



## Lia Overbrook's anorexia in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*

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**Abstract.** This study is about Lia Overbrook's Anorexia in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*. There is one problem statements for this study, that is How is Lia's anorexia described in *Wintergirls*? The aims of this study are to analyze Lia's anorexia. To conduct the study, the researcher uses psychological approach. This study uses descriptive qualitative method because the source of data comes from the utterances in the novel. Lia develops Anorexia Nervosa because of the pressure and societal expectations from her mother. Lia finds her solace in internet. She exposed with dangerous advice that further perpetuate the cycle of disordered eating. Lia experiences extreme weight loss because her obsession in weight loss and fuel her disordered behaviors, that is anorexia nervosa. Lia' preoccupation with food calories, and self-blame of her death friend develop her Anorexia Nervosa.

**Keywords:** Anorexia Nervosa, Disruption, Obsession

### INTRODUCTION

Psychological disorder has significantly raised in the recent years around the world. According to the World Health Organization (2021), one in every four persons may have mental or neurological illnesses at some time in their life. This reflects a considerable increase in the number of persons suffering from mental health problems throughout the world. No doubt that there has been a significant increase in the prevalence of psychological disorders recent years. The numerous people worldwide that affected by this could leads into several factors of psychological disorder to happen.

There are several factors contributing to the rise of psychological disorders worldwide. One of the significant factors is the increase in stress levels in modern society. Numerous individuals are struggling to deal with the rigors of daily life due to the stress of job, family, and societal expectations. This causes a rise in anxiety, sadness, and other mental health disorders. (Chen et al, 2018: 48-54). Social media additionally had a substantial influence on psychological well-being, with research indicating that excessive utilization may contribute to more experiences of isolation, despair, and anxiety. (Twenge et al, 2019: 15). Additionally, the rise of technology and social media has also been a factor to the increase in psychological disorders.

Psychological disorder, often known as a mental condition, is a behavioural or mental pattern that significantly impairs personal functioning or causes distress (Bolton, 2008:6). Both psychological disorders and various aspects of human behaviour and personality can exhibit a wide range of different classifications, like eating disorder. This disorder can be caused by a number of variables, including genetics, chemical imbalances in the brain, traumatic events, and environmental influences. Psychological disorders represent a broad range of mental health disorders marked by substantial behavioral, emotional, and cognitive difficulties. These disorders can vary greatly in their presentation and severity, and often categorized into different types based on their symptoms and underlying causes.

Eating disorders are a type of psychological disorder that involve disturbances in eating behavior and body image. These disorders are characterized by extreme preoccupation with weight, body shape, and food intake, and can cause significant physical and mental health problems. Eating disorders can have a significant impact on physical health and can cause a range of problems such as malnutrition, electrolyte imbalances, and gastrointestinal issues. These disorders can also cause significant mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and social isolation. Additionally, individuals with eating disorders may be at increased risk of suicide. One of eating disorders are anorexia nervosa.

Anorexia nervosa, or simply an eating disorder indeed a significant mental condition that affects many of those who are afflicted. This psychological disorder that can happen to every people around the world, and commonly found in western young women rather than men (Treasure et al, 2010:585) Anorexia nervosa is a weight-loss eating disorder. Anorexics often limit their calorie intake and the sorts of food they consume. Some patients with the illness also exercise obsessively, purge through vomiting and laxatives, and/or binge eat. It is reasonable to say that people with anorexia nervosa frequently have co-occurring psychological illnesses. Their intention like perfectionist, peer pressure, preoccupation with slenderness and beauty, gaining autonomy, identity conflicts, and the slippery slope of weight loss that patients faced various aspects that haunt them into the anorexia disorder.

The anorexia disorder issue is also depicted in the *Wintergirls* written by Laurie Halse Anderson in 2009. Lia Overbrook as the main character in the novel. She lives in a small town in upstate New York with her parents and younger stepsister, Emma. Her parents are divorced when she is young, and her father remarried a woman named Jennifer, who had a daughter of her own, Emma. Lia's relationship with her stepmother is strained, and she often feels like an outsider in her own family.

