the universe. It is strengthened by Webber (2009: 7) that explaining existentialism states that a freedom to choose what they want to be, a way to life, or how they enjoy their lives is the best way to find the meaning of life.

Search for the meaning of life has been an interesting topic in literary research and literary works. Several researches have been conducted in order to show the relation between the literary works and human's life. Debora, Tri Pramesti, and Linusia Marsih (2013) from Faculty of Humanities, 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya University in their research of *A Quest for Meaning of Life in Mitch Albom's The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, analyzed about how the main character, Eddie, learns the meaning of his life on earth after he died and lives in Heaven. Another research is Ambar Andayani's (2018) research journal entitled *Sartre's Existentialism in Herman Melville's Moby Dick* from 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya University.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how human searches for the meaning of life that is represented in a literary work entitled *The Language of Dying* (2009) by Sarah Pinborough. The novel more focus to tell a story about a woman who is nearly forty year old who takes care of her dying father because of lung cancer. Even though the book focuses on how she spends her days to take care of her dying father, the book also describes the obstacles she has experienced in her past life to be in the present situation. However, all of the events that she experienced in the past, the present moment, and even every decision she has made, do not make her know what the real meaning of her life is because she has got several components that lead her to the existential crisis. Furthermore, she starts thinking what the meaning of her life is which is also her existential crisis.

The writer uses the theory of atheistic existentialism particularly conducted by Jean-Paul Sartre and philosophical approach for the research. Referring to Kaufmann (1956: 292), the greatest idea of existentialism is "existence precedes essence", which means human first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and then defines themselves afterward. It is also stated by Sartre (2007: 23), in order to find the meaning of life, people are free since they are the one who create themselves, but they are still responsible for anything they do and their own existence too, and not determined by God.

The problem statement of the present study is mentioned as follows: How does the main character search for the meaning of life in Sarah Pinborough's *The Language of Dying*? The result of the study hopefully can give enrichment to the portrayal of human's life in literary works and the study can be useful for the other researchers in the future.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research uses qualitative method. According to Creswell (2009: 140), qualitative research requires an in-depth study of non-numeric results. The results of qualitative method

may be drawn easily from the data that is obtained from the quotations of the phrases, sentences, or dialogues taken from the novel. In addition, other references are taken from journals or books.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the book of *The Language of Dying*, it more focuses on how the unnamed main character takes care of her ill father. However, the current situation about her father who is really close with her since she was a kid makes her recall all the memories in the past until she finally in the present moment and all those past life she has experienced lead her to the process of the discovery of the meaning of her life. The father's illness forces her to contact her other siblings; Paul, Penny, Davey, and Simon who live separately after they are adults in order to make everything better and help her to overcome the tensions.

In this study, the writer analyzes how the main character searches for the meaning of life based on the atheistic existentialism theory which states that human can pursue their meaning of life through their responsible actions and decisions. The main character in *The Language of Dying* (2009) tries to search the meaning of life by deciding every choice through different situations that happened in her life and faces different aspects of existential crisis that slowly leads her to the discovery of the meaning of her life.

1. Being Engaged in a Relationship

The first step that the main character takes in order to find the meaning of her life is to be in a relationship with a man that she believes he is the one. The main character's relationship has started when she decided to go to London with her sister when she was in her twenties, Penny, to experience a new journey in her life because she also likes that city. Her decision to go to London with Penny in order to take opportunities to experience another journey as the beginning of the main character's adulthood shows the idea of the existentialism. Even though the main character does think that she is not as pretty as Penny, but she has managed to find a man that is described as a person with wide smile, twinkle eyes, white teeth, and dark haired that she has met in a bar in London when she was going with Penny.

The main character fell in love with the man at first sight and they started to be in a relationship after they met in the bar. They even decided to live together in within two months and got married as the proof of the man's unending love to her. The proof of this can be described as follows:

“I fall in love in a snap. ... Within two months we are living in his large house in Notting Hill. I have a golden ring on my finger which proves his promise of unending love. I am the fairy-tale princess and have my fairy-tale ending. And all in that snap.” (Pinborough, 2009:69)

At that moment, the main character feels like she finally happy and live as a princess who found her true love in a fairy-tale with a happy life as a couple as if they were meant to be together because she was twenty and very young at that moment. Her decisions to find her love, to live together, and to get married are based on the Sartre's theory that human is free to do anything in their life.

