

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE: (Kya's characterization in the novel 'Where the Crawdads Sing')

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### Abstract

Domestic violence is a prevalent problem, affecting children as the most vulnerable family members. It also contributes to irreparable psychological damage to human's behavior in the future. As one of the literary works highlighting domestic violence, the novel entitled 'Where the Crawdads Sings' describes the suffering of the main character, who experienced the unbearable violence committed by a mentally ill father. The present study highlights the above novel, which is frequently used as a reading source in the literature department of an English college. The study was qualitative, in which the researchers acted as the main instruments to elicit and interpret the data independently. There were three important variables illuminated in the study: a) the description of the main character, b) the values of the novel, and c) the potential use of the novel as the reading media in EFL. Despite the fact that the novel is engaging, the results show that one of the most crucial issues is the language employed in it. It is also noted that the protagonist, who is intended to be the primary character, is the one who succeeds in committing horrific crime. If the novel had been written in a more morally acceptable manner, it would not only have become a thriller for the addicts but also a valuable teaching tool and the perfect source for an EFL class, especially for adult students.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, characterization, main character, where the crawdads sing

### Abstrak

*Kekerasan dalam rumah tangga adalah masalah umum yang mempengaruhi anak-anak sebagai anggota keluarga yang paling lemah. Kekerasan dalam rumah tangga juga dapat menimbulkan dampak psikologis yang mempengaruhi perilaku seseorang di masa yang akan datang. Sebagai sebuah karya sastra yang mengusung tema kekerasan dalam rumah tangga, novel 'Where the Crawdads Sings' menggambarkan penderitaan tokoh utama yang mengalami kekerasan akut yang dilakukan oleh sang ayah yang memiliki gangguan jiwa. Kajian ini menyoroti novel yang sering digunakan sebagai bahan ajar di kampus jurusan Sastra Inggris. Kajian dilakukan secara kualitatif dimana peneliti berperan sebagai instrumen utama dalam mengambil dan menafsirkan data secara mandiri. Terdapat tiga variabel penting yang menjadi fokus peneliti: a) gambaran dari tokoh utama, b) nilai-nilai dalam novel, dan c) kemungkinan penggunaan novel tersebut sebagai media bacaan dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Walaupun menarik, hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa terdapat beberapa hal penting yang harus diperhatikan, salah satunya adalah penggunaan bahasa yang digunakan dalam novel tersebut. Diketahui pula bahwa tokoh utama dalam novel ini merupakan seseorang yang berhasil melakukan pembunuhan berencana secara keji. Seandainya novel ini ditulis dengan memasukkan pesan moral yang lebih dapat diterima, maka novel ini tidak hanya akan menjadi thriller bagi para pencandunya tetapi juga dapat menjadi media belajar yang bermanfaat dan juga sumber bacaan yang sempurna bagi para pembelajar bahasa Inggris tingkat dewasa.*

**Kata Kunci:** Kekerasan dalam rumah tangga, penokohan, tokoh utama, where the crawdads sing

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## INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is a global problem. It affects the entire family, who are prone to violence, not just the youngsters. Although women were traditionally thought of as the closest personal partners in domestic abuse, children are increasingly included (United Nation

Organization, n. d.). Anyone, regardless of ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender, can experience domestic abuse. Numerous couples, including married and dating couples, are susceptible to it. Domestic abuse may have an impact on people from various social and educational backgrounds (United Nations Organization, n.d.).

As one of the literary works, a novel can possibly highlight various themes, including domestic violence. A novel can attract its readers as it can provide some series of events attracting and moving the readers' hearts (Johnston, 2017 March 27). In addition, a novel enables the readers to feel and to experience the events narrated inside the novel (Goodyer, 2008, p. 17). The present study examined the main character, Kayla, as a central and an important person in the novel entitled 'Where the Crawdads Sing'.

A novel written by an American popular writer constitutes one of the popular literary works read by millions of readers worldwide (Ehrlich, 2022 July 12). Besides, the present study also highlights the other relevant issues, such as potential values beneath the novel, and the quality of the language to be used as the English learning media. The need to identify the novel as a learning source is important as this novel belongs to the popular novel among the English learners particularly by the ones taking English literature.