Her weight has fluctuated dramatically over time. She has been in and out of treatment centres and therapy, but she has never fully recovered. Lia's best friend, Cassie, also struggled with an eating disorder, and the two girls became increasingly competitive with each other over time. After a particularly intense argument, Lia speaking no more to Cassie, and their relationship ended on a bitter note.

Lia learns that Cassie has died, and she becomes consumed with guilt and grief over their fractured friendship. Lia's mental and physical health deteriorate as she tries to cope with Cassie's death, and she becomes increasingly isolated and obsessed with her weight and appearance. She limits her eating, monitors her weight and calorie count, and exercises in secret at night. Because of her disorder, she has been in and out of recovery hospitals twice. She tries to overcome anorexia, despair, and other mental illnesses. Lia spends the weeks coming up to Thanksgiving and Christmas attempting to come to grips with

Cassie's loss. Cassie called Lia several times the night before she died, thus Lia blames herself for her death.

The research problems in this article is How is Lia's anorexia described in *Wintergirls*. The main objective of the study in this research is to describe Lia's Anorexia Nervosa in *Wintergirls*. This research uses anorexia nervosa theory from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013: 338-349). Anorexia nervosa is characterises by a distorted body image, Intense fear of gaining weight, Preoccupation with food and calories, Emotional distress and low self-esteem, Physical health complications, Social and interpersonal challenges. The physical and psychological symptoms of anorexia nervosa can be severe and long-lasting, impacting an individual's health, relationships, and overall quality of life.

The researcher's interest in conducting this study stems from a desire to deepen our understanding of anorexia disorder as portrayed in the character of Lia Overbrook. Lia's relentless pursuit of extreme weight loss methods captures the attention of the researcher, prompting further examination of her anorexic behaviour. Anorexia is a complex psychological disorder, and the researcher is particularly intrigued by its portrayal in the novel *Wintergirls*. The researcher explores Lia Overbrook's anorexia depiction in the novel, thereby providing valuable insights for the researcher's findings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Some researchers have conducted the research on *Wintergirls* novel. The first study conducted by Silvy Yosviana Meliala (2019) entitled "A Psychoanalysis of Anorexia Nervosa as Portrayed in Laurie Halse Anderson's Novel *Wintergirls*". There are two objectives in this study, to analyze the portrayal of Lia Overbrook's Anorexia Nervosa using psychoanalysis and to analyze how Lia Overbrook overcomes her anorexic behavior. This study analyzes the portrayal Lia's anorexia nervosa using Hilde Bruch's theory and theory from DSM-IV. The researcher uses descriptive-qualitative method to show Lia Overbrook's Anorexia Nervosa portrayal. This study discussed about how Lia Overbrook got her Anorexia Nervosa because of her early traumatic experience of her parent's divorce. As the result, she has eating disorder (anorexia), anxiety, hallucination, and does self-harming. The researcher also analyzes how Lia Overbrook overcame her anorexic and self-harming behavior.

The second study conducted by Clara Febrianna (2021) entitled "Lia's and Cassie's Body Image in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*". The study focuses on the portrayal, causes, and effects of the negative body image in Lia Overbrook and Cassandra Jane Parrish (Cassie). The analysis uses psychology of literature to connect literary work with psychological matters, which is the psychological condition of Lia and Cassie. The analysis also using three supportive theories, which are: Sarah Grogan' theory of body image, Laura H.Choate's theory and DSM-V theory. The researcher uses descriptive qualitative to analyze the depiction of negative body image in Lia and Cassie that is shown as an anorexia disorder. The thesis uses Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Wintergirls* as data source that contains negative body image portrayal and anorexia nervosa. The negative body image in Lia and Cassie develops because of the environment they are currently living. The negative environment they are living makes them develop anorexia disorder which are, anorexia nervosa (Lia) and bulimia nervosa (Cassie).

From the previous studies before, there are similarities between the two previous studies and the researcher's thesis. The first and the second previous study uses Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Wintergirls* as data source, as well as the researcher conducts this study.

