

Before the Petal Falls: A Novella Exploring Self-Efficacy and Learned Helplessness in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is about self-efficacy and learned helplessness in young adults. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to achieve one's goal. The lack of self efficacy is known as learned helplessness, a term to describe the belief that one does not have control over the future. Through a novella, this thesis explores why young adults experience lack of self-efficacy and how they develop self-efficacy. This novella implements the theory of self-efficacy by Bandura (1997) and the theory of learned helplessness by Peterson, Maier, and Seligman (1993). The novella tells a story of a young adult girl, Etta, who is living in an oppressive orphanage. Due to her traumatic experience, she suffers from learned helplessness, making her unable to get out of the oppressive environment. However, after reading her senior's diary, getting support from her close ones, and practicing the skills, she develops the belief that she can escape the orphanage. Her new conviction helps her in overcoming setbacks until she is able to achieve her goal.

Keywords: dark fantasy, learned helplessness, novella, self-efficacy

INTRODUCTION

Young adulthood, typically defined as the period between ages 18-26 (Stroud et al., 2015), is marked by newfound autonomy and the pressure to build future aspirations (Arnett, 2014). This phase is a critical and challenging stage. Many young adults face anxiety about their future dreams (Lawton & Cain, 2022), often struggling with decision-making. Fictional books offer escapism and guidance, helping young adults cope with their anxieties. Recognizing the significant role of books, I decided to create a novella targeting young adult readers.

My novella explores the importance of self-efficacy in young adults' lives. The theory of self-efficacy applied in my creative work is taken from Albert Bandura's book titled *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (1997). Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1999), is the belief in one's ability to achieve goals, encompassing both self-belief and goal orientation. This differs from self-esteem, which only refers to one's overall assessment of oneself (Malbi & Reasoner, 2000 as cited in Tosriadi, 2019). Self-efficacy is crucial for young adults in navigating developmental tasks, such as identity formation, by setting and pursuing goals (Lawton & Cain, 2022). There are three factors to build self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997). Mastery experiences can be defined as a series of successful task completion. Next, vicarious experiences involve learning from role models. To boost self-efficacy, verbal persuasion from credible people is important to encourage persistence in the face of challenges. Once self-efficacy is developed, it helps young adults overcome obstacles and maintain a positive mindset (Azar, Vasudeva, & Abdollahi, 2006). In contrast, those who lack self-efficacy are more prone to anxiety and stress, hindering their problem-solving abilities (Pajares, 2002).

In Indonesia, today's young adults are seen as the "golden generation" for 2045, critical for the country's development (Tambunan & Sinaga, 2023). Their success depends on developing self-efficacy to overcome societal challenges and avoid learned helplessness (Apdillah et al., 2022). The second theory brought up in my creative work is learned helplessness from Peterson, Maier, and Seligman's book titled *Learned Helplessness: A Theory for the Age of Personal Control* (1993). The theory mentioned that learned helplessness arises from a lack of self-efficacy, leading individuals to believe they have no control over future events, thereby disrupting motivation and cognitive function (Peterson et al., 1993). This mindset, encapsulated by "I can't do it," stems from uncontrollable events, fostering a sense of powerlessness and passive behavior. Learned helplessness is caused by experiences with uncontrollable events, leading individuals to believe future events will also be uncontrollable (Peterson et al., 1993). According to the theory, there are three elements in learned helplessness: contingency (one's action does not produce the desired result), cognition (one interprets and generalizes the circumstances, leading to a conclusion that one would continue to fail in the future), and behavior (one stops exerting action). Learned helplessness results in performance deficits and passivity because individuals believe their actions do not matter.

Young adults in Indonesia are particularly susceptible to learned helplessness. The 2018 Basic Health Research revealed a high prevalence of depression among those aged 15 to 24 (Condinata et al., 2021), with psychological distress increasing significantly over the past decade. A study by Verma et al. (1988) confirms a strong link between psychological distress and learned helplessness. Given the prevalence of learned helplessness due to low self-efficacy among young adults, my creative thesis will delve into this issue, highlighting its impact and the importance of fostering self-efficacy to combat it.

