

Unwritten Scars: Gaslighting in Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Gaslighting is a modern term that describes a type of toxic relationship that psychologically abuses the victim. Gaslighting is understood as manipulating the victim into questioning his sanity and the gaslighter has a goal to create a 'surreal' environment that will cause the victim to feel like he is in the wrong and is crazy. Since gaslighting is all about manipulation, it can cause mental disorders. In the theoretical framework, we will apply the concept of gaslighting and self-actualization to show the effects of gaslighting and the ways to cope with it. In this work, we explore how gaslighting can cause anxiety, depression and low self-esteem in the victims. We show that the victims of gaslighting can deal with it by fulfilling physiological needs and building herself up again by the help of friends and families.

Keywords: gaslighting, toxic relationship, poetry, lyrical poem

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is needed especially for modern times today, as people nowadays tend to forget the little things in life. Society today is so caught up in social media and everything trivial in their lives such as comparing to one another, and then declining well-being because they are not satisfied with what they have in their lives. In 2018, a scientific research carried out by Patalay and Fitzsimons towards 9,553 adolescents found that their well-being was highly unstable, due to many comparisons they made within society (Gómez-López et al., 2019). Modern day society today cares too much about their impressions and presentation towards the society that they do not care about their own well-being, which shows that they need help to trigger the positive emotions and we believe that it can be triggered through poetry. The award-winning poet, Jane Hirshfield, believes that poetry can cure the world of social issues because it creates large fields of possibilities and poetry gives limitless imagination. Through the imagination, a reader can experience change and that change is the beginning of their freedom. Hirshfield thinks that poetry provide elements like compassion, empathy, interconnection, and it lets a reader to grow trust and courage within themselves to get out of their comfort zone and because of this, their change is the antidote to tackle the social problems (Burns, 2015). *Writer's Digest University*, a workshop for writing any form, made the research on reading poetry. KM Barkley, an author, wrote an article about the benefits of reading poetry on the *Writer's Digest* platform. He stated that reading poetry is like opening doors to see the soul of another person (Barkley, 2016). Poems can help reader to see deeper into themselves and to uncover feelings that they have been confused about. In simpler terms, poetry can help readers to express themselves easier.

For our work, the genre we have chosen is lyrical poetry and a bit of narrative to tell the story. For literary works in the form of poetry, narrative and lyrical are common. Narrative is the genre that tells a story through poems and the lines are much easier to understand because it is much more straightforward and uses obvious terms. On the other hand, lyrical poetry goes way deeper than narrative and much more diverse (Irmawati, 2014). According to Kuilya, a lyric poem "is a

private expression of emotion by an individual speaker.” (pg.1) Lyrical poems can contain the emotions of a person, not necessarily just a story and it can also become a musical piece of art. One of the key features of lyrical poems is relating the emotions within to the writer’s experiences so that readers can learn a new perspective or study through emotions.

For this creative work, we will use the topic gaslighting, which is a form of toxic relationship. For the case in our creative work, we will be using a theory by Paige L. Sweet. She states that *gaslighting* is the attempt to create a ‘surreal’ reality or environment to make the victim in the relationship feel crazy and it is manipulative (Sweet, 2019). *Gaslighting* usually occurs in cycles and is repetitive and it causes the victim to be adapted to helplessness. These states will further encourage negative behaviors to the victims, such as avoiding activities, people, emotions, and it disrupts the victim's body image mindset, sexuality and causes intimacy issues (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