The Differences between the two previous studies and the researcher's thesis are in the objectives of the study. In the previous study from Meliala (2019), the objectives of the study are to analyze the portrayal of Lia Overbrook's Anorexia Nervosa using psychoanalysis and how Lia Overbrook overcomes her anorexic behavior. Febrianna's (2021) objectives focuses on the portrayal, causes, and effects of the negative body image in Lia Overbrook and Cassandra Jane Parrish (Cassie). Meanwhile the researcher of this study objective describes what Lia feels while she experiencing Anorexia Nervosa in Wintergirls. The researcher explains the cause and effects of Anorexia Nervosa in Wintergirls main character, Lia Overbrook.

The Application of theories. In Meliala (2019) uses Hilde Bruch's psychoanalysis theory that analyze the connection of literary work with Anorexia Nervosa and DSM-IV theory from American Psychiatric Association to analyze how Lia Overbrook overcomes her anorexic behavior. Febrianna (2021) uses Sarah Grogan' theory of body image and Laura H.Choate's theory to analyze the anorexic behavior as the negative body image. Meanwhile in this study the researcher use Stefan Zipfel's Theory that discuss about the aetiology, assessment, and treatment for anorexia sufferer and DSM-V theory to describe the anorexia nervosa.

Theoretical Framework of the study uses anorexia nervosa theory from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013: 338-349). Anorexia nervosa is characterized by a distorted body image, Intense fear of gaining weight, Preoccupation with food and calories, Emotional distress and low self-esteem, Physical health complications, Social and interpersonal challenges. The physical and psychological symptoms of anorexia nervosa can be severe and long-lasting, impacting an individual's health, relationships, and overall quality of life.

## **METHOD**

This research uses qualitative research using descriptive methods. Qualitative research design is a methodological approach to conducting research that seeks to understand complex human phenomena in a non-numerical manner. It involves collecting and analyzing data from sources such as interviews, observations, and documents to gain an in-depth understanding of the social or cultural context of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013:22). In simple terms, qualitative research design is a way of studying social phenomena that cannot be measured or quantified using numerical data. It seeks to understand the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals within a particular context, rather than attempting to generalize findings to a larger population. This type of research design can provide valuable insights into the nuances of human behavior and can be particularly useful in exploring topics such as culture, identity, and social relationships. This method is relevant for the researcher because it serves as a guideline for conducting the same field of research.

As the study concerns with anorexia nervosa, extrinsic literary approach is used. It is a critical method used to analyze a literary text by considering external factors such as historical context, authorial background, and socio-political influences. It examines how these external factors shape the meaning and interpretation of a literary work. In other words, the extrinsic approach to literary analysis is concerned in understanding how external factors shape the meaning of a literary text.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher uses the psychological approach. According to Zunshine (2017:36) psychological approach aims to understand, explain, and predict human behavior, emotions, and mental processes. It seeks to uncover the underlying psychological mechanisms and factors that contribute to human thoughts, feelings, and actions. The psychological approach aims to provide insights into the complexities of human psychology and enhance our understanding of individuals and their interactions with the environment. The researcher applies the psychological approach to this study as the study focuses on the causes and effects of anorexia nervosa in Lia Overbrook, the main character of *Wintergirls*.

The data source of the research comes from novel *Wintergirls* written by Laurie Halse Anderson. The data are sentences that characterize the causes and effects of the anorexia nervosa in the main character, Lia Overbrook. The data are collected from the thoughts and behavior of the main character, Lia Overbrook through the sentences in novel written by author. The primary data are supported by the secondary source deriving from internet and related journals about anorexia disorder in the literary works.

The researcher collects the data in novel *Wintergirls* to acquire the related data about anorexia nervosa in main character. The data collection of this research is by reading the novel, *Wintergirls* completely. After the researcher reads the novel from beginning to the end of the story, the writer collects the data from every chapter of the novel by taking note the specific characteristics of anorexia disorder suffered by Lia Overbrook, the main character of the *Wintergirls*. The acquired data are categorized by using the theory from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013: 338-349). The researcher himself is the instrument of the study. There are no interviews or questionnaire in the study because the data collected through the novel.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Lia Overbrook is the main protagonist in the novel *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson. She is a high school student who struggles with anorexia nervosa, a life-threatening eating disorder. Lia is described as a deeply troubled young woman, haunted by her own insecurities and haunted by the death of her best friend, Cassie. She embodies a strong sense of self-destructive behavior, engaging in extreme dieting, calorie counting, and self-starvation. Lia's disorder is driven by her obsessive desire for control, as she sees her weight and body as a measure of her self-worth.