My creative work will be in the form of a novella, which is a literary work with a length between 13,000 and 40,000 words (Brewer, 2022). A novella has a simpler plot compared to novels, focusing intensely on one subject without subplots (Leibowitz, 2013). This compressed form keeps readers engaged with its intense and surprising plot.

My novella is written in the dark fantasy genre. It can be described as a genre of horror narrative, where humanity faces threats from supernatural forces that transcend ordinary understanding (Stevens & Hoppenstand, 2004). Dark fantasy allows for a critical examination of reality, making it suitable for exploring self-efficacy in young adults (Killmeier, 2013). I chose dark fantasy as the genre because it provides a distance from reality, offering readers clearer insights into real-world issues (Timmerman, 1983). This genre is particularly effective for young adults who have become hardened by life experiences, as it allows them to view the world from a critical and imaginative perspective (Cunningham, 2010).

This novella will explore two main themes: why young adults experience a lack of self-efficacy and how they can build it. These themes will be conveyed through the journey of the main character, who developed learned helplessness due to an uncontrollable event in her past. She spent subsequent years living in an oppressive orphanage, but ultimately, she built her self-efficacy, which enabled her to break free from her miserable life.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The main theme of the story is self-efficacy as an imperative tool for young adults to cope with their past and pursue their intended future. Some of the subject matters in my novella

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includes overcoming oppression, friendship, and searching for identity. The theme is depicted in the story through the main character's struggles, her battles to escape the oppressive life and build her self-confidence. The struggles lead to her mental transformation from an insecure person to an assured one. It results in her achieving the goals, which is escaping from the orphanage.

Plot

As the hook, the prologue gives a flashback to Etta's past in which she saw her family die in a fire. Then, the story opens with a brief overview of the children's life in the orphanage as the exposition. For six days a week, Etta was happy living in the orphanage. She had a lot of friends, good nurses, and delicious food.

On the seventh day of the week, every child should visit the "Father's" office. Father was the owner of the orphanage, who had a supernatural ability to make the children laugh and turn their laughter into white roses. The children would continue to laugh until their happiness was drained, until only emptiness was left. The children are told that it was the only way they could give back to the orphanage after all of the kindness and happiness they had received.

The conflict appears on Etta's fifteenth birthday. She was very happy. But at the end of the day, she was summoned to the Father's office. Father made Etta laugh so hard until she lost her voice. Etta left Father's room with a headache and accidentally entered the wrong room.

The rising action began when Etta discovered the dead body of her friend, May. Etta fell unconscious because of that. When she woke up, she found that a nurse, Clara, had been taking care of her, and she told her about the dead body. After being persuaded, Clara explained the truth about the orphanage to Etta. She revealed that all children here were taken care of so that Father could harvest their happiness. Father turned their laughter into flowers and sold the flowers to wealthy state officials.

When the children reached maturity, that is when they stopped producing flowers. The first sign of developing maturity is when they develop romantic desires. Then, they were considered fully mature when they had more and more personal desires. Once the children could not produce flowers, Father would give them two choices, either working as state officials and supporting the transaction or not. Some children agreed to work in the government given the high-salary and the opportunity to enjoy instant happiness. Meanwhile, the children who rejected Father's offer to work in the government were 'removed'.

The nurse, Clara, encouraged Etta to run away from the orphanage. At first, Etta did not believe in herself. Apparently, Etta blamed herself for not being able to save her family in the fire incident. She, then, developed a conviction that she did not have control over her life. The nurse gave Etta a diary of a girl who successfully ran away from the orphanage. After reading the diary, Etta was inspired by the girl's bravery and learned that there was a secret passage to get out of the orphanage. After her successful attempt in saving her best friend, Etta started to believe that she can achieve her goals. That belief was also reinforced by the affirmation from Clara and Asuka. From that moment, Etta set her heart for her first dream in life, bringing all children out of the orphanage.

