Gaspery-Jacques Roberts' Anxiety in Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility*

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Abstract. This study is entitled "Gaspery-Jacques Roberts' Anxiety in Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility*". The objective of this research is to examine the anxiety experienced by Gaspery-Jacques Roberts, the main character of the novel. It uses a qualitative descriptive method and a psychological approach to literature, applying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as the framework. This study aims to identify the causes of Gaspery's anxiety, examine its effects on his character development, and portray how he copes with it throughout the story. The results show that Gaspery's anxiety is caused by helplessness over the loss of his mother and his failed marriage, the danger-situation of investigating a reality-threatening anomaly, the loss of important people such as Talia, and the ego's fear of the super-ego produced by breaking the protocol of the Time Institute. These causes affect his feeling, thinking, and acting, moving him from emotional numbness toward calmness and longing for connection, from panic toward moral clarity and philosophical acceptance, and from passive withdrawal toward decisive action. There are several ways Gaspery copes with his anxiety, namely avoidance, reasoning, action, and acceptance. From the results of this study, the findings indicate that Gaspery successfully transforms the anxiety that has shaped his life into a force that leads him toward moral growth, culminating in his quiet acceptance of both his choices and the uncertain nature of his reality.

Keywords: Anxiety, Causes, Effects, Coping, Psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of changes that people cannot always predict, and the way a person handles them is closely tied to their ability to regulate emotion and find adaptive coping (Honan et al., 2023: 2527). Among the emotional responses that uncertainty produces, anxiety is one of the most common. Anxiety is now widely understood as a response to uncertainty rather than to a clear and present danger; it grows from things that are unknown or have not yet happened (Brown et al., 2023: 546; Ostafin et al., 2022: 379). Because the mind cannot solve this uncertainty with logic alone, it often responds with avoidance and ongoing stress (Wiese et al., 2023: 138), and if left unaddressed, anxiety can affect a person's quality of life for years (Wilmer et al., 2021: 77).

Anxiety is not only found in real life; it is also a recurring subject in literature, where fiction allows writers to show what is happening inside a person in a way that feels real to readers (Denham, 2024: 1). Many recent studies have used Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory to analyse the id, ego, and super-ego of literary characters such as Lily Bloom (Wati & Tawami, 2024: 1), Kat Stratford (Loway & Nurochman, 2023: 7), and Estella in Cruella (Endrawati et al., 2022: 1285), as well as characters' anxiety specifically, such as Hazel Grace in The Fault in Our Stars (Onthoni et al., 2022: 316) and characters caught between conscience and external rule (Pramono, 2023: 1). These

studies confirm that the field of psychology of literature continues to grow and that Freud's framework remains relevant for understanding fictional characters.

A contemporary novel that explores anxiety in a particularly striking way is Emily St. John Mandel's Sea of Tranquility (2022). The novel follows Gaspery-Jacques Roberts, a young man from Colony One on the moon who has lost his mother, ended his marriage, and grown distant from his sister Zoey. When Zoey, who works at the Time Institute, offers him training as a time-travel investigator, Gaspery agrees to look into a reality-threatening anomaly recorded across several centuries. As he travels through time and meets people whose futures he already knows, he faces growing moral and emotional pressure, eventually breaking the most important rule of his work by warning the novelist Olive Llewellyn about a coming pandemic, an act that costs him his freedom. Throughout the story, Gaspery experiences anxiety rooted in loss, moral conflict, rule-breaking, and the instability of reality itself.

Based on this background, the writer formulates three research problems: what are the causes of Gaspery's anxiety, how does anxiety affect his character development, and how does he cope with his anxiety in Sea of Tranquility. Previous studies on anxiety and psychoanalysis in literature, such as those on Life of Pi (Asniar & Rahayu, 2024: 61) and School of Fear (Suwoto & Rahayu, 2022: 97), analyse anxiety that arises from concrete external threats in realistic settings. The gap of this research is that Sea of Tranquility is a speculative fiction novel in which anxiety grows from the loss of a coherent sense of time, reality, and identity rather than from an everyday external threat, and very few studies have examined it through the lens of psychology of literature. Thus, this study aims to complete this gap by identifying the causes, examining the effects, and portraying the coping mechanism of Gaspery-Jacques Roberts' anxiety in Emily St. John Mandel's Sea of Tranquility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety is a general state of apprehension or fear that appears when a person faces something uncertain, threatening, or beyond their control, and it becomes a recognised psychological condition when it affects a person's ability to function even when no real danger is present (Barlow, 2021: 108; Nevid et al., 2018: 158). Anxiety is often confused with fear, but the two are produced by different systems: fear is a response to a specific threat happening now, while anxiety is a response to threats that are uncertain or have not yet occurred (LeDoux & Pine, 2016: 1083). Carleton (2016: 5) argues that the fear of the unknown may be the central fear behind all anxiety, since the mind treats uncertainty itself as a danger.

