

CHILD ABUSE IN WIESEL'S NIGHT NOVEL (A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH)

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ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini menganalisis isu kekerasan terhadap anak dalam novel Night karya Elie Wiesel dengan pendekatan sosiologis. Fokus penelitian ini adalah mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis dan dampak kekerasan terhadap anak yang dialami oleh anak-anak selama peristiwa Holocaust sebagaimana digambarkan dalam novel tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori jenis-jenis kekerasan terhadap anak dari McCabe dan Murphy (2017), serta teori dampak kekerasan dari Shannon (2009). Dengan metode deskriptif kualitatif, peneliti menganalisis bukti tekstual dalam novel untuk mengungkap bagaimana kekerasan ditampilkan dan dampaknya terhadap karakter anak-anak. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa anak-anak dalam Night mengalami kekerasan fisik yang parah, seperti pemukulan dan kerja paksa; kekerasan emosional, seperti rasa takut, perpisahan, dan penghinaan; serta penelantaran, melalui kekurangan makanan, rasa aman, dan perawatan.

Kata kunci: Kekerasan Terhadap Anak, Night, Holocaust

ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the issue of abuse against children in Elie Wiesel's Night novel through a sociological approach. The focus of this study is to identify the types and impacts of abuse experienced by children during the Holocaust as depicted in the novel. This study uses McCabe and Murphy's (2017) theory on the types of child violence and Shannon's (2009) theory on the impact of abuse. Using descriptive qualitative methods, the writer analyzes textual evidence in the novel to reveal how abuse is depicted and how it affects the characters of children. The research findings indicate that children in Night experience severe physical abuse, such as beatings and forced labor; emotional violence, including fear, separation, and humiliation; and neglect, which manifests itself through lack of food, security, and care.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Night, Holocaust

INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the most powerful tools used by human beings to express experiences, ideas, and feelings. It reflects the realities of life and allows people to share what they think, feel, and go through in various situations. Through language, literature captures personal, social, and even historical aspects of human life. It not only entertains readers but also helps them understand complex

human emotions and social issues. According to Sharma et al. (2022), literature comes in various forms, such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and prose, each offering a unique way to present and explore the human experience.

Among various literary forms, the novel stands out as a rich and powerful medium to present real-life social problems. A novel is more than just a story; it often reflects the world we live in. It shows the thoughts and actions of characters who face different social challenges and helps readers understand the meaning behind these experiences. As Pavel (2015) states, a novel is a long prose narrative that tells stories about human lives, their struggles, conflicts, and how they deal with their environment. Alexander (2020) also points out that novels play an important role in discussing various issues such as social inequality, poverty, trauma, and human rights. In this way, novels can be seen as mirrors that reflect the condition of society. One of the serious issues often discussed in the literature is child abuse. Child abuse is a painful and disturbing issue that affects children around the world. It refers to actions or neglect that cause physical, emotional, psychological, or even sexual harm to a child (Radell et al., 2021). Many people often associate child abuse with something that happens inside the home or family. However, in reality, child abuse can also happen in broader social settings, such as in schools, communities, or even during wars and social conflicts. Wiehe (2021) explains that literature can be an effective medium to explore child abuse, especially in situations where these issues are hidden, ignored, or difficult to talk about openly. Literature has the power to reveal these realities and give a voice to those who have been silenced.

A powerful example of this kind of literary work is the novel *Night* (2006) by Elie Wiesel. This novel tells the true story of Wiesel's own experience as a teenager during the Holocaust. The story follows Eliezer, a fifteen-year-old Jewish boy, who is taken with his family to the Auschwitz concentration camp. In the camp, he and other prisoners, especially children, are subjected to

unspeakable cruelty. They suffer from hunger, forced labor, physical beatings, and emotional despair. The children are treated not as human beings, but as worthless objects. Many of them are separated from their families, lose their sense of security, and are exposed to continuous fear and abuse. What makes this novel particularly heartbreaking is how it shows the emotional and psychological changes in Eliezer and other child characters. Eliezer, who begins the story as a hopeful and religious boy, slowly loses his faith, hope, and even his relationship with his father due to the extreme suffering. The bond between father and son is tested in the worst possible way. As the novel progresses, we see how the children are pushed beyond their limits, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. Some of them die, not only from starvation or illness, but also because they lose the will to live. There are two reasons why the writer chooses to focus on this topic. First, child abuse remains a global issue that continues to harm millions of children around the world, especially in places affected by war, poverty, and social instability. Second, although many studies have been conducted on child abuse, most of them focus on abuse that occurs in the home or within the family. In contrast, this study aims to examine child abuse in a wider social context, particularly in times of war, where the abuse is not only personal but also part of a violent social system.