Etta prepared herself and the children. She learned the skills to open the secret passage and gathered her friends. During the preparation, she was haunted by her past that caused her to doubt herself once more. On the D-day, the story reaches its climax. The children carried out the mission. However, Father interrupted. To distract him, Etta burned the orphanage. That brave step returned Etta's confidence. However, Father managed to chase Etta and her friends once

more. Etta and Father had a heated conversation which revealed Father's past. Remembering his trauma made him grieving. There were sacks of rose petals stored in the tunnel, and he munched on those petals to gain instant happiness.

For the resolution, the overdose of happiness drove Father crazy, and he fell, died. Etta and her friends were able to run away, and Etta got a good job. She returned to the orphanage as a donor, while Miss Clara became the new head of the orphanage.

Characters

Main Characters

- **Etta**
Age: 15 years old

Etta has been an orphan since she was five. She has long, black hair, styled in two braids. Her eyes are dark and her cheeks blushed in pink. She is still pictured as immature, since she has not yet developed romantic and other personal desires. This psychological development is based on Erik Erikson's theory from his book titled *The Life Cycle Completed* (1998). After developing their identity, young adults enter a stage called intimacy versus isolation from age 18 until 40 years old. Experiencing intimacy means that they are successful in developing intimate, romantic relationships and in opening up to others about their lives (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). They have positive relationships with friends, family, and their significant others. Developing a romantic relationship is an important event at this stage. Because Etta has not yet developed the desire to have a romantic relationship, she is still able to live in the orphanage.

Etta's most prominent trait is that she has learned helplessness. Her family died in a fire and she could do nothing to help them. That uncontrollable incident made her believe that she is not capable of controlling her life. It stopped her from making goals about her future. Before she decided to save all children from the orphanage, her biggest ambition was only to have a cat, and she thought it was ambitious enough. She was easily reminded of her past and her thoughts were full of self-doubt until she learned to develop self-efficacy.

However, Etta has a big heart and is very loyal, which makes her well-liked among the other children. She always thinks about her friends instead of her own needs only. This trait later influences her goal to save all of the children in the orphanage. Another good trait of hers is that she has good observation and a knack to produce out of the box ideas. She uses her abilities to help her friends and lead them to escape the orphanage.

- **Father**
Age: 50 years old

He is the villain in this novella. He is the current owner of the orphanage, and the children call him Father. His prominent feature is his lips, stretching wide from one cheek to another when he smiles or laughs. He also has a pair of yellow eyes, just like a cat. His charm lies in his laughter. It is so contagious that people who see it will also laugh, if he wants them to. Besides, he also possesses a supernatural ability, which is turning children's laughter into flowers. Back then, Father was the son of the orphanage's previous owner. When he was a child, he used his special abilities to entertain the children in the orphanage. But later his parents were killed during a riot. Before they died, they told Father, their only child, to keep the orphanage and the

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children safe. To fulfill his parents' wish, Father strived to raise money for the orphanage by selling the children's happiness to the wealthy state officials. He even pushed aside his own feelings and empathy toward the children. He has no idea how miserable the children feel when their happiness is taken. Thus, he kept selling the children's happiness, believing that it is for their own good.

Supporting Characters:

- **Clara**

Age: 25 years old

Clara is the nurse who supports Etta during her venture in achieving her dream. She has a pair of clear eyes and a bit bruised lips. She was once an orphan raised in Father's orphanage, but she ran away. She wrote a diary, recording her thoughts and actions, which is later read by Etta. A young Clara was curious and hopeful, depicted from her diary's tone of voice. That nature made her actively pursue her goal of escaping from the orphanage. Her diary becomes a role model and a source of inspiration for Etta.

