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A PASSWORD TO DIE: ANALYZING CHARACTERS' PERSONALITY IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *TEN LITTLE NIGGERS*

Dian Fajrina

Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh, INDONESIA

Email: dfajrina80@gmail.com

Abstract

Ten Little Niggers first published in 1939, was Agatha Christie's best seller novel and the only novel she wrote where there was no detective to solve the mystery. The story began by introducing eight persons who were invited to *The Indian Island* by a person who claimed to be an old friend. Arriving in the island, the guests were only welcomed by a couple who were hired to be the house keeper and the cook. One by one of ten persons living in that house were killed based on the nursery rhyme hanged on the wall of each room. This paper is aimed to find out the reason and the personality of each character which resulted in them being killed. Content analysis was applied to gather and analyze the data from the novel. It was found out that Marston was the first to be killed because of his careless personality and the least sin he made in the past. Claythorne was the last to be killed because she made the biggest sin and therefore, suffered a lot from fear and guilt which made her hang herself with the equipment prepared by the murderer.

Keywords: *Mystery novel, personality, character.*

INTRODUCTION

Agatha Christie is well-known for her thriller mystery books. Many of her books have been translated into several different languages and some are adapted for film. One of her mystery books, *Ten Little Niggers* (Christie, 1994), first published in 1939, was considered as Christie's best seller novel and the only novel she wrote where there was no detective to solve the case. The book was first published under the title *Ten Little Niggers*, and changed to *And Then There Were None* for the publication in America. Later, it was also entitled *Ten Little Indians*. The story tells about 10 people invited to *The Indian Island* by someone who claimed to know them. Tension begins when they were murdered one by one based on the nursery rhyme pattern. The question for this study is, "What is the personality of each character which made them be chosen to be killed based on the nursery rhyme?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character

Character is "a "person" in a literary work, as McGee says "Characters have moral and psychological features that make them human in some way or another" (McGee, 2001, p. 5). Terenas (2014) argues that readers who read Christie's novels will find the characters in her novels seem to be alive. It was because Christie constructed her characters carefully depending on the strata they belong to. In the story of *Ten Little Niggers*, the ten characters are from different strata and age, and

Christie successfully created the dialogues and described details in the story based on who are talking, when and where the dialogue takes place, and what and how something happens. One example is Ms. Brent, who is described as a religious woman and spends her time reading Bible. She believes that the devil must have possessed one of them to be the murderer (Christie, 1994).

Personality

Personality as Larsen & Buss stated (2005, cited in Mayer, 2007a, p. 1), is "the set of psychological traits and mechanisms within the individual that are organized and relatively enduring and that influence his or her interactions with, and adaptations to, the intrapsychic, physical, and social environments". Personality deals with issues of human behavior (Mayer, 2007b). In the story of *Ten Little Niggers*, the characters' maintained their psychological traits which resulted in their being killed because the murderer had already anticipated the thing that the target victim would do in a certain created situation.

Summary of the Story

Eight people were invited to Indian Island by a mysterious person. Vera Claythorne was hired during her holiday to be the secretary; Philip Lombard and William Blore were hired to take care for the jewelry during the weekend. Dr. Armstrong was hired to give a report on the health of the wife of the Indian Island owner. Emily Brent, General Macarthur, Tony Marston, and Judge Wargrave were invited by someone who claimed to be an old friend.

Arriving on the island, the guests were welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, the butler and housekeeper, who had been in that house for only two days earlier than the guests. Rogers said that the host of the house, Mr. Owen, would arrive the next day. After dinner that evening, the guests were shocked by a recorded voice accusing each of them of a crime they committed in the past, which was as follows (Christie, 1994, pp. 44-45):

1. *Edward George Armstrong, that you did upon the 14th day of March, 1925, caused the death of Louisa Mary Clees.*
2. *Emily Caroline Brent, that upon the 5th of November, 1931 you were responsible for the death of Beatrice Taylor.*
3. *William Henry Blore that you brought about the death of James Stephen Landor on October 10th, 1928.*
4. *Vera Elizabeth Claythorne, that on the 11th day of August, 1935 you killed Cyril Ogilvie Hamilton.*
5. *Philip Lombard, that upon a date in February, 1932, you were guilty of the death of twenty-one men, members of an East African tribe.*
6. *John Gordon Macarthur, that on the 4th of January, 1917, you deliberately sent your wife's lover, Arthur Richmond, to his death.*
7. *Anthony James Marston, that upon the 14th day of November last you were guilty of the murder of John and Lucy Combes.*
- 8.9. *Thomas and Ethel Rogers, that on the 6th of May, 1929, you brought about the death of Jennifer Brady.*
10. *Lawrence John Wargrave, that upon the 10th day of June, 1930 you were guilty of the murder of Edward Seton".*

As they were discussing on what was happening, Tony Marston drank poisoned whiskey and died. Frightened, the guests decided to go to bed.