The novel tells the agony of the main character, who is frequently abused by her father, an ex-soldier, who is mentally sick, and has to stay with her father on her own. Previously, her mother, and siblings have left home as they could not stand to live with their abusive father anymore. In her house, she has to be very careful in facing her father, who frequently gets angry and frequently finds her safe place in a marsh for her safety (Owen, 2018).

It should be noted that there have been some previous studies, which are relatively similar to the present study. One of them was conducted by Putri (2018). Putri (2018) analyzed the novel *Mummy's Witness*. This novel depicts domestic violence committed by the father, called as Tom Sanders who is an abusive and controlling person. As a head of the family he frequently resorts to any means to control and coerce his wife and child, Susan Sanders and Gayle Sanders. Based on her analysis, there are some forms of violence found in the story, such as psychological, emotional, and economic. Likewise, Gayle Sanders, the daughter experiences physical, sexual, and emotional violence.

Secondly, Alfianita (2021) identified that domestic violence that happened against women and children could possibly traumatize and alert victims. As the main characters, Luce attempts to protect herself from the trauma of being raped. The kinds of domestic violence in the novel are physical and psychological violence. It was found that the main character, who was the victim of sexual abuse continuously protect herself, by finding a safer place to live becoming

more defensive by using a razor while staying on high alert where the abuser is coming (p. 45).

Unlike the above studies, the present study aimed to identify the description of main character 'Kayla' along with the other important aspects pertaining to the novel, values and linguistic quality for learning English. In sum, identifying the above variables will not only provide the researchers with the knowledge on the main character but also provide anyone interested in this novel and the other potential teachers to have a more knowledgeable picture on how to use the above novel for pedagogical purpose.

### **Novel and its elements**

Novel is a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length. Abrams said the novel is different from short story or novelette as it has more elements, character involved much more compared to short story and novelette. "The novel is distinguished from the short story and from the work of middle length called the novelette; a greater variety of character, greater motives than do the shorter, more concentrate modes" (Abrams, 1999, p. 190). All of these elements are integral parts of any novel.

The first element which is commonly analyzed is character. A character is commonly considered the most important thing in a novel. A character is usually narrated or described as a human being or non-human. In some instances, it is also possible that the main characters change into positive or negative traits based on the story written by the author. The character viewed to possess a positive attribute is commonly categorized as a protagonist (Delf, & Williams, 2022). On the other hand, the character that changes into the negative one is categorized as an antagonist (Delf, & Williams, 2022).

Abrams (1999, pp. 32-33) postulates that characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who is interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying in the dialogue and from what they do. From the above excerpts, it can be interpreted that character is the figure, which is given a particular moral, intellectual, or other specific qualities narrated and constitute the most important part of the story.

The second element of novel which is commonly analyzed is characterization. Unlike character, the term 'characterization' refers to the way the character is described in the novel (See e.g., Abrams, 1999). The third element is plot. The plot is the sequence of the story. It is the ups and downs of the story created by the writer. Rogers (2014, p. 123) classifies the plot as the map of the story, which may turn out, in the end, to be wrong in some respects, or even entirely useless. The last element analyzed in the novel is point of view.

Al-Alami (2018, p. 911) suggests that point of view refers to the way the author or the writer presents or describes the story. In this case, every writer will usually have a certain way of presenting or describing an object, topic, or person in the story. In a narrative, however, a point of view is the narrator's position in the description of characters and events. Simpson (2010 as cited in Al-Alami, 2018, p. 912) thinks that point of view embraces the angle of narrating in fiction. Point of view is important because it filters everything in a narrative. It determines the amount of information the narrator shares with the reader. It can also influence the degree to which the reader can identify with the protagonist (Al-Alami, 2016; 2013).

### **Novel as one of learning media**

Smaldino (as cited in Marpanji, Mahali, & Putra, 2018, p. 2) states that medium, which is a singular term of media, is a means of communication used by the sender to convey information to the recipient. The word medium is derived from Latin which means "between". It refers to anything that carries information between the source and the recipient. In this case, any medium of instruction/learning can include video, television, diagrams, print materials, computer programs, and instructors. Learning medium (learning media) can be defined as a means to deliver any information from the teachers, who deliver information to the students, as the recipients.