However, beautiful things that she experienced when she first met him and the beginning of their relationship did not last any longer. A year or so after they got married, she started to be trapped in domestic violence. Her husband started to be violent toward her, schedules her day, control everything she does, and even get mad just from a simple thing. She got the symptoms of her malignancy marriage that also started to lead her to the period of existential crisis when her husband called the agency where she works and told them that she will not coming back to work after he saw her laughing with her male colleague. He got very angry and even did worse things physically and mentally toward his wife. However, she forgave him and embraced him as she told her husband that everything will be alright and she does not care about work, but him. Her attitude that shows how she forgave her husband after all the abuses she has got is the form of her responsibility of her previous decision; to get married with a man she has just met in a short period of time.

Then, the things change again when she figured out that she was pregnant. Because of her pregnancy, she once again thought that she can understand her meaning of life and everything will change to be better. The proof of this can be described as follows:

“I relaxed slightly. Maybe things will be better when there are three of us. For the first time in a long time I feel the fizz of excitement. In fact, it's the first time in a long time that I've felt anything at all.

I sleep with a hand on my belly and when we go to the doctor, we go together. All smiles.” (Pinborough, 2009:76)

The quotation above expresses how she and her husband were happy and excited about her pregnancy. She wished that her pregnancy was the beginning of a new chapter of their marriage that could be better than before. She once felt being loved again by her husband after they were expecting a child.

2. Got Divorced and Came Back Home

After the main character was happy because she knew that she got pregnant, she started to hope that everything will be better in the future. According to the explanation about existentialism in the second chapter, humans are free to decide everything in their life. So the main character decided to stay with her husband and tried to believe that everything is going to be better soon, especially with her pregnancy. However, it did not turn out the way she expected. When she was seven months pregnant, she had to give birth to her baby, but she's already dead because her husband slammed his knee into her chest while he was drunk that made her fell off the stairs and made her miscarried. The doctor even told her that there will be no more babies. She felt stupid for still wanting to believe in fairy-tale happy endings, when she knows that they do not exist.

Because of that incident, she began to realize that her life with him was nothing close to fairy-tale that she has been thinking about. After she gave birth to her dead baby, she told her husband that it was the end of their relationship.

He comes to see me and realizes that it's all over. He is afraid, which surprises me. It diminishes him and I hate that someone so small has caused all this pain.

"I want a divorce," I hear myself saying. (Pinborough, 2009:79)

The quotation above describes another decision she has made in order to lead her to get the meaning of life was she decided to divorce him and to be apart with him that is based on Sartre's theory of existentialism. Her losses of everything at that moment lead her into the feeling of deep despair. In addition, she has to be responsible and accept the fact that she lost her baby because of her previous decision when she decided to not leave him although she has experienced domestic violence from her husband as one of the points of existentialism by Sartre.

After she has faced the tragic truth about her failed marriage and even lost her baby because of her own decision, she has finally bought her father's house in Surrey and came back home after a couple of months of recovery. The proof of this can be described as follows:

"I go straight home and buy your house, ready to fade away in it, and so the new chapter begins. I go into the bedroom. I find the fairy tale book. It tears at my heart and I drift a little." (Pinborough, 2009:80)

The statement above expresses her decision to come back home. Her loss of relationship made her face another stage of existential crisis. However, her decision might lead her to discover new meaning of her life by making another journey.

3. Takes Care of Her Dying Father

After she bought her father's house and came back home, she starts living with her father since her other siblings do not live with their father. After few months they have been living together, her father was diagnosed with lung cancer because of his addiction to smoking. His cancer is getting worse within six months that it makes him dying. However, the main character takes care of her father really well, even though she also does not find it easy to bare. She tries her best to nurse her dying father alone at home.

I'm sitting by the window and from here I can see the small television table at the end of your bed with the video monitor on it. Downstairs, your sleeping image is showing to an empty room— only me here now and I'm here with you. (Pinborough, 2009:2)

Moreover, after she knows that her father is dying and does not have much time left, her siblings start going back one by one to their house to spend their last time with their father and also help her to take care of him. The first who arrives at their house is the second child who is also her sister, Penny. However, she thinks that Penny is a type of person who is easy to find the easiness in things, including handling grief situation at the moment, so she does not think Penny's existence in the house has any changes. On the other hand, the main character knows how hard it is for her and how her father takes such efforts into the performance.