To understand the issue of child abuse in the novel *Night* more deeply, this study uses a sociological approach. According to Passell (2013), sociology helps us examine how people behave in groups, how society influences individual lives, and how power, inequality, and conflict affect human interactions. In literature, a sociological approach helps us understand how characters are shaped by their social conditions, and how social problems are presented through stories. As Tamrin (2025) explains, sociological literary criticism is useful in analyzing how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges social structures. This approach is especially relevant in analyzing *Night*, which is not only a personal memoir but also a narrative shaped by larger systems of oppression during the

Holocaust. The problems of the study that will be discussed in this study are What types of child abuse are presented in Ellie Wiesel's *Night* Novel? and What are the impacts of child abuse depicted in Elie Wiesel's *Night* Novel? The purposes of the study are to investigate types and impact of child abuse that are depicted in Ellie Wiesel's *Night* Novel.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of child abuse. The data in this study are analyzed using a descriptive qualitative study. Williams (2007) emphasized that a descriptive qualitative study involves intentional application of data collection methods to explain, describe, and interpret. This study employed the qualitative techniques because, according to the definition given above, the data were explained and described using the theory. The data source utilized in this study was *Night* Novel. During the data collection process, the writer employs a series of systematic steps to gather data for this study. First, reading the novel to understand its context, characters, and plot. Second, collecting the identified sentences or phrases in a structured format to track instances of abuse. The last, identifying relevant sentences or phrases and noting sentences or phrases that suggest or describe forms of child abuse. Besides, the writer carried out data analysis through the following steps. Firstly, classifying the collected sentences and phrases into specific types and impacts of child abuse based on the chosen theoretical framework. Secondly, analyzing the words, phrases, and sentences that indicate child abuse based on the theory and describing the phenomena in the novel using qualitative methodology during the data analysis procedure. The way the words, sentences, phrases, and paragraphs are arranged in the description explains the phenomenon under investigation. Lastly, concluding the study results based on the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are presented and discussed in relation to the forms and impacts of child abuse depicted in Wiesel's *Night*. The analysis focuses on identifying specific types of abuse experienced by children during the Holocaust and interpreting how these abuses influence their physical, emotional, and behavioral conditions. Each type of abuse is examined based on textual evidence and supported by relevant theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how child abuse is portrayed in the novel.

Types of Child Abuse

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is one of the most common forms of abuse experienced by children, both within the family and in the wider community. This type of abuse often has significant physical health consequences for victims, especially children. Physical abuse includes intentional acts that cause physical harm to a child, such as hitting, kicking, burning, or intentionally causing injury. These acts can occur in a variety of settings, including the home, school, or other social settings. The explanation of the physical abuse experienced by children in the *Night* novel is explained in more detail in the following explanation and quotes below.

*...abruptly, our doors opened. Strange-looking creatures, dressed in striped jackets and black pants, jumped into the wagon. **Holding flashlights and sticks, they began to strike at us left and right**, shouting: "Everybody out! Leave everything inside. Hurry up!" We jumped out...(Night, 2006:28)*

The quote above describes a very tense and brutal atmosphere when the narrator, Eliezer, a Jewish child, and other prisoners have just arrived at the Birkenau concentration camp. In the dark and tense night atmosphere, the guards were forced out of the carriage by a group of uniformed guards

who were depicted as strange creatures, reflecting the dehumanization experienced by the victims. The guards entered the carriage carrying flashlights and sticks, and without warning, they began to beat Eliezer and the other prisoners left and right. This beating was carried out on the Jews, who included children, namely Eliezer, and also Mrs. Schächter's child. This beating was carried out randomly and brutally, without considering the physical condition of the victims, who were already weak due to the long and inhumane journey.

*Around five o'clock in the morning, we were expelled from the barrack. **The Kapos were beating us again, but I no longer felt the pain.** A glacial wind was enveloping us. We were naked, holding our shoes and belts. (Night, 2006:36)*

The above quote describes the extreme conditions in which Eliezer, a Jewish child, was beaten along with other prisoners, as seen in the sentence above, and they were forced out of the barracks at dawn, naked and exposed to the cold wind. In this situation, he and other prisoners were beaten by the Kapos, prisoners who were given the power by the Nazis to control their fellow prisoners. This beating was a clear form of physical abuse, which was the use of physical force that causes pain or suffering. Although Eliezer said that he "no longer felt the pain," this statement actually showed how often he experienced abuse until his body and mind became numb, a psychological response to extreme and continuous physical suffering. Another physical abuse can be seen below.