One of the advantages of novels as an educational medium is that the author in conveying his educational message can be manifested in light language but does not bore the reader. For instance, the readers can peruse the storyline and characters in novels, without having to focus on the teaching process conducted by the teacher; thus making the learning process more independent (Kholisoh, 2012 as cited in Sasalia, & Sari, 2020, p. 57). Specifically, the survey conducted to the 8th grade of English language Art students in Southern California, indicated that the majority of the students having novel studies could physically engage when they learn the novel (Wanningen, 2022, p. 48).

### **Values, definitions, and the types**

Robbins and Judge (2018, p. 145) define values as basic convictions that "a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. Additionally, Robbins and Judge (2018, p. 145) exemplify some of the values commonly adopted by white collars, blue collars, or activists as the followings: Self-respect, Family security, Freedom, Equality, and Happiness. The other scholars (Schroeder, Chatfield, Singh, Chennells, Herissone-Kelly, 2019) add on some of the universally adopted values, such as fairness, respect, care, and honesty. The present

study attempted to identify the above-mentioned values suggested by some scholars (Robbinsm & Judge, 2018, p. 145; Schroeder, Chatfield, Singh, Chennells, Herissone-Kelly, 2019).

### **Domestic violence, prevalence, and the impact**

Domestic abuse, also called "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence", can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner (United Nation Organization, n. d.). Domestic violence violates the human rights of children and has a harmful effect on their development. Domestic violence against children has many different manifestations and can be in the form of sexual violence, physical and/or psychological violence (Council of Europe, 2023; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023).

Domestic violence has many forms which are physical, sexual, economic, emotional, and verbal. It not only hurts the women, but it also affects children. Domestic violence creates insecurity for children because the home is a place where children feel they are safe, but if domestic violence occurs, the home is no longer a safe place for them. Domestic violence affects children via numerous aspects: physical, mental, family relationships, as well as awareness and education (Khemthong, & Chutipongdech, 2021).

More specifically, the impacts of domestic violence on children can be grouped into four categories, such as physical effects, psychological effects, relationship effects, and educational effects (Khemthong, & Chutipongdech, 2021). These effects can lead to different and unexpected behavior in children, such as aggressive behavior in society (Iverson & Segal, 1990 as cited in Tuwangye, 2000, p. 16). Adair (2017, pp. 11-12) adds that parental risk factors of domestic violence, low socioeconomic status, drug and alcohol abuse, and parents with disabilities would be associated with specific types of child maltreatment.

## **METHOD**

### **Design of the study**

Qualitative is generally considered as a natural inquiry that is done by humans who wish to know the natural phenomenon around the people. More specifically, it is an iterative process in which "improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (Aspers, & Corte, 2019, p.139). In its application, qualitative research is commonly perceived as a means for identifying natural phenomenon descriptively (Cresswell, 2008).

Despite the possibility to use several instruments in qualitative, such as observation, interview, and documentary analysis, due to the researchers' time and financial constraint, they could only analyze the sources found in internet this is due to the consideration that the sources

and the research data that the researchers inquired were actually non-living objects (i.e., novel and other written documents). There researchers decided to peruse, and analyze both primary and secondary sources accessed as the followings: a) the novel entitled ‘Where the Crawdads Sing’, which could be accessed for free in internet (Owen, 2018) and b) the previously researched journals, c) the perceived related reviews on the novel and the main characters.

### **Steps of the Study**

There were some steps that the researchers used in conducting the research. Firstly, the researchers read the novel, which they found from the net repeatedly. The researchers discussed the characters, and the potential important themes identified in the novel. The researchers identified some important themes considered relevant to the research questions. Finally, the researchers wrote the summary.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The descriptions of the main character**

The following excerpts are some of the perceived relevant proofs indicating her hardship leading to the murder committed by her.

Datum 1)

But this morning, Ma had been quiet; her smile lost, her eyes red. She’d tied a white scarf pirate style, low across her forehead, but the purple and yellow edges of a bruise spilled out. Right after breakfast, even before the dishes were washed, Ma had put a few personals in the train case and walked down the road (p. 16).