In her process of running away, she was hurt by Father. The wound forced her to undergo healing that changes her face. After she ran away, Clara still maintains her ideal to save the children living in the orphanage. As she prepared herself to return to the orphanage, she grew from a rather reckless girl into a wiser woman. After ten years, she returned to the orphanage, with a different face, to carry out her mission of saving the children.

- **Asuka**

Age: 15 years old

She is Etta's best friend. Her outgoing and relaxed nature makes her compatible with the timid and doubtful Etta. She is a pragmatic person. She knew she was left in the orphanage by her parents due to monetary problems. Instead of having a hard feeling towards them, she thought her parent's decision was right. Asuka was once helped by Etta to escape from the weekly visit to Father's office when she was ill.

Conflicts

My novella features three types of conflicts. The first is external conflict, specifically man against man, in which two characters who have opposed viewpoints, beliefs, or objectives (Likumahuwa, 2001). In my creative work, Etta, the protagonist, opposes Father and the nurses in the orphanage. Etta seeks to control her future and protect her friends, while Father sells the children's happiness to government officials to ensure their safety, and the nurses support him for high salaries. The second conflict is man versus society, which is a conflict involving one character who has opposed belief against a community (Likumahuwa, 2001). This is presented through Etta's rebellion against the nurses, who represent societal prejudices against orphans. The third conflict is internal, man versus self, in which the person is battling with his/her psychological problems, for example inner confusion (Likumahuwa, 2001). This is portrayed through Etta's struggles with her self-doubt after discovering the truth about the orphanage. She has inner battles about whether to escape or submit to oppression, doubting her ability to achieve her goals. This internal conflict, emphasizing the mental process of developing self-efficacy, is the dominant theme in my novella.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this creative work is to show the significance of self-efficacy to young adults. Specifically, I discuss the cause of lack of self-efficacy and how to develop it. For the first issue, I use the theory of learned helplessness to explore why lack of self-efficacy happens. The theory is implemented in my novella through the main character as she struggles with her past. The flashbacks convey an uncontrollable event that happened in her past, in which her family died in a fire. The memories keep occurring throughout the story. In the initial chapters, the main character is debilitated by her past and she has negative inner thoughts. Later, when she appears to almost overcome her negative view of herself, her past haunts her again and becomes a setback for her.

For the second issue, I use the theory of developing self-efficacy through three ways, which are mastery experience, vicarious experience, and verbal persuasion. The theory is applied in the creative work through the main character's effort to master the skills needed to achieve her goal, which are tricking the main villain, Father, and opening the locked trapdoor. For the vicarious experience, the main character makes a diary of her senior who successfully escaped the orphanage as her role model. She learns about the secret way out of the orphanage and she was inspired by the diarist's boldness and positive attitude. Last, for the verbal persuasion, the main character is constantly reminded of her good qualities by her best friend and her nurse. Her best friend often commends the main character's good observation and out of the box ideas, which were once useful to save her. The nurse, who knows her as a bright girl in class, also encourages her and states her trust in her capabilities. Even though the main character experiences threats and setbacks, she perseveres in pursuing her goal. After undergoing the process of developing her confidence to achieve her goals through chapter 4 until chapter 5, in the last chapter she proves that she is capable of achieving her goal.

In the process of writing my thesis, I found that self-efficacy is not a widely known topic. Most people are not familiar with it and not many articles talk about it yet. Meanwhile, according to Albert Bandura's theory, self-efficacy is an important factor for goal achievement and the lack of it is debilitating. However, my novella only talks about self-efficacy for young adults, so there are opportunities to explore other age groups' perspectives. I would suggest that the future creative works explore self-efficacy from the perspective of children, especially with traumatic experiences. Children from such backgrounds are more likely to suffer from lack of self-efficacy, also known as learned helplessness. It causes children to be passive instead of actively pursuing their goals. Therefore, they will benefit from understanding self-efficacy and how to develop it from an early age.

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