Sigmund Freud, in Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety (1936), explains human behaviour as shaped by the interaction of the id, the ego, and the super-ego, and describes anxiety as a signal that warns the ego of a danger-situation, one that can come from memories, internal conflict, or situations the ego cannot control (Freud, 1936: 109). This anxiety is rooted in an earlier experience of helplessness that is reproduced whenever the ego faces a new situation resembling that original feeling (Freud, 1936: 162). Freud's framework identifies five causes of anxiety used in this study: helplessness as the original source of anxiety, in which the ego feels unable to control or escape what is happening (Freud, 1936: 108); the danger-situation, where the ego senses a threat that has not yet happened, as distinguished from the traumatic situation, where the helplessness is already real (Freud, 1936: 160); the loss of the object, where anxiety arises from the loss, or fear of loss, of a person the individual emotionally depends on (Freud, 1936: 166); unresolved loss, which separates healthy mourning from anxiety that remains unresolved (Freud,

1936: 166); and the ego's fear of the super-ego, a discomfort that arises entirely from within the person when the ego acts against its own internalised rules (Freud, 1936: 90, 111).

When anxiety appears, it shows itself in three dimensions of the self. Its effect on feeling appears as the emotional core of helplessness, expressed through sadness, nervousness, or quiet despair (Freud, 1936: 108, 162; Ally & Aloka, 2024: 38). Its effect on thinking changes the way the ego processes information, often making the person measure their own strength against the danger they face (Freud, 1936: 109, 160). Its effect on action shows that anxiety functions as a signal that pushes the ego to act to avoid danger, even though the action itself can generate a new form of anxiety when it breaks the person's internal rules (Freud, 1936: 91, 109; Jesus, 2023: 1250).

Facing this anxiety, a person does not simply suffer through it; the ego develops different responses depending on what it is facing (Freud, 1936: 91). This study uses four ways of coping drawn from Freud's ideas about the ego's response to danger: avoidance, the ego's tendency to turn away from what causes discomfort (Freud, 1936: 91); reasoning, in which the ego thinks the situation through using logic in order to understand it (Freud, 1936: 160); action, in which the ego responds by acting on the situation even when the action itself produces a new form of anxiety (Freud, 1936: 109; Jesus, 2023: 1252); and acceptance, in which the person stops fighting the loss and learns to live with what cannot be changed, as Freud (1936: 166) describes through the process of mourning.

METHOD

This study uses an extrinsic literary approach that looks beyond the text itself to understand the work through the psychological side of its main character. The writer applies Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on helplessness, the danger-situation, the loss of the object, and the ego's relationship to internal rules, to analyse Gaspery-Jacques Roberts in Emily St. John Mandel's Sea of Tranquility. According to Barry (2017: 1), the psychoanalytic approach is one of the most established forms of extrinsic literary analysis because it reveals the deeper emotional and mental processes that intrinsic analysis alone cannot show.

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design because the data are in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and narration taken from the novel. Merriam & Tisdell (2016: 6) state that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences". As a descriptive study, this research describes and analyses Gaspery's anxiety based on evidence found directly in the text, interpreted using Freud's psychoanalytic theory as the framework.

The primary data source is the novel Sea of Tranquility written by Emily St. John Mandel, published in 2022 by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, consisting of 208 pages divided into eight parts across several timelines. The researcher herself serves as the main research instrument, reading the novel repeatedly, identifying passages that show Gaspery's thoughts, feelings, and actions related to anxiety, then classifying the data into three categories corresponding to the causes of anxiety, its effects on character development, and the ways Gaspery copes with it. The classified data are then analysed descriptively using Freud's psychoanalytic theory as the framework, and conclusions are drawn to answer the three research problems of this study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses Gaspery-Jacques Roberts' anxiety consisting of its causes, its effects, and how he copes with it.

A. The Causes of Gaspery's Anxiety

1. Helplessness as the Original Source of Anxiety

Gaspery's anxiety begins with a grief he never properly faces. He starts working at a hotel only a month after his mother's death: "I started work at the hotel about a month after my mother died... That last week we were there every day and every night, exhausted comrades keeping watch, while our mother murmured and slept" (Mandel, 2022: 89). He fills the empty hours with routine rather than sitting with the pain, and the grief settles beneath the surface of everything he does. This is reinforced by his description of his job as "terminally boring" (Mandel, 2022: 93), which is not only a complaint about work but a sign that his whole life has begun to feel the same way, a place where time passes without leaving a mark. Following Freud (1936: 108), this feeling of being unable to control or escape his condition is the original source of Gaspery's anxiety.

2. The Danger-Situation and the Traumatic Situation

Gaspery's anxiety takes a different form once he begins the investigation itself. Anticipating an unknown threat while walking through an unfamiliar forest, he notices that "there was no pattern to the white noise of a forest, and the randomness put Gaspery on edge" (Mandel, 2022: 160), an anxiety of anticipation consistent with Freud's danger-situation (1936: 160). This differs from the traumatic situation he later lives through directly, once he is "in prison in the wrong century" (Mandel, 2022: 181), where the helplessness is no longer anticipated but real and unavoidable.