He threw himself on me like a wild beast, beating me in the chest, on my head, throwing me to the ground and picking me up again, crushing me with ever more violent blows, until I was covered in blood.. (Night, 2006:53)

Based on the quote above, there is a real example of child physical abuse against children. In the scene, the main character, Eliezer, experienced brutal abuse from Idek, a Kapo in a concentration camp. He was beaten blindly on the chest and head, thrown to the ground, then lifted again, only to be beaten

even harder until his body was covered in blood. In the quote, the abuse committed by Idek was a real form of extreme physical torture. Idek's actions not only caused physical pain but psychological trauma for the main character. Although Eliezer did not fight back and endures the pain, Idek interpreted it as a form of resistance, which caused the abuse to get worse.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is a form of non-physical abuse that is carried out by hurting feelings, undermining dignity, or causing prolonged psychological pressure on children. Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse is more directed at actions such as insults, threats, emotional neglect, verbal expressions, intimidation, or the creation of an environment full of fear and insecurity, which continuously damages the child's mental and emotional development.

In a fraction of a second, I could see my mother, my sisters, move to the right. Tzipora was holding Mother's hand. I saw them walking farther and farther away; Mother was stroking my sister's blond hair, as if to protect her. And I walked on with my father, with the men. I didn't know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever...(Night, 2006:29)

In the quotation above, Eliezer experienced profound emotional abuse when he was suddenly separated from his mother and younger sister, Tzipora, without explanation or opportunity to say goodbye. Based on the theory, it was included in Rejecting. Eliezer was separated from his mother and sister without explanation or a chance to say goodbye. This cold, emotionless order reflects a form of emotional rejection, in which the child is suddenly deprived of affective support and family ties. It is a denial of the child's emotional needs. The short, emotionless command given by a Waffen SS soldier to separate a man and woman becomes the starting point of emotional trauma that destroys Eliezer's sense of security and family ties.

Not far from us, flames, huge flames, were rising from a ditch. Something was being burned there. A truck drew close and unloaded its hold: small children. Babies! Yes, I did see this, with my own eyes ... children thrown into the flames. (Is it any wonder that ever since then, sleep tends to elude me?) (Night, 2006:32)

The quote above illustrates one of the most extreme forms of emotional abuse experienced by Eliezer in the novel *Night*. Eliezer witnessed the horrific cruelty of other children being burned alive. This event created a climate of fear, despair, and deep trauma that was the essence of terrorizing. Eliezer, still a teenager, was forced to face the reality that humans could do such barbaric things to the most innocent of creatures, babies and young children. This trauma was so profound that it changed the fundamental structure of how he understood the world, which is the most destructive form of psychological abuse to a child's mental development.

"Listen to me, you son of a swine!" said Idek coldly. "So much for your curiosity. You shall receive five times more if you dare...(Night, 2006:58)

Based on the quote above, the character Idek in the novel *Night* by Wiesel described one form of emotional abuse, based on the theory, namely verbally assaulting that lowers a person's self-esteem. This emotional abuse focuses on insults, verbal abuse, and creating a sense of fear or inferiority in the victim. In the sentence, Idek not only called Elie a "son of a swine," which is a rude insult, but also emotionally pressures Elie by humiliating him in front of others.

Neglect

Neglect is a form of child abuse that is defined as the failure to provide the basic needs for a child's physical, emotional, medical, educational, and adequate supervision. Neglect can be categorized into several types: physical neglect (failure to provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter), emotional neglect (lack of psychological support and affection), educational neglect (not

providing access to education), and supervised neglect (leaving a child without adequate supervision).

*The evacuation was postponed to the next day. **Hunger was tormenting us; we had not eaten for nearly six days except for a few stalks of grass and some potato peels found on the grounds of the kitchens.** (Night, 2006:14-15)*

This quote gives a very powerful picture of child neglect in the form of deprivation of basic needs, especially the need for nutrition, which is a fundamental right of every child. The quotation also shows the extreme level of hunger that children in this situation are experiencing, and this is included in severe neglect. What makes this a form of neglect is the fact that this hunger was not natural or due to a disaster, but was the result of a system that deliberately creates conditions where children do not get enough food to survive.

*The heat was oppressive. Sweat streamed from people's faces and bodies. **Children were crying for water. Water! There was water close by inside the houses, the backyards, but it was forbidden to break rank. "Water, Mother, I am thirsty!"** (Night, 2006:16)*

The quotation above from Elie Wiesel's novel *Night* illustrates a form of systemic and structured child neglect in the context of the early stages of the deportation of the Jewish people. This form of neglect is included in Severe Neglect. Children were thirsty even though water was available, but their access was denied for the sake of the marching order. This showed extreme disregard for the most basic need (drinking water), which directly risks the health and safety of children. It was categorized as severe because it caused real suffering and was at risk of death.