Experiencing anorexia nervosa can be a complex and challenging experience for Lia. People with anorexia nervosa often have a distorted perception of their body size and shape. They may see themselves as overweight or larger than they actually are, even when they are significantly underweight. This distorted body image can contribute to create a misperception about their appearance. The portrayal of anorexia nervosa in Lia Overbrook can be seen in the following quotation: "Yellow bubbles of fat are bloating under my skin. I am starting to look disgusting again, weak." (Anderson, 2009:102).

From the quotation above, Lia sees her body as expanding or becoming distorted, which triggers feelings of distress and dissatisfaction. Lia's is hyper-focused on her physical appearance and weight. She also has a strong sense of self-revulsion through the description of herself as "disgusting". She perceives her body as unattractive or repulsive, likely due to the standards she has set for herself. This contributes to her low self-esteem and fuels her ongoing battle with her eating disorder.

Lia's Anorexia Nervosa has become her behavior in her every day. One significant behavior that characterizes her struggle is the constant need to restrict her strong cravings. These cravings, which may arise from genuine hunger or desires for certain foods, become a source of internal conflict for Lia. Despite the natural inclination to nourish her body, her eating disorder drives her to deny herself the satisfaction of indulging in these cravings. "I could eat the entire box I probably won't even fill the bowl. "My stomach's upset." (Anderson, 2009:5). The following quotation shows Lia's inner thoughts about her desire to eat the entire box of cereal, suggesting a strong craving or temptation. However, she quickly dismisses this idea by stating that it probably won't even fill the bowl. This indicates a distorted perception of her own hunger and satiety cues, as well as a tendency to underestimate her food needs.

Following that thought, Lia mentions that her stomach is upset. It might indicate a physical discomfort she experiences when thinking about eating or consuming food. Alternatively, it could also represent a psychological or emotional discomfort associated with eating, potentially stemming from constantly fear of gaining weight and searching for reasons to restrict her food intake and minimize her volume of food. The combination of desiring to eat a significant amount of food while simultaneously feeling that it won't satisfy her and experiencing an upset stomach reflects the complex relationship Lia has with food. It suggests a disconnection between her cravings and her ability to fulfill them, as well as an internal struggle regarding her body and food intake.

Lia's anorexic behavior not only manifests in her restrictive eating habits but also significantly impacts her preoccupation with foods and calories. Her mind becomes consumed by thoughts revolving around what she can and cannot eat, constantly calculating the caloric content of various foods. Every meal becomes a meticulous process of scrutiny, as Lia meticulously analyzes ingredient lists and portion sizes, aiming to minimize her calorie intake. This preoccupation infiltrates her thoughts throughout the day, making it difficult for her to focus on anything else. "Because I can't let myself want them because I don't need a muffin (410), I don't want an orange (75) or toast (87), and waffles (180) make me gag." (Anderson, 2009:5)

The quotation above shows that Lia expresses her thoughts and struggles related to food and her eating disorder. She mentions specific food items and her corresponding calorie counts, indicating a preoccupation with controlling her intake. Lia resists her wanting or needing certain foods, associating negative feelings with her, such as the idea of waffles making her gag. Lia also develop her own restrictive eating pattern. Lia's new plan reveals the extent to which her anorexia governs her thoughts and behaviors, showcasing the dangerous and restrictive nature of her mindset. The daily calories of Lia, the anorexia nervosa sufferer far below than normal people. She develops plans to maximize their calorie limit below than other normal person.