3. The Loss of the Object

Gaspery's anxiety is also rooted in his emotional dependence on the people closest to him. After Talia is gone, he admits, "What I didn't tell him: I felt that without Talia I might disappear into thin air, out there by myself... Loneliness wasn't a strong enough word for it" (Mandel, 2022: 201). This confirms Freud's (1936: 166) argument that anxiety often arises from the loss, or fear of loss, of a person on whom the individual emotionally depends.

4. The Ego's Fear of the Super-Ego

The most significant cause of Gaspery's anxiety comes from within himself, when he considers acting against the rules he has accepted as an investigator. Before breaking the protocol to warn Olive Llewellyn, he reflects that "the thought of breaking the protocol occurred to me, then and in the morning two days later when I reported to the travel chamber" (Mandel, 2022: 133). The repetition of this thought shows a conflict that comes entirely from within his own conscience, matching Freud's (1936: 90, 111) description of anxiety produced when the ego considers acting against its internalised rules.

B. The Effects of Anxiety on Gaspery's Character Development

1. The Effect on Feeling

Gaspery's anxiety first shows itself through feeling. Faced with the possibility that reality itself is unstable, his mind grasps at anything solid: "The desk is real, I told myself. The wilted flowers on the desk are real. The blue paint on the walls" (Mandel, 2022: 102). This panic later develops into an unexpected calmness in prison, described through his habit of watching the moon through his cell window (Mandel, 2022: 182), showing the shift Freud (1936: 108, 162) describes from helplessness toward a changed emotional state.

2. The Effect on Thinking

Anxiety also reshapes how Gaspery thinks. His early panicked listing of physical objects gradually becomes moral clarity, seen when he reflects on his decision to warn Olive: "Warning Olive Llewellyn of the approaching pandemic was not, no matter how he turned

the moment over in his mind, the wrong thing to do" (Mandel, 2022: 181). This shift illustrates Freud's (1936: 109, 160) idea that anxiety changes how the ego processes and measures the danger it faces.

3. The Effect on Action

Anxiety eventually pushes Gaspery to act. Impatient with his empty routine, he suddenly asks Ephrem, "'Could I start early?' I asked... 'could I just start the training now? Tonight?'" (Mandel, 2022: 120), leaving the hotel job that has held him in place for years. This culminates in his decision to break the Time Institute's most important rule to save Olive Llewellyn, even knowing "he'd broken the most important rule" (Mandel, 2022: 162), confirming Freud's (1936: 91, 109) view that anxiety functions as a signal that pushes the ego toward action, even when that action produces a new form of anxiety.

C. How Gaspery Copes with His Anxiety

1. Avoidance

Gaspery's first response to his anxiety is to turn away from it. He describes sleeping through his days in Colony One and trying "not to think about my mother too much" (Mandel, 2022: 94), and later refuses to leave the farm for years after his release from prison. This matches Freud's (1936: 91) description of avoidance as the ego's tendency to turn away from what causes discomfort.

2. Reasoning

When avoidance is no longer possible, Gaspery turns to reasoning. He calms himself with historical facts, reminding himself that "None of them were old enough to remember the winter of 1918-1919... Covid-19 would not arrive for another thirteen years" (Mandel, 2022: 165), using logic to manage a situation that feels overwhelming, consistent with Freud's (1936: 160) idea of the ego thinking a problem through.

3. Action

Gaspery also copes by acting decisively, most importantly in his choice to break the protocol and warn Olive Llewellyn despite knowing the cost to his freedom (Mandel, 2022: 162). This reflects Freud's (1936: 109) view of action as a response the ego takes even when it produces its own form of anxiety.

4. Acceptance

In the later parts of his life, Gaspery reaches acceptance. Reflecting on the possibility that his reality may be a simulation, he concludes, "if definitive proof emerges that we're living in a simulation, the correct response to that news will be So what. A life lived in a simulation is still a life" (Mandel, 2022: 194). This phrase captures Freud's (1936: 166) description of acceptance as the point where a person stops fighting what cannot be changed and learns to live with it.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the causes of his anxiety, Gaspery-Jacques Roberts experiences a layered psychological condition that grows from the helplessness of personal loss, the danger-situation of his investigation, the loss of people he depends on, and the ego's fear of the super-ego produced by breaking the Time Institute's protocol. This anxiety produces real changes across his feeling, thinking, and acting, moving him from numbness and panic toward calmness, moral clarity, and decisive action.

To cope with this anxiety, Gaspery uses avoidance, reasoning, action, and acceptance, developing gradually across the story from turning away from his grief, to reasoning through overwhelming situations, to acting decisively by breaking the protocol to save Olive Llewellyn, and finally to accepting both his choices and the uncertain nature of his reality.

In sum, the findings of this research show that Gaspery successfully transforms the anxiety that has shaped his life into a force for moral growth, moving him from emotional distance toward a more honest and connected way of living. This study confirms that Freud's psychoanalytic framework remains relevant for understanding how anxiety, loss, and moral conflict are represented in speculative fiction.

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