At first, she has anxiety as she faces her denial period when she knows her father is dying. She wants to believe that her father is not the person who keeps sleeping and staying in the bed upstairs. She still believes that her dad could be recovered. Her attitude can be described as follows:

"I am wrong of course. You have so much more dying to do yet. You have to become so much less before you go. One week. Maybe a little less. The body fights, you know?" (Pinborough, 2009:36)

The quotation shows how she also feels guilt about her father's condition and because she cannot do anything about it except to be by his side. She takes care for her father not only in the beginning of his illness, but also way before it. When the doctor said that her father has around two months left, he himself did not afraid or worried which makes his daughter a little bit relieved because she does believe him. She even took her father to the chapel that her father wanted to be there in the future as if it is her father's bucket list.

We don't speak as we hunt out the office, our feet crunching on the gravel, disturbing the silence. ... "What do you think?" I ask, as if we are looking at a venue party. "I suppose it'll do," you say. "Seems pleasant enough." (Pinborough, 2009:43,45)

Her father knows for sure that death is natural; it is going to be happened. However, she can tell that her father was actually sad and his face looked exhausted. That makes her try very hard to hide how she actually feels when she was looking at the place in order to avoid hurting her father's feelings. She decides to give everything for him since she loves him. She is aware that time will take her father from her, but she wants to give the best memories in order to live the meaningful life for herself and does not regret anything in the future.

After the main character and her sister, Penny, lives together to take care of their father for a few days, they call the other siblings to come home. Nurses from the hospital also come regularly to check on his condition and even stay to watch over their father at night when he is so close to the time. However, the main character still always stays by her father's side to make sure that her father is alright and gets anything he needs.

“What is it, Dad?” I ask you. “Do you need something? Do you need the toilet?” ... I stand with my hands on my hips for a moment and watch you. Then I sponge your mouth a little. (Pinborough, 2009:96-97)

The quotation above expresses how she is always ready to take care of her father even in the middle of her sleep. She barely asks for any helps from other people, even her siblings, to take care of him. She fears that she might lose her father at any moment if she does not stay by his side.

In order to make the nurse thing easier, she decides to buy a baby monitor to monitor her father since her father is in the phase that is called terminal agitations; when her father's body is moving by its own like rising his arms and getting out of bed is because his body is shutting down as he slips further away from them. After they installed the baby monitor, the main character's eyes keep drifting away from the television to watch her father on the small screen. She cannot help to keep checking on him and stare how her father's body keeps moving by its own. The proof of this can be described as follows:

“And that becomes the pattern of the day. ... The pale green light makes me feel queasy, but I can't help but stare as your toes twitch and I know that any moment now you are going to start those strange jerky movements.” (Pinborough, 2009:115-116)

The quotation above expresses her worries about the father's condition because he keeps moving himself. The baby monitor surely makes everything easier, yet harder at the same time, especially when his father is in the terminal agitations. That routine makes her hard to sleep at night. Everything starts to get intense which makes her wide awake in her exhaustion.

4. Kills Her Father

The terminal agitations of her father have become worse which leads him into the next stage of dying. That condition starts to make her feel different thing. She knows that she hates those kinds of languages of dying that she does not really understand. However, one thing she knows that she realizes that everything changes again. Her father has gone where she cannot any longer to reach or vice versa. This situation gets more intense and more exhausting for her. All of the tensions she experiences at the moment make her stress and want to get rid of it. She also feels the tension is not only inside her, but also among her siblings who stay to help her take care of her father. She begins to do not feel any guilt and she hopes her father to die soon, so she will not feel exhausted anymore. The proof of this can be described as follows:

“As I bite into a spring roll I wish with a breaking heart that you’d just hurry up and die. I don’t feel any guilt. I know wishes don’t come true.” (Pinborough, 2009:115)

The quotation above expresses how she really wishes that her father would just die and everything is going to be done. All the exhaustion and guilt would end soon. However, she knows that she still wishes for that with such a breaking heart since deep in her heart, she knows that she does care for her father.

