



LOSS AND DEPRESSION IN JENNIFER NIVEN'S ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses loss and depression in Jennifer Niven's novel, *All the Bright Places*. The novel represents people who undergo loss and depression because of losing a loved one. This is library research and applies mimetic theory proposed by Abrams saying that literature is an imitation of the real world. The analysis is focused on the loss and depression as a result of the death, neglect, or abandonment. The author creates Violet and Finch to represent people who undergo the situations. Violet loses her beloved sister and suffers from depression of feeling sad and guilty. Finch loses his parents' figure and care and the worst is he loses his freedom to make friend because of bullying, so he suffers from sadness and depression and ends in committing suicide. It is found that the author, Jennifer Niven through her novel *All the Bright Places* conveys that loss can make people depress and affect their lives, and many of them can suffer and live tragically.

Keywords: loss, bullying, depression, suicide.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jennifer Niven was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, on May 14, 1968 and raised in Indiana, the setting of *All the Bright Places*. Her mother Penelope Niven is an author and high school English teacher who is the author of the highly acclaimed Carl Sandburg: *A Biography* (1991), as well as five other books. One of these, *Voices and Silences* (1993), a biography of James Earl Jones was coauthored with the American actor. She attended high school at Richmond High School in Richmond, Indiana, then went to Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, and the American Film Institute in Los Angeles (jenniferniven.com).

She began to have a desire to become a writer because of her mother's influence and encouragement. From her, she learned to find a story in everything, and she learned never to limit herself or her imagination. She chooses to raise issues relating to mental illness, depression, and loss because people rarely bring flowers to suicide. Her thoughts about the stigma around mental health and suicide are what

make her novels different from other stories. She does not only write about these subjects, but she also writes for teens to be more sensitive about it, and more responsible (Caitlin).

All the Bright Places is one of the best of her novels that won many awards, namely the New York Times Bestseller, and GoodReads Choice Book Award of the Year. This novel has also been made into a film produced by Echo Lake Entertainment and Film Nation Entertainment. The film premiered through the Netflix platform in 2020 and received a lot of positive responses from audiences around the world.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Clarification of Terms

Loss is the feeling of sadness experienced when someone or something is taken away from you. It may have a range of feelings which could include shock, sadness, despair, anxiety, anger, guilt, loneliness, depression, and relief (Collins). It is a feeling in the individual that results from the absence of a thing either person or anything that was before there is. These



events can be in the form of death, divorce, accident, natural disasters, layoffs, and others (Joseph). Meanwhile, depression is a serious situation that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act. It causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease your ability to function at work and at home (psychiatry.org). Depression is a state of feeling sad, low spirits, and melancholy, specifically a mood disorder that is marked by varying degrees of sadness, despair, and loneliness and that is typically accompanied by inactivity, guilt, loss of concentration, antisocial, sleep disturbances, and sometimes suicidal tendencies (merriamwebster.com)

2.2 Theory and Method

This is a library research where data are collected from some libraries online, author's website, journal and online resources. The theory is Mimetic proposed by Abrams saying that it is the explanation of art as essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe. The arts of painting, poetry, music, dancing, and sculpture, Socrates says, are all imitations. It is a relational term, signifying two items and some correspondence between them. But although in many later mimetic theories, the philosopher in the Platonic dialogues characteristically operates with three categories. The first category is that of the eternal and unchanging ideas; the second, reflecting this, is the world of sense, natural or artificial; and the third category, in turn reflecting the second, comprises such things as shadows, images in water and mirrors, and the fine arts (9-13).

III. THE ANALYSIS

All The Bright Places, a novel of 416 pages is a story about a young girl and a young boy who are hit by loss and depression. The girl suffers seriously depressed because of her sister's death in a car accident. The boy suffers from hideous

depression because his father left them, and his mother is rarely at home because she has to work all the time. Besides, he is bullied by his friends at school. They met accidentally: the boy found the girl standing on the school's bell tower who was about to jump down and wanted to end her life. He saved the girl and after that, he always tries to comfort the girl every day and takes her on a trip to beautiful places to make her feel better and can release her sadness. The girl finally manages to get out of her depression but the boy experiences different things and remains in his sadness. In the end, the girl realizes that the boy has unpredictable thoughts, and when the girl wants to do the same that the boy does to her, it is too late, she finds him already dead on the lake.