The text indicates the sadness experienced by Kya when her mother left home

Datum 2)

Kya returned to the porch steps later and waited for a long time, but, as she looked to the end of the lane, she never cried. Her face was still, her lips a simple thin line under searching eyes. But Ma didn’t come back that day either (p. 18)

The text indicates Kya’s hidden sadness, which is described slightly in the section of the story when her mother never goes back.

Datum 3)

After Ma left, over the next few weeks, Kya’s oldest brother and two sisters drifted away too, as if by example. They had endured Pa’s red-faced rages, which started as shouts, then escalated into fist-slugs, or backhanded punches, until one by one, they disappeared. They were nearly

grown anyway. And later, just as she forgot their ages, she couldn't remember their real names, only that they were called Missy, Murph, and Mandy. On her porch mattress, Kya found a small pile of socks left by her sisters (p. 19).

The text above describes the mounting grief when finally the other siblings left home following her mother.

Datum 4)

LATER, NEAR SUNSET, Jodie found Kya on the beach staring at the sea. As he stepped up beside her, she didn't look at him but kept her eyes on the roiling waves. Still, she knew by the way he spoke that Pa had slugged his face. "I hafta go, Kya. Can't live here no longer." She almost turned to him, but didn't. Wanted to beg him not to leave her alone with Pa, but the words jammed up. "When you're old enough you'll understand," he said. Kya wanted to holler out that she may be young, but she wasn't stupid. She knew Pa was the reason they all left; what she wondered was why no one took her with them. She'd thought of leaving too, but had nowhere to go and no bus money (p. 20).

The pressure, grief, agony, and the sorrow overwhelmed Kya when the last sibling 'Jodie', whom she was closed to finally left her alone at home

Datum 5)

PA HAD FOUGHT GERMANY in the Second World War, where his left femur caught shrapnel and shattered, their last source of pride. His weekly disability checks, their only source of income. A week after Jodie left, the Frigidaire stood empty and hardly any turnips remained. When Kya walked into the kitchen that Monday morning, Pa pointed to a crumpled dollar and loose coins on the kitchen table. "This here'll get ya food fer the week. Thar ain't no such thang as handouts," he said. "Ever'thang cost sump'm, and fer the money ya gotta keep the house up, stove wood c'lected, and warsh the laundree." (p. 22).

The text indicates that Kya has to survive with her abusive father who was an ex-soldier in the world war.

Datum 6)

Kya learned from other mistakes of the others, and perhaps more from the minnows, how to live with him. Just keep out of the way, don't let him see you, dart from sunspots to shadow. Up and out of the house before he rose, she lived in the woods and water, then padded into the house to sleep in her bed on the porch as close to the marsh as she could get (p. 22).

Kayla also learns how to deal with her abusive father who is mentally insane and physically disabled.

Datum 7)

Suddenly she heard footsteps on the duff and then a voice: “Well, look who’s here. My Marsh Girl.” Whirling around, standing at the same time, she stood face-to-face with Chase. “Hello, Kya,” he said. She looked around. How had he gotten here? She’d heard no boat. He read her question. “I was fishing, saw ya pass, so landed over yonder on the other side.”

“Please just go,” she said, stuffing her pencils and pad in the knapsack. But he put his hand on her arm. “C’mon, Kya. I’m sorry about how things turned out.” He leaned in, wisps of breakfast bourbon on his breath. (p. 233)

The text shows that Chase, who was one of the ex-lover, comes again to ask for a new romantic relationship with her.

Datum 8)

They slept the first night on the beach, and he moved into the shack with her the next day. Packing and unpacking within a single tide. As sand creatures do. As they walked along the tide line in late afternoon, he took her hand and looked at her. “Will you marry me, Kya?” “We are married. Like the geese,” she said. “Okay. I can live with that.”(p. 317)

The text indicates that Kya finds her true love and makes intimate relationship with Tate.

Datum 9)

He glanced through some of the poems, most about nature or love. One was folded neatly in its own envelope. He pulled it out and read:

The Firefly  
Luring him was as easy  
As flashing valentines.  
But like a lady firefly  
They hid a secret call to die.  
A final touch,  
Unfinished;  
The last step, a trap.  
Down, down he falls,  
His eyes still holding mine  
Until they see another world.  
I saw them change.  
First a question,  
Then an answer,  
Finally an end.