The morning came, and Mrs. Rogers was found dead in her sleep after taking some sedative. Blore, Lombard, and Armstrong decided to search for the murderer by walking around the island. Meanwhile, General Macarthur, already felt guilty, sat by the sea and waited for his turn to be murdered. Before lunch, Dr. Armstrong found the General dead of a hit to his head. The remaining guests had a discussion on what was happening to them. They decided that one of them must be the killer.

The next morning, Rogers was killed while chopping wood in preparation for breakfast. The guests felt sure that the series of murders were conducted based on the nursery rhyme, and that the ten Indian figures on the dining table disappeared one by one each time a person died. The nursery rhyme went like this:

*Ten little Indian boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self and then there were nine.
Nine little Indian boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself and then there were eight.
Eight little Indian boys travelling in Devon;
One said he'd stay there and then there were seven.
Seven little Indian boys chopping up sticks;
One chopped himself in halves and then there were six.
Six little Indian boys playing with a hive;
A bumblebee stung one and then there were five
Five little Indian boys going in for law;
One got in Chancery and then there were four.
Four little Indian boys going out to sea;
A red herring swallowed one and then there were three.
Three little Indian boys walking in the zoo;
A big bear hugged one and then there two.
Two little Indian boys sitting in the sun;
One got frizzled up and then there was one.
One little Indian boy left all alone;
He went and hanged himself and then there were none.
(Christie, 1994, pp. 32-33).*

After breakfast, Emily Brent who did not feel very well stayed in the dining room alone. Soon she was found dead by having an injection in her neck with poison. The remaining guests decided to be always together to make sure that no one would be the next victim. Finally, Vera went to the bathroom, but she was shocked by a piece of seaweed hanging from the ceiling and screamed out. Blore, Lombard, and Armstrong hurriedly went upstairs to help her. But when they returned downstairs, Wargrave was wrapped in a red curtain that resembles courtroom robes and a red mark was found on his forehead. That night, Armstrong was missing, and so was another Indian figure on the table.

In the morning, Vera, Lombard, and Blore decided to stay together outside. In the afternoon, Blore decided to go back into the house to get some food. Blore was soon killed by a bear-shaped statue dropped from the second-story window, as he entered the house.

Realizing what happened to Blore, Vera and Lombard went back to the shore, and found Armstrong's drowned body on the beach. Assured that Lombard was the killer, Vera took Lombard's gun from his pocket and shot him.

Feeling safe, Vera returned to the house but found a noose in her room. Suddenly, she had a strange feeling to complete the last line of the nursery rhyme, and hanged herself.

The mystery was solved when a manuscript was found in a floating bottle. It was Wargrave who wrote the manuscript and explained how and why he did all of the murders, including murdering himself at the end.

METHODS

This study used content analysis method to analyze the data collected from the story (Mayring, 2014). There are three distinct approaches used in the current applications of content analysis: conventional, directed, or summative (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This study used conventional content analysis, where coding categories are derived directly from the text data. There are three main phases conducted in the process of analyzing the data: preparation, organizing and reporting (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 109). In the preparation phase, the writer carefully read *Ten Little Niggers* to comprehend the content. Next, all units in the book were analyzed, and the writer decided the subject matter that would be the focus of this study. The next step was to classify the data, here, the characters and their personality were highlighted. The highlight technique applied was by giving different colors to sentences related to the personality of the characters. One color is applied to highlight the personality of one character, so there are ten colors all together.