After she becomes calmer, she decides to be alone with her father again. So, she tells her sister, Penny, and her brother, Davey, to go home for a day or so to see another brother, Paul who went back home earlier than anybody else. She wants to be alone and she thinks they do not belong in the house, and she knows that actually they do not want to be there, which hurts her more. Unfortunately, her action leads her into deeper darkness in herself that makes her realize how lonely they are, she and her father.

As she acknowledges her situation that she is alive with tension, she starts discovering what the meaning of her life is. It starts when she sees and meets the “creature” that she has been waiting for years since the last time they met. She feels like she has been healed when she sees the creature. Her feeling of happiness because of the beast’s presence is because she was full with loneliness and helplessness.

After she sees the creature through the window, she stares to her father in the bed and smile. Then, she leans over him, kisses his head and leaves her lips there for a moment to savor his heat. She watches his slow breath which does not change since the last stage. Suddenly, she thinks about everything that will happen if she wants to do something to her father. She thinks about every possibility that will happen if other people such as her siblings

or the nurse find out. Furthermore, she decides to do the last thing that she will not regret it. Her attitude can be described as follows:

“... I say goodbye to your face and push the pillow down over it. I hope it doesn't hurt.

Your hands tremble slightly and then your back arches, and then nothing. It didn't take so very much for you to die, after all.” (Pinborough, 2009:129)

The quotation expresses how she decides to kill her father with her own hands. Her action to kill her father is based on Sartre's existentialism theory that human has freedom for their own actions that are not influenced by the society's norms. She does that after she sees the creature and she feels that the creature is waiting for her to follow it. After she stops the pain of her father, she runs outside to chase after the creature. She does feel hurt in her chest, but it does not slow her down to down the path to the gate. She feels free since there will be no dying father and languages of dying anymore.

Her last decision to kill her father before she follows the beast is also the form of her responsibility to finish her father's pain because she has decided to take care of him alone in the first place. She also does not want to leave her father alone without anyone besides him if she decides to follow the beast while her father is still alive and seriously ill. After she reaches the creature, she feels like she is alive. So, she decides to follow the beast and leaves everything behind including her died father and the house. She feels she has nothing to lose, regretless, fearless, and she gets her freedom in the end. In the end, she finds her new source of strength, meaning of her life and her freedom after several journeys throughout her life.

CONCLUSION

Meaning of life is the essence for being a human. It is human's responsibility to discover their meaning of life in order to understand their authenticity in the world. In *The Language of Dying*, the unnamed main character that was left by her own mother and has such a terrible childhood has been experiencing different stages throughout her life that leads her to questioning the meaning of her life when she is an adult. In addition, she decides to make right decisions when she has to face different moments throughout her life as she keeps her desire to meet the beast once again that she first met when she was a kid because she feels that she belongs to it.

Through this study, it can be concluded that every decision that she has been taken starting with got married with a man that she has just met in a bar in such a short period of time, got divorced because she was trapped in domestic violence that made her lost her baby

during her seven-month pregnancy, came back home, takes care of her dying father who is diagnosed with lung cancer, and the last is by killing her father slowly leads her to the discovery of the meaning of her life which is based on the theory of atheistic existentialism particularly conducted by Jean-Paul Sartre. The journey of the unnamed main character in *The Language of Dying* shows us that human can pursue the meaning of life by their own efforts through choices or decisions they make in different circumstances in life as long as they are responsible. It is possible because humans are free and create themselves once they were born into the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aldegheishem, H. (2015). Existentialism Staged: A Comparative Study between Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Kanafani's "The Hat and the Prophet". *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* , 295-301.
- Andayani, A. (2018). Sartre's Existentialism in Herman Melville's Moby Dick. *Anaphora: Journal of Language, Literary, and Cultural Studies. Vol. 1* , 23-37.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches, Third Edition*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.
- Debora, T. P. (2013). A Quest for Meaning of Life in Mitch Albom's The Five People You Meet in Heaven. *Paraphrase Vol.13* , 35-52.
- Hasbiansyah, O. (2002). The Search for Meaning of Life: Existentialism, Communication, and Islam. *Mediator* , 249-258.
- Kaufmann, W. (1956). *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: Meridian Books, Inc.
- Pinborough, S. (2009). *The Language of Dying*. New York: Quercus.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. USA: Yale University.
- Webber, J. (2009). *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York: Routledge.