It was there for the taking. An open tomb. A summer Sun. WE HAD SPENT the day without food. But we were not really hungry. We were exhausted. (Night, 2006:17)

The quotation above indicates severe neglect. Eliezer was deprived of food for days in displacement situations, with no guarantee of shelter or emotional support. This was a serious form of neglect of

physical and psychological needs, especially in the context of collective trauma. It was considered severe because this condition causes risks of malnutrition and developmental disorders. Child neglect is evident in the collective failure to meet children's basic needs, such as food, a safe place, and protection from trauma. This was the most basic form of child neglect, namely the failure to meet children's basic needs, especially food.

The Impact of Child Abuse

Physical Health Consequences

The physical consequences of child abuse are the most visible and direct form of abuse experienced. These physical impacts are not only limited to visible wounds or injuries, but also include a variety of health disorders that can affect the child's overall development and function. Physical abuse of children can result in a wide spectrum of injuries, from bruises, cuts, and broken bones to traumatic head injuries and life-threatening internal organ damage. However, the physical impacts of child abuse are not always acute or immediately visible. The following are the physical health consequences of child abuse experienced by children in the novel *Night*.

*Our clothes were to be thrown on the floor at the back of the barrack. **There was a pile there already. New suits, old ones, torn overcoats, rags. For us it meant true equality: nakedness. We trembled in the cold.*** (Night, 2006:35)

The quote above describes a very heartbreaking moment, when the prisoners, including children, were forced to take off their clothes and stand naked in the cold weather. The phrase “We trembled in the cold” was not only a literary description, but reflected the real body reaction to extreme physical abuse. When a child is forced to stand naked in cold temperatures, his body would experience various biological reactions that were very dangerous. Children had a body temperature control system that

not as strong as adults. As a result, they lost body heat much faster. The trembling that occurs was the body's natural way of trying to stay warm by making muscles contract automatically to produce heat.

*He threw himself on me like a wild beast, **beating me in the chest, on my head, throwing me to the ground and picking me up again, crushing me with ever more violent blows, until I was covered in blood... ..I was aching all over. I felt a cool hand wiping the blood from my forehead.***(Night, 2006:53)

The quote above clearly depicts the physical consequences experienced by Eliezer due to the brutal abuse in the concentration camp. He was beaten blindly, on the chest, head, and all over his body, until his body was covered in blood. The abuse not only caused open wounds, but also bruises, bleeding. The pain he suffered was so great that he had to bite his own lip to keep from screaming, indicating the extraordinary suffering and emotional suppression of his helplessness. After the abuse, the child's body became very weak, until he had to drag himself to the corner of the room, depicting extreme fatigue and loss of physical strength.

... All of a sudden, he had terrible stomach cramps. "My stomach aches," he whispered to me. But, while running, he began to undo his buttons and yelled to me: "I can't go on. My stomach is bursting..." "Make an effort, Z a l man...Try..." "I can't go on," he groaned. He lowered his pants and fell to the ground.(Night, 2006:86)

The quote above is another example of the physical health consequences experienced by the character Zalman. Zalman's story illustrated the severe physical health effects of systemic abuse on children during the Holocaust. Zalman was a Polish boy who was forced to follow a death march in extreme winter conditions, without food, rest, or shelter. As he marched, he experienced severe stomach cramps, possibly due to malnutrition, extreme exhaustion, or untreated digestive problems, as well as the cold. His already weakened body could no longer withstand it, and he eventually fell to the ground,

left behind in the line, which almost certainly meant his death.

Psychological Consequences

Child abuse has serious and complex psychological consequences. The impacts experienced include acute trauma, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, academic difficulties, and behavioral changes such as withdrawal or aggression. In addition, victims are at risk of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, persistent mental disorders, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, low self-esteem, and attachment disorders. The psychological impact of this trauma is also experienced by Eliezer and several other child characters in the *Night* novel by Elie Wiesel.

Some of the men spoke of God: His mysterious ways, the sins of the Jewish people, and the redemption to come. As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice. (Night, 2006:45)

The actions taken by Eliezer, as in the quote above, reflect the deep psychological impact of the extreme abuse and suffering experienced by Eliezer, which can be categorized as a form of child abuse in the context of the Holocaust. As a child who was previously very religious and lived in a Hasidic environment rich in spiritual tradition, Eliezer experienced a painful spiritual breakdown. He no longer prayed, not because he rejected the existence of God, but because he lost faith in His justice. This reflects a very deep crisis of faith, a form of psychological wound, where important values that had been the basis of his life were destroyed by a cruel reality that could not be explained logically.