The writer then organized all of the personality of each character found in the book by writing the name of each character and listing all of his/her personality stated in the book. After the organizing process finished, the writer then tried to find links between the personality of each character and the way they were killed based on the order stated in the nursery rhyme hanged on the wall in each of the characters' bedroom. To help the writer found the links, she tried to gather the data from Ten Little Niggers book reviews. She also read about Agatha Christie's life as the author of the story to learn her way of thinking in writing her mystery novels. She read journals in literature and theories of personality to learn more in depth about people personality. The last step was to write the discussion based on the data obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses the characters and their personality which resulted in their getting killed. The killing orders were based on the degree of guilt they made in the past. "Those whose guilt was the lightest should, I decided, pass out first, and not suffer the prolonged mental strain and fear that the more cold-blooded offenders were to suffer" (p. 282). The first person to get killed was Anthony Marston, a rich, athletic and handsome young man. "Several young women looked at him admiringly his six feet of well-proportioned body, his crisp hair, tanned face, and intensely blue eyes" (p. 15). "At the wheel sat a young man, his hair blown back by the wind. In the blaze of the evening light he looked, not a man, but a young God, a Hero God out of some Northern Saga (p. 26). However, he was also a reckless person. He always drives his car in a maximum speed. "He let in the clutch with a roar and leapt up the narrow street. Old men and errand boys jumped for safety" (p. 15). This attitude led him to kill two small children in a car accident, but only spent some times in jail. This is what the murderer thinks of Marston, "Marston, I recognized, was a type born without that feeling of moral responsibility which most of us have. He was a moral pagan (p. 282). The attitude also led him to getting killed by drinking poisoned drink carelessly. "He picked up his drink and drank it off at a gulp. Too quickly, perhaps, he choked – choked badly. His face contorted, turned purple. He gasped for breath-then slid down off his chair, the glass falling from his hand" (p. 71).

The second person to get killed was Ethel Rogers, who-together with her husband-had just been in the house two days before the other guests arrived to serve as cook. "His wife was a pretty good cook, too" (p. 129). Mrs. Rogers was a frail woman who seemed to be always in fear. One of the guests, Ms. Claythorne, thought about Mrs. Rogers, "She looks frightened of her own shadow." Yes, that was it-frightened! She looked like a woman who walked in mortal fear. . . ." (p. 30). Marston's death made her faint and she needed to take some sedative pills before going to sleep. The pills led her to die.

General John Gordon Macarthur was the oldest guest and a retired army, as written "Old military gentleman-real Army by the look of him" (p. 27). Many years ago, he had a young wife whom he loved so much and still in love with her even though she had died after suffering from a hard sickness from losing her lover. It was the General who sent his wife lover to the front battle and died. After two people died in The Indian Island, General Macarthur kept a difficult feeling to tell which made him sat on the rock by the sea, recalling his memory and his feeling. "And now-this evening-a hidden voice had blared out that old hidden story. Had he dealt with it all right? Kept a stiff upper lip? Betrayed the right amount of feeling-indignation, disgust-but no guilt, no discomfiture? Difficult to tell (p. 81). The memory and the feeling he had inside him, made him defenselessly wait for his turn to be killed. "He knew, suddenly, that he didn't want to leave the island" (p. 82). "He hesitated, then he said in a low strange voice: "That's peace-real peace. To come to the end-not to have to go on...Yes, peace..." (p. 99). While sitting on the rock by the sea, Miss Claythorne came to approach him, but his respond was, "None of us are going to leave the island. That's the plan. You know it, of course, perfectly. What, perhaps, you can't understand is the relief!" (p. 123). At lunch time, Macarthur did not show up, Armstrong decided to look for him, but then Macarthur was found dead. "Armstrong was very pale. He said: "No question of heart failure or anything like that. Macarthur was hit with a life preserver or some such thing on the back of the head" (p. 143).

Thomas Rogers was a dignified butler. "The butler came forward bowing slightly. He was a tall man, grey haired and very respectable" (p. 29). Rogers continued doing all the household chores even after his wife was found dead. Two of the guests in the house, commented on Rogers, "Philip

Lombard said lightly: "Wonderful animal, the good servant. Carries on with an impassive countenance." Armstrong said appreciatively: "Rogers is a first-class butler, I'll say that for him!" (p. 129). Together with his wife, he took responsibility of the death of their former employer. Rogers was killed by a chopper to his head, "He was in the little wash-house across the yard. He had been chopping sticks in preparation for lighting the kitchen fire. The small chopper was still in his hand. A bigger chopper, a heavy affair, was leaning against the door-the metal of it stained a dull brown. It corresponded only too well with the deep wound in the back of Rogers' head. . . ." (p. 178).