The main characters are Violet Markey and Theodore Finch, and minor characters are Eleanor Markey, Ryan Cross, Amanda Monk, Mr. Embry, Ted Finch, Finch's Mother, Kate Finch, James Markey, and Mrs. Markey. Violet Markey, a seventeen-year-old, is Finch's love interest has blonde hair, bright skin, and freckled cheeks, a skilled writer, a former cheerleader, popular girl, and girlfriend of the star baseball player. Violet attempts to assuage her survivor's guilt by refraining from enjoying or moving forward with her own life. She refuses to get in a car and is still given leeway by all her teachers almost a year later because of extenuating circumstances that start haunting her. Theodore Finch is one of the protagonists and is Violet's love interest. He is described as a seventeen-year-old boy who has a tall body and handsome face with dark hair color, but despite his good looks, other boys at school refer to call him as "Theodore Freak." Though he insists he is on the ledge to remind himself that he has control of his life and not to kill himself, he is nevertheless taken with the idea of dying by suicide. As Finch enters into a relationship with Violet, he finds the reason to make him want to stay alive. Eleanor Markey is Violet's elder sister who died in a car accident a year before she met Finch. Violet



describes her as a funny, intelligent person who took risks and made everything fun. Amanda Monk is Violet's close friend before the accident, one of the loudest voices calling Finch a freak. After the accident, Amanda and Violet drift apart.

The novel is set in a fictional town Bartlett, Indiana. The two most frequent places in the story are school and Finch's room. Finch describes the school as hell, a place where he is always treated unfairly, bullied by classmates, and alienated by everyone. They accidentally meet in the school's bell tower when they decide to jump. Moreover, Finch's room is described as a small room with red walls and ceilings, but when he is in severe depression he changes it to blue to help him find peace and quiet. The ceiling of his room is filled with notes about what happened to him every day but mostly the bad things are there.

3.1 Loss

People commonly associate certain losses with strong feelings of grief. This condition can be in the form of death, divorce, accident, natural disasters, layoffs, and others. Those who have experienced loss may have a range of feelings of shock, sadness, denial, despair, anger, guilt, loneliness, and depression. In this novel, the author shows the readers how loss is caused by the death of a loved one and abandonment through the characters Theodore Finch, Violet Markey, Sheryl Markey, James Markey, and Mrs. Finch. Niven creates character Violet Markey as a representation of people who hardly cannot cope with the loss of a loved one. She had a tragic accident with her older sister Eleanor who died that night. She is Violet's beloved sister and best friend so they always do everything together and have the same hobbies and dreams. They have a website that contains random things that discuss their dreams, such as going to college on the same campus, going on adventures to new places, and sharing ups and downs together. Eleanor has become a role model and a

perfect person for her. She confesses:

She was smart, stubborn, moody, funny, and mean when she lost her temper, sweet, protective of the people she loved. Her favorite color was yellow. She always had my back, even if we fought sometimes. I could tell her anything, because the thing about Eleanor was that she didn't judge. She was my best friend (97).

The author pictures how violet deeply loves her sister and is an important figure to her who understands her better than her parents. When she fell down, got angry, lost her spirits, had a bad day, and whatever wrong she did, her sister was always there. She narrates:

The best and the worst of you. And they love you anyway. You can fight, but even when you're mad at them, you know they're not going to stop being your friend" (97).

The author shows a close relationship between sisters, a relationship that parents or friends rarely have because everything cannot be discussed with everyone. The closest person who always listens, supports, and trusts she gets from a sister like Eleanor. Violet feels guilty of her cheating that her sister cannot write on that website anymore. She feels guilty of writing at the website that her sister also found and has taken every opportunity to write on the website. Her sister's death has made Violet think of ending her life by climbing the school bell tower and wanted to jump down. Fortunately, Finch was there and saved her life by persuading her not to jump and managed to get her down. Since then, they become close and spend a lot of time together, talk about everything and share many things. Finch always pays attention because he knows that violet needs encouragement to get out of the guilt that always haunts her. They do a school assignment together by writing a paper about the beautiful places they have visited in the city.

When she lost her beloved sister,



even, there was no more will to survive, and decides to commit suicide, with a purpose, the author presents character Finch who comes to save him. He manages to erase her sadness, free from the trauma so she is grateful. His help and love free her from the shackles of guilt over her sister's death. The attention and love he gives are bright ways for her to get out of the abyss of sadness. They fall in love and she can gradually forget the sadness of her sister's death, and feels happy again in her life. She says: "I'm just glad he was there before I fell off the ledge and killed myself in front of everyone" (34).