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The above quote depicts a very traumatic and unimaginable moment: Eliezer, a teenager at the time, witnessed babies and young children being thrown into the flames to be burned alive. This was not

only a depiction of physical cruelty, but the culmination of moral and spiritual destruction witnessed by a child. In the context of psychology, an event like this was a form of extreme child abuse, not only for the direct victims (the children who were killed), but also for the children who witnessed the cruelty, such as Eliezer. Eliezer's statement above not only stated the facts but also confirms that the experience was so horrific that it was hard to believe, even for him. In addition, the next statement in brackets above shows classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, namely insomnia or sleep disturbances due to flashbacks and deep anxiety.

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Behavioral Consequences

Child abuse can leave a very serious impact not only emotionally and psychologically, but also in the form of deviant or problematic behavior in children. Children who experience physical, emotional, or sexual abuse often show behavioral changes such as aggression, withdrawal from social environments, difficulty concentrating, and impulsive or self-destructive behavior. They can also have difficulty building healthy relationships, show distrust of others, and experience disturbances in

emotional regulation. These behaviors are also experienced by children who are victims of child abuse in the *Night*.

In Buna, the pipe-were hated; they often displayed greater cruelty than their elders. I once saw one of them, a boy of thirteen, beat his father for not making his bed properly. As the old man quietly wept, the boy was yelling: "If you don't stop crying instantly, I will no longer bring you bread. Understood?" (Night, 2006:63)

In the quote, Wiesel described the behavioral impact of abuse on children that was so profound and complex. Children who lived in the cruelty of concentration camps such as Buna were not only victims, but in some cases, experienced behavioral changes by becoming perpetrators of abuse. A thirteen-year-old boy was depicted hitting his own father for a small mistake and threatening to withhold bread. These actions reflected the extreme shift in moral values due to the brutal and inhumane environment. The abuse that children experienced in the camps continuously blurs the line between right and wrong, kills empathy, and fosters aggressive and cruel behavior as a form of adaptation to the oppressive system. The child had lost respect for parents, something that was usually highly valued, indicating severe psychological damage. This was a direct impact of structural abuse that suppresses and damages the child's emotional development.

But the other threw himself on him. The old man mumbled something, groaned, and died. Nobody cared. His son searched him, took the crust of bread, and began to devour it. He didn't get far.

(Night, 2006:101-102)

The quote illustrates the very serious behavioral impact of extreme abuse (child abuse) experienced by children in the Holocaust. Meir, a child, beat his own father just to get a piece of bread. His father even tried to share food with him, but the extreme hunger and cruel conditions in the concentration

camp made Meir lose his sense of compassion and empathy. This action showed how severe trauma and extreme suffering can drastically change a child's behavior. Meir's behavior was a form of behavioral consequence due to trauma.

...I gave him what was left of my soup. But my heart was heavy. I was aware that I was doing it grudgingly. Just like Rabbi Eliahu's son, I had not passed the test."

(Night, 2006:107)

The quote above reflects the behavioral consequences experienced by children as a result of extreme abuse and ongoing psychosocial stress in the concentration camp environment. In this condition, Eliezer, the main character who was still a teenager, showed a change in attitude and behavior that was no longer entirely based on the values of affection and empathy that children usually had for their parents. Although he still gave his leftover food to his sick father, Elie admitted that he did it with a heavy heart and was not sincere. This attitude indicated a change in morals and the emergence of egoism as a survival mechanism in a situation full of suffering. He even realized that he was not much different from Rabbi Eliahu's son, who consciously left his father when he was in critical condition. This showed how the system of abuse that continues to befall children has damaged basic human values and family relationships.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis in the previous chapter, this study concludes that child abuse in Wiesel's *Night* appears in three primary forms, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect, and each profoundly affects the children in the narrative. Physical abuse is portrayed through beatings,

forced labor, and starvation; emotional abuse emerges in the form of insults, threats, and psychological pressure; while neglect is evident in the deprivation of basic needs such as food, care, and protection. These abuses lead to significant impacts categorized into physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences. Physically, children experience malnutrition, injuries, and even death; psychologically, they endure fear, hopelessness, and lasting trauma; and behaviorally, many, including Eliezer, exhibit emotional numbness, moral conflict, and withdrawal from others, even family members. Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of examining child abuse through literary works like *Night* to raise awareness of its severe and long-term consequences, demonstrating that child abuse harms the body, damages the mind, and extinguishes hope. Its effects can echo across generations; therefore, recognizing and addressing child abuse is not only a moral obligation but also an urgent social responsibility.

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