Emily Brent was a religious woman who spent her days reading Bible. "Emily Brent, dressed in black silk ready for dinner, was reading her Bible" (p. 40). In her opinion, all of the killings were "Call it, if you prefer, an Act of God" (p. 94). Other than reading Bible, Miss Brent also spent her time by knitting. "Emily Brent had brought a small piece of embroidery out of her bag." (p. 43). "And Emily Brent, placid and righteous, sat knitting (p. 122). Miss Brent was a kind of person who has a certain attitude that follows strict rules. "In a non-smoking carriage Miss Emily Brent sat very upright as was her custom. She was sixty-five and she did not approve of lounging" (p. 9). Unlike the other characters, Emily Brent did not show any remorse feeling for what she did. Miss Brent said coldly: "There is no question of defense. I have always acted in accordance with the dictates of my conscience. I have nothing with which to reproach myself" (p. 69). She stayed in the dining room alone after lunch because of feeling giddy. It was that time the murderer came and injected her with a Cyanide. "At breakfast I slipped my last dose of Chloral into Miss Brent's coffee when I was refilling her cup. We left her in the dining-room. I slipped in there a little while later-she was nearly unconscious and it was easy to inject a strong solution of Cyanide into her" (p. 284).

Judge Lawrence Wargrave was an old, intelligent, and retired judge, with a commanding personality. "Always looked half asleep, but was shrewd as could be when it came to a point of law... A hanging judge, some people said" (p. 35). Wargrave's personal appearance was described by Armstrong as he seemed to have ever known Wargrave, "Where had he seen that frog-like face, that tortoise-like neck that hunched up attitude eyes, and those pale shrewd little eyes? Of course – old Wargrave" (p. 35). At night, when Wargrave moved his false teeth, his appearance turned to be a ruthless person, "Carefully, Mr. Justice Wargrave removed his false teeth and dropped them into a glass of water. The shrunken lips fell in. It was a cruel mouth now, cruel and predatory" (p. 77). However, he was also a psychopath who planned the murders on the island. "I was eager to create a murder mystery that cannot be solved by anyone. But I realized that an artist would not be satisfied with the work of art itself. It was indisputable, that I have a desire to gain popularity. I admit it, that I have a desire to be known as a genius person" (p. 287). Wargrave planned to be died and asked Armstrong to help him ran his plan. "It was then that I intimated to Armstrong that we must carry our plan into effect. It was simply this-I must appear to be the next victim. That would perhaps rattle the murderer-at any rate once I was supposed to be dead I could move about the house and spy upon the unknown murderer" (p. 284). Wargrave pretended to be shot on his forehead in the evening and the only person who examined him was Armstrong. It was easy to do because there is no lamp, only a light from a candle. "We carried it out that evening. A little plaster of red mud on the forehead-the red curtain and the wool and the stage was set. The lights of the candles were very flickering and uncertain and the only person who would examine me closely was Armstrong" (p. 284).

Dr. Edward George Armstrong, a successful and respectable young doctor. "Dr. Armstrong was quick and efficient" (p. 88). However, he ever conducted an operation to his patient many years ago while he was drunk, which resulted the patient died on the operation table. Armstrong has a weak personality. The deaths on the Indian Island strongly affected him. "Armstrong was in a pitiable condition of nerves. He twitched and his hands shook. He lighted cigarette after cigarette and stubbed them out almost immediately. The forced inaction of their position seemed to gall him more than the others. Every now and then he broke out into a torrent of nervous speech (p. 204). Armstrong was also a kind of susceptible person and Wargrave knows this. He selected Armstrong to be his ally because Armstrong believed that it was impossible for a respectable person such as him or Wargrave to be the murderer. "I chose Armstrong. He was a gullible sort of man. He has ever seen me and knows my reputation and because it never occurred to him that someone like me could be a murderer!" (p. 283). Armstrong died in the middle of the night when Wargrave asked him to go outside of the house together to find the murderer. "I had a rendezvous with Armstrong outside the

house at a quarter to two. I took him up a little way behind the house on the edge of the cliff... It was quite easy. I uttered an exclamation, leant over the cliff, told him to look, wasn't that the mouth of a cave? He leant right over. A quick vigorous push sent him off his balance and splash into the heaving sea below" (p. 285).