"New rules:

1. 800 calories a day, max. 500 preferred.
2. A day starts at dinner. If they make me eat with them, stuff in enough to keep them off my back. Restrict during the next day to make up for it.
3. If no breakfast, take the bus to school.
  - 3a. Better. walk.
  - 3b. Best. don't go.
4. Restart exercise program..." (Anderson, 2009:103)

Lia outlines a new set of rules and guidelines that reflect her anorexia nervosa. These rules demonstrate her commitment to restricting her calorie intake, controlling her eating habits, and intensifying her exercise regimen. The first rule sets a maximum limit of 800 calories per day, with a preferred goal of 500 calories. This indicates Lia's determination to severely limit her food intake, reflecting her preoccupation with achieving a low body weight. Lia establishes a specific framework for her daily routine, with the day starting at dinner. If she is compelled to eat with others, she plans to consume enough food to appease them and avoid scrutiny. However, she compensates for this by restricting her food intake the following day, likely to compensate for any perceived overconsumption. Lia offers herself two options regarding breakfast. Option 3a suggests that if she decides to have breakfast, she will walk to school instead of taking the bus, presumably to burn additional calories. Option 3b presents the idea of skipping school altogether, indicating that she sees the avoidance of food and social interactions as a preferable alternative. The final rule signifies Lia's intention to restart her exercise program, emphasizing her focus on physical activity as a means of burning calories and maintaining control over her body. These rules demonstrate Lia's rigid and obsessive thinking patterns, as she meticulously plans her daily routine around food and exercise. They also highlight her distorted perception of control and the lengths she is willing to go to maintain her disordered eating habits.

The negative self-talk expressed by Lia in *Wintergirls* portrays her internal struggles with self-esteem, self-worth, and self-acceptance. Lia's negative self-talk not only reveals the destructive impact of her eating disorder but also sheds light on the broader expectations that contribute to her internal struggles. It underscores the profound psychological and emotional toll that her battle with anorexia nervosa takes on her overall well-being. "...stupid/ugly/stupid/bitch/stupid/fat/stupid/baby/stupid/loser/stupid/lost:." (Anderson, 2009:60). This quotation shows about Lia's thoughts reflect a pattern of negative self-talk and self-deprecating language. It reveals an emotional self-perception and a deep sense of self-criticism and self-hatred.

The negative self-labeling from the quotation above reinforces her perception of being inadequate, unintelligent, or lacking in some way. Lia's negative self-image and the harsh judgment she places upon herself. It indicates that she views herself as unattractive, unworthy, weak, and incapable, fueling her self-esteem issues and emotional distress. The repetitive nature of these negative descriptors emphasizes the intensity of Lia's self-criticism. It suggests that she is trapped in a cycle of self-deprecation, unable to break free from the negative thoughts and beliefs that plague her.

This pattern of negative self-talk and self-deprecating language indicates a deep-seated struggle with low self-esteem, self-worth, and body image issues. It suggests that Lia's perception of herself is heavily distorted and that she holds herself to impossibly high standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-blame. Overall, the negative self-talk expressed by Lia in the quotation above portrays her internal struggles with self-esteem, self-worth, and self-acceptance. It highlights the detrimental impact of her negative self-perception on her emotional well-being and emphasizes the need for support and intervention to help her challenge and overcome these negative thought patterns.

Lia's anorexia nervosa compels her to pursue drastic weight loss, as evidenced by her regular weigh-ins on the scale, which reveals a concerning measurement of 89 pounds. This particular number holds negative connotations for Lia, intensifying her discontentment with her body and driving her towards compulsive behaviors aimed at achieving further weight reduction. The dissatisfaction she experiences becomes a

catalyst for her relentless pursuit of extreme weight loss, leading to a cycle of restrictive eating, excessive exercise, and the gradual depletion of her body mass. This can be seen from the quotation "I could say I'm excited, but that would be a lie. The number doesn't matter. If I got down to 070.00, I'd want 065.00... The only number that would ever be enough is 0. Zero pounds, zero life, size zero. double-zero, zero point. Zero in tennis is love. I finally get it." (Anderson, 2009:220)

From the quotation above, Lia's thoughts reveal her obsessive fixation on numbers, specifically related to her weight. It showcases the distorted thinking patterns and the unattainable standards she sets for herself. Lia dismisses the significance of any particular number, suggesting that no matter how low her weight goes, it would never be enough. She mentions that if she were to reach a weight of 070.00, she would then desire 065.00, indicating a perpetual dissatisfaction with her body and a constant desire to achieve an even lower weight.