### And love itself passing

To whatever it was before it began. A.H. (p. 323)

The text indicates that Tate, his partner, knows that Kya was the one who had terminated Chase. Datum 10)

Still kneeling on the floor, he read it again. He held the paper next to his heart, throbbing inside his chest. He looked out the window, making certain no one was coming down the lane—not that they would, why would they? But to be sure. Then he opened the small box, knowing what he would find. There, laid out carefully on cotton, was the shell necklace Chase had worn until the night he died (p. 324).

The text indicates that Tate finds the proof of the murder worn by Kya's victim.

Datum 11)

Then, in near dusk, he walked to the beach and stood on a sharp bed of white and cracked mollusks and crab pieces. For a second he stared at Chase's shell in his open palm and then dropped it on the sand. Looking the same as all the others, it vanished. The tide was coming in, and a wave flowed over his feet, taking with it hundreds of seashells back into the sea. Kya had been of this land and of this water; now they would take her back. Keep her secrets deep (p. 324).

The text indicates that Tate decides to cover the murder.

### **Certain values identified beneath the novel**

Based on the data above, most of the values identified are happiness, and family unity. For instance, the datum 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 indicates the values of happiness, which was abruptly taken as the ones whom she loved dearly gradually left home. Datum 5, and 6 indicate the values of family security. Despite being abusive, Kya, for some reasons, tried to survive with her father. It can be interpreted that being alone, in some instances, is far more difficult for her, thus making her stay with him. Lastly, datum 9, 10, and 11 respectively indicates the secret of the murder committed by Kya. However, the husband, Tate, tries to keep the secret of the murder probably because he wanted to keep his family secure until the end of their life.

### **Linguistic aspects of the novel and the potential use for learning media in EFL**

Based on the data analysis, it can be found that the language used in the novel is not a commonly used for communication. In fact, some of the datum (e.g., datum 4, 5, 7) indicated the use of slangs, which are certainly frowned upon during the formal discourse. With regard to the purpose of learning, which tend to be instrumentally-driven (e.g., looking for a better

employment, pursuing higher degree, etc.), this novel does not seem to be worth-reading. In fact, this novel may be good for improving an appreciation toward literary works, which are not always formally packaged. With reference to the concept offered by Sasalia and Sari (2020) indicating the potential benefit of using novel as one of the learning media in EFL, the finding partially disconfirms the argument as this novel partially contains slang and colloquial languages; the types of languages which are commonly avoided by the teachers when teaching English class. However, as the present study was conducted qualitatively without involving the readers of the novel, further study should be conducted by involving more readers/teachers so that the responses can be obtained more objectively.

## CONCLUSION

Domestic violence is a psychological pandemic, which happens worldwide. The works of the authors in choosing and expressing the theme to the readers worldwide deserve the praise. However, the language aspects, the plots of the story, and the characterization of the novel constitute the other important aspects, which are actually inseparable in packaging the narrative. This is the case as the story, which has a good theme, can possibly lead to different misinterpretation when it is packaged with improper language styles.

The use of slangs and the characterization depicting the main character (i.e., Kya) who committed heinous crime and finally managed to escape the penalty, might provide some readers with an example of street tribunal or even reprisal in the name of happiness, freedom, or even family security. The novel, which tends to deliver the ‘tit for tat’ or ‘an eye for an eye’, will certainly provide nothing but the pleasure of carnal desire for revenge. It does not mean that the main character portrayed in the novel is always protagonist and possesses Godly character. However, the portrayal of the main character that freely acts beyond the reach of the law for whatever the reasons (e.g., pursuing happiness, even revenge, etc.) can possibly disappoint some of the law-obedient readers as they think this novel can possibly mislead the readers rather than inspire them with some morally upstanding deeds.

The present study was conducted qualitatively, in which the researchers were the ones who took the data and interpreted the data independently. Further study regarding this novel should involve more readers so that the use of the novel for pedagogical purposes or the other English trainings can be identified more objectively.

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