William Henry Blore was a former police inspector. "Ex-Inspector Blore looked coarser and clumsier in build. His walk was that of a slow padding animal. His eyes were bloodshot. There was a look of mingled ferocity and stupidity about him. He was like a beast at bay ready to charge its pursuers" (p. 204). As a former policeman, he had a habit to live a well-regulated life, which made it easier for the murderer to predict what he will do next. He was killed when he entered the house to get lunch at lunch time. "Lombard said softly: "Feeding time at the Zoo! The animals are very regular in their habits!" (p. 244). Blore was killed by a big clock, made from great block of white-bear-shaped marble, dropped from the second floor, when he entered the house at lunch time. "They found Blore. He was spread-eagled on the stone terrace on the east side, his head crushed and mangled by a great block of white marble" (p. 248).

Philip Lombard was a kind of person who believed in his own capability to cope with a hard situation. "...the lean hungry looking gentleman with the quick eyes, he was a queer one, ..." (p. 27). "He moved like a panther, smoothly and noiselessly. There was something of the panther about him altogether. A beast of prey-pleasant to the eye" (p. 39). "A tall man with a brown face, light eyes set rather close together and an arrogant almost cruel mouth" (p. 6). However, after several killings took places, it was hard for Lombard to control his emotion feeling. "For the first time his voice was uneven, almost shrill. It was as though even his nerves, seasoned by a long career of hazards and dangerous undertakings, had given out at last. He said violently: "It's mad!-absolutely mad-we're all mad!" (p. 196). His weakness was that he underestimated the strength of a woman. He did not realize that Vera stole his gun from his pocket and soon shot him right on his heart.

Vera Claythorne was an intelligent, ordinary young woman, "Nice looking young lady-but the ordinary kind, not glamorous - no Hollywood touch about her" (p. 27). Vera was a former governess who let a small child under her care sank. However, no one accused her on the "accident", not even the police, "He had even complimented her on her presence of mind and courage, she remembered" (p. 6). She kept feeling guilty about what she had done which resulted in her reacting nervously to the series of murders on the island. The nursery rhyme had a powerful effect on Vera which made her suffer from attacks of hysteria:

"A sound of laughter was heard-they turned sharply. Vera Claythorne was standing in the yard. She cried out in a high shrill voice, shaken with wild laugh. "Do they keep bees on this island? Tell me that. Where do we go for honey? Ha! ha!" They stared at her uncomprehendingly. It was as though the sane well balanced girl had gone mad before their eyes. She went on in that high unnatural voice. "Don't stare like that! As though you thought I was mad. It's sane enough what I'm asking. Bees, hives, bees! Oh, don't you understand? Haven't you read that idiotic rhyme? It's up in all your bedrooms-put there for you to study! We might have come here straightaway if we'd had sense. Seven little Indian boys chopping up sticks. And the next verse. I know the whole thing by heart, I tell you! Six little Indian boys playing with a hive. And that's why I'm asking-do they keep bees on this island?-isn't it funny?-isn't it damned funny...?" She began laughing wildly again. (p. 179-180).

The hysteria feeling led her hung herself with the equipment prepared by the murderer.

CONCLUSION

Ten Little Niggers tells a story of a series of murders committed by Wargrave, a retired judge who was also a psychopath. The victims were chosen because they committed a crime in their past but they were never in jail to pay for what they did. Wargrave committed the murders based on a nursery rhyme hanged on the wall of the room of each victim. The victims died in the order planned by Wargrave, since Wargrave had already learnt their personalities, so he could predict what the victims would do in such a situation.

The first person to die was Marston because he was a reckless person and carelessly drank on a poisoned drink. The next person to die was Mrs. Rogers who was always haunted by the crime she

and her husband did in the past. She got fainted after listening to the accusation and took a sleep early after taking some sedative. It was on that time Wargrave came in and put Potassium Cyanide in her drink and then drank it to her while she was very sleepy. The third person to die was General Macarthur, who defenselessly waited for his turn to be killed. The fourth victim was Mr. Rogers, the professional butler, who still did his duties without thinking of his safety. The next victim was Ms. Brent, who kept thinking that she always does the right thing and confidently sitting alone in the dinner room when she felt giddy. Wargrave, the real murderer, pretended to be murdered. Armstrong, the next victim, was killed because he is a kind of susceptible and gullible person. Blore lived a regular life and got killed when he entered the house for lunch. Lombard's weakness was he underestimated the strength of a woman, and he was shot by Vera. Vera was so much affected by all of the killings in the order stated in the nursery rhyme. She then hanged herself with the equipment prepared by the murderer as the last line of the rhyme sounds, "One little Indian boy left all alone; He went and hanged himself and then there were none" (p. 33).

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