Unfortunately, when she gradually forgets her sadness over the loss of his sister, she must experience a second loss: the loss of Finch, the person she loves who has brought her out of the abyss of sadness. He died by committing suicide because of deep depression. It started by his broken family situation due to his father's neglect as well as his school friends' bullying. Although she has relieved of grief over the loss of her sister, she again must suffer from her beloved Finch's death. The guilt haunts her back for not being able to save someone she loves who has saved her.

3.2 Depression

Depression is the situation of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease the ability to function at work and at home. Depression symptoms can vary from mild to severe and can include, feeling sad or having a depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, unstable emotion, loss of energy or increased fatigue, increase in purposeless physical activity or slowed movements or speech, feeling worthless or guilty, difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions, thoughts of death or suicide. The author creates characters Theodore Finch and Violet Markey as representation of people who struggle in depression. Finch's

struggle in depression is because of this father's abandonment and physical violence against him. His family's environment becomes the greatest factor for his depression. He is being neglected since he was young when he really needed a father figure to protect and teach him good experiences. In contrast, his father even disrupted his feeling by neglecting him when he really needs parental nurture. Finch's father fails to be his leader and exemplary model that he longs for.

We are shown Finch's depression both psychologically and physically. Physical violence of his father's cruelty has affected him psychological and emotionally, consequently, he sees his father as a bad and cruel figure and hates him. He narrates:

I hold up my hands and they're shaking, because my hands, like the rest of me, would like to kill my father. Ever since I was ten and he sent Mom to the hospital with a busted chin, and then a year later when it was my turn (122).

His father's bad treatments has disrupted his emotional feeling so that he urges to kill his father is a form of his hatred and disappointment.

Moreover, the author creates Mrs. Finch to portray a mother who is not capable of doing her role as an exemplary mother. She seems to neglect Finch too after his father leaves him, while his mother does not have much time at home, so she never takes care of Finch and does not know what happens to him. Knowing that his son is being neglected by his father, her mother should have to take the role to provide him more attention and love. However, she neglects him too when he actually needs help and attention from the one that he thinks can understand his condition well. He expresses about his mother:

I can go downstairs right now and let my mom know how I'm feeling—if she's even home—but she'll tell me to help myself to the Advil in her purse and that I need to relax and stop getting myself worked up, because in



this house there's no such thing as being sick unless you can measure it with a thermometer under the tongue (140).

It clearly depicts that Finch's mother does not care if her son is sad or feeling down because she only perceives his son to be sick if she could use an object, thermometer to check it. Finch does not get enough love and attention that he hopes from his parents while for him, parents are important figures for his emotional and psychological developments because they are the sources of security and tenderness.

Finch's depression does not only derive from his parents but also from his school friends. He is first bullied for revealing what is in his head. His mind often thinks about strange things that tend to make him nervous. He also often hears voices and often has headaches. His fault is he tells his friends about his conditions and feelings just because he is curious to know if he is the only one who feels. He says:

A few years ago, I asked my then good friend Gabe Romero if he could feel sound and see headaches, if the spaces around him ever grew or shrank, if he ever wondered what would happen if he jumped in front of a car or train or bus, I asked him to try it with me, just to see, he went home and told his parents, and they told my teacher, who told the principal, who told my parents, The next day it was all over school, and I was officially Theodore Freak (107).

The author clears that Finch's strange attitude is the reason why he is being bullied. Since then, he becomes the target of bullying from his friends and this is one of the reasons why he is depressed. He becomes lonely, no one likes him and understands his feelings: neither his parents nor his friends. They call him "freak" which means that he is hated by his friends and this hatred begins when one of his friends complains about his strange behavior, although he himself does not think it is freak but different. Bullying makes Finch

frustrated and depressed as a result, he cannot stand it except killing himself.

IV. CONCLUSION

The novel *All the Bright Places* written by Jennifer Niven reflects human loss and depression, and their consequences. The author intends to represent people who undergo loss and depression from loved ones through death and abandonment which result in severe depression and committing suicide. Moreover, this study finds that people can survive and struggle despite of the loss and depression that they have experienced because, in every sadness, there must be wisdom and no matter how dark the lives people to drive. It is clear that the main characters, Violet and Finch face loss and depression, Violet losing her sister, Finch losing her father figure and her mother's love. Depression that people experience can be relieved through the motivations and encouragements from others. They are the reasons why people can live life as the way it used to be, the life before they love ones died. However, a different thing can happen to others who cannot cope with depression and end up in committing suicide, especially teenagers if they undergo bully. Supports and encouragements from the closest people such as family and friends can be crucial helps for such people.

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