She expresses the belief that the only number that would satisfy her is zero. This zero represents an extreme and unattainable goal—zero pounds, zero life, and size zero. Lia's thoughts reveal her longing for complete emptiness, associating it with a sense of achievement and perfection. Lia's remark suggests that she finally understands the appeal of striving for nothingness, as if reaching zero weight would bring her a sense of fulfillment or completeness. This aligns with DSM-V (APA, 2013: 338-349) as a one of physical health complications of an anorexia nervosa, that is extreme weight loss.

Lia's battle with anorexia nervosa not only takes a toll on her physical and mental well-being but also significantly strains her relationships with both family and friends. The destructive nature of her eating disorder permeates her interactions, causing rifts and challenges that impact her social connections. Lia's family bears witness to the distressing effects of her anorexia, leading to strained dynamics as they grapple with feelings of helplessness and concern. The constant worry for her health and the inability to fully comprehend her internal struggles create tension within familial bonds. "I hate it when you talk like a textbook." She leans forward. "I hate it when you starve yourself. I hate it when you cut open your skin, and I hate it when you push us away." (Anderson, 2009:235) The quotation above is the conversation between Lia and her mother. It reveals a tense and emotionally charged exchange regarding Lia's behaviors and struggles. Each of them expresses their frustrations and concerns, reflecting the difficult dynamics in their relationship. Lia's mother starts by expressing her dislike for Lia's way of speaking, referring to it as talking "like a textbook." This implies a desire from her mother for more open and heartfelt communication, wanting Lia to express her feelings more authentically.

In response, Lia's mother leans forward and expresses her own frustrations and emotions. She mentions hating it when Lia starves herself, cuts her skin, and pushes them away. These statements highlight the destructive behaviors that Lia engages in as part of her struggles with her mental health, particularly her eating disorder and self-harm. Lia's mother's strong emotions demonstrate her deep concern and anguish over her daughter's well-being. Her words reflect the pain and helplessness she feels witnessing Lia's harmful behaviors and the strain it puts on their relationship. Overall, the conversation highlights the challenging nature of Lia's struggles and their impact on her relationship with her mother. It reveals the disconnect between their communication styles and the intense emotions that both parties experience. It underscores the need for understanding, empathy, and support in navigating the complexities of Lia's mental health challenges and fostering a healthier and more effective mode of communication.



## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the previous chapter, there are several main points that can be taken from Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* that characterize Lia Overbrook. Lia's anorexia nervosa causes an incorrect perception of her physical size and shape. Lia's anorexic behavior is manifested not only in her restrictive eating habits, but also in her concern with foods and calories. This fixation pervades her thoughts all day, making it impossible for her to concentrate on anything else. Lia's fight with anorexia nervosa not only affects her physical and emotional health, but it also stresses her relationships with family and friends. Her eating disorder's destructive character pervades her interactions, generating rifts and problems that impair her social connections.

The researcher finds that Lia's anorexia nervosa creates an obsession to pursuing weight loss, limiting food intake, calories, and engaging in excessive exercise. Her extreme behavior nearly causes her demise. When she comes close to death, she realizes that she has crossed a line. This moment becomes a turning point in her life. Lia begins to recognize and acknowledge that her disordered eating habits and obsession with weight are problematic. She confronts the reality of her condition and acknowledges that she needs help. Lia's self-awareness enables her to make conscious decisions and take responsibility for her recovery. She successfully overcomes her anorexia disorder and spends ten days in the hospital for her rehabilitation. Following her recovery, she begins attending therapy sessions, which offer her a secure environment to delve into her emotions, traumas, and the root causes underlying her anorexia. The support she receives from her family, particularly her stepsister Emma, and her newfound friend Elijah, allows Lia to create meaningful connections and friendships with individuals who comprehend and empathize with her challenges.

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