Gaslighting and bullying are separated by a thin line. Many people may mistake *gaslighting* as a form of bullying. As a matter of fact, when it comes to bullying, the bully does not mask their bad intentions. Whereas for *gaslighting*, the gaslighter are usually convincing liars, and can even be charming. They deny their wrongdoings, unlike bullies who know that what they are doing is wrong but proceed to do it anyway. Furthermore, gaslighting is considered as abuse as the motives of the gaslighter are equivalent or parallel with control and power that are the motives of abusers (Spear, 2018). Gaslighters like to take control of their victims, while bullies do not put much thoughts into their actions and just bluntly hurt their victims (Petric, 2018). On the contrary, what makes gaslighting a special case as compared to other abusive forms is that, unlike others, gaslighters require the agreement of their victims and cooperation. Control to them is just merely scratching the surface and it does not give them enough satisfaction. Complete submission and obedience or agreement is what they thrive to achieve (Spear, 2018). One more crucial trait that many people misunderstand is that gaslighting is mistaken for mere disagreement between parties. Gaslighting is not just a disagreement because the abuser suppresses or denies the credibility of the victim’s judgement and verbally attacks the victim by saying that their mistake is due to a fault that is from within them (Stark, 2019).

Gaslighting is also one of the booming topics in Indonesia, not just in foreign countries. An article from *CNN Indonesia* is also bringing up the gaslighting topic. *CNN Indonesia* talks about the seven steps of gaslighting, namely lying, repetition, disagreement, weakening of the victim, dependency, false hopes, and, domination and control of the relationship (Mengenal 7 Tahap Gaslighting, March 23, 2020). Aside from the article and the famous influencer, gaslighting is also portrayed through film in Indonesia, such as the new movie entitled *Story of Kale: When Someone’s in Love*. That movie is about the reality of how a manipulative romantic relationship can take place in life, and it is about a woman, Dinda, and two men, Kale and Argo. Dinda was trying to make her toxic relationship work with Argo but failed and moved on to Kale. Their new relationship eventually became toxic too and it has several aspects. They were gaslighting, physical abuse, and verbal abuse (Rahman, 2021). Gaslighting was included because the male figures, both Kale and Argo, was manipulative and insecure and wanted to control Dinda’s reality. An example from the movie is the dialogue that Argo said, “If you want this relationship to work, quit from your job!”. Another example that shows how a gaslighting victim would react is portrayed through Dinda when she said, “I’m the one that can’t be a good girlfriend for him instead.” (Laksamana, 2020). The context here is that she was abused by Argo, but instead of blaming his actions, she blamed herself for not being good enough.

Overall, our creative work will talk about a woman meeting a man in times of loneliness and then he happens to be one of those *gaslighters*. The female character will be introduced to this new world of toxicity, and she experiences a mental breakdown and becomes miserable as she does not realize that she is being gaslighted. Our poetry will progress as a story and show how she reacts as a victim. The story will also focus on how she will end up defying the gaslighter and defending herself. Nearing the end, it will tell the readers how she builds herself back up again after the trauma and pain.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme we want to explore is that love and life are all about healing and growing. Our creative work will show the same characteristics as the theme in a typical storybook. Furthermore, the theme would help the readers understand and see more about the positive aspects of life and help them to develop a positive personality development. Even though the theme will show certain uncomfortable elements of being a human, it is the negative experience that will help the readers realize that they have many things to improve in their lives.

Applying that theme into our creative work, we will create the character with a personality trait which shows an inflexible character due to trauma from the gaslighting perpetrated by her ex-boyfriend. After relieving herself from a relationship as such, she will come to experience trust issues and have a negative mindset that leads to repulsiveness. Proceeding to grow from the pain by going through the process of self-actualization, she will be determined to pursue her dreams and learn to become an independent woman and live a better life for herself.

Poetic Devices

For the poetic tools of our creative work, we will apply five devices that are common for poetry, namely repetition, symbolism, imagery, enjambment, and free verse from *The California Federation of Chaparral Poets Inc.* The explanation of the five devices are as follows:

#1- Repetition

Repetition is the reuse of the same words or phrases to add effect into the literary work. We will be using the repetition technique in our poems several times to emphasize our character's emotions when she feels sad or happy, and it will also be used when she is reminiscing the relationship she had with her ex-boyfriend. It can be found in one of the poems entitled, *I Guess*. Some lines of the poem *I Guess* go as follows:

*I guess I choose to ignore them,
I guess I choose to love you.*

#2 – Symbolism

Symbolism is a device that uses symbols like people, objects, locations, and etc. to represent something else more than its literal meaning. We will be using symbolism in our creative work for the part where our character is struggling with self-love. It can be found in one of the poems entitled *Pillars*. Symbolism can be found in these lines:

*The unfamiliarity of these pillars will
keep me away from the nightmares,
keep me away from the fear of
not being able to hold myself again.*

The ‘pillars’ here is a symbol for the friends and families that our persona has in her life. The people around her will be the ones that help her stand up again from the hurt she experienced, and they will help her find herself once again and heal mentally. Poets who use symbolism would usually mention or include objects, colors, sounds, or places in the story and replace them with another meaning that is more personal and intimate.

#3 – Imagery

Imagery is a figurative language that is used to trigger sensory experience on the readers. Imagery in our work will be used to describe how gaslighting is done, and also the feeling of our persona healing. The language used with this technique is very vivid and it is meant to evoke mental images. The mental images are evoked to spark emotional reactions to the readers and make them imagine and feel the sensations as described by words.

Multiple uses of imagery will be present in our creative work, and it will probably be used in almost all of our poems. One of the poems that uses imagery in our creative work is *Absence*. It can be seen in these lines:

*On cold nights like this,
I miss how your favorite tattered socks
rub against our ankles as your arms
warm our torso*

This stanza from our poem describes a scene where our persona is having intimate moments with her partner as they were going to sleep. The description of rough socks that are worn out and rubbing on ankles may give the image that their legs are intertwined. The arms that warm the torso gives the image that the partner is hugging her and has his arms rested on her hips and over the tummy.

#4 – Enjambment

In poetry, enjambment is understood as the continuation of the strings of words in a logical sense. We will be using enjambments several times to emphasize more on the word combinations to highlight stanzas that are more crucial than the others. The enjambments we are using will also include using the titles of several poems as the stanzas or lines in the poem. This technique can be found in our poem entitled, *Walls* and the lines are as follows:

*I have always wondered where life
Will take me if I actually
Let down our walls.*

#5 – Free Verse

Free verse is a technique in poetry that has no pattern or structure and I will be using in my poems as a form of writing style. Free verse gives me the freedom to create lines as long and as short as we deem fit, and the formations of each stanza will be to our own preferences. An example of the use of free verse can be found in all of our poems but one of them would be *No Turning Back* and two stanzas that shows free verse are as follows:

*They say it's impossible,
To love someone overnight.*

*But honey,
Love can't be measured with time.
Love is measured by the actions,
And effort you show.
Love is unpredictable.*

The first two lines still qualify as a stanza even though the second stanza contains five lines. The freedom to write like our example is how free verse works in poetry.

CONCLUSION

Through the creation of this creative work, we intend to spread the awareness about the topic of gaslighting among people of all ages. We hope it has positive impacts towards young adults and adolescents in such a way that it will help them to recognize gaslighting in their relationships, to learn how it affects the victims, and to help themselves or others to heal from gaslighting. To recognize gaslighting and its traits, the readers can see that our persona in our poems is being manipulated in many ways. For example, in the poem *Kitchen*, it talks about the boyfriend manipulating and controlling the persona into being a submissive woman instead of letting her stand up for herself. The first line '*Get back into the kitchen*' is a line that shows an image of the boyfriend trying to control our persona. In that poem we were trying to show to the readers an example of how a man will try to forcefully control the woman.

Apart from spreading the awareness, we would also like to emphasize on the different ways that people cope with the stress from gaslighting. Young adults and adolescents are usually in a phase where they are emotionally unstable, so it is definitely a challenge for them when they are coping with stress from a psychological abuse such as gaslighting. Hence, the persona we have created is within that age range, and in the poems, we have shown how she dealt with the pressure. As the readers can see, in our poem entitled *Vacant* and *Absence*, our persona is a melancholic type that lingers to her past and spends her time staying home while she deals with heartbreak.

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