

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Over the last century, the percentage of American teenagers who suffer from mental illnesses has raised and this has become a major concern nowadays. A study shows “about 20 percent of U.S. youth . . . are affected by some type of mental disorder” (“National Survey Confirms that Youth are Disproportionately Affected by Mental Disorders”). This is why the issue of mental health is essential.

Mental illnesses, which are also known as mental disorders, are defined as “health conditions involving changes in thinking, emotion or behavior (or a combination of these)” (Parekh). There are several symptoms of mental illnesses. One of them is “certain personality traits; such as low self-esteem, self-critical or pessimistic” (“Depression (Major Depressive Disorder): Symptoms and Causes”). Certain characteristics of someone may be the indicators of their suffering from mental illnesses. However, it is possible that people suffer from mental disorders without showing any symptoms (Martin). Even when people possess those certain traits, it does not guarantee they suffer from mental illnesses. Those certain traits,

however, may trigger and can turn into mental disorders if the traits become “too dominant or unhealthy” (Gregoire). This issue of mental illnesses and how certain traits reflect mental illnesses are depicted in the two novels that are going to be analyzed in this thesis: *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow and *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini.

Kathleen Glasgow, the author of *Girl in Pieces*, is considered one of the most influential contemporary American authors in the twenty-first century. Although she just made her debut in 2016, her writing has received much praise from many influential critics. Kerry Kletter, a fellow American author, stated that Glasgow’s writing is “transcendent and brilliant” (“*Girl in Pieces*”).

Girl in Pieces, Glasgow’s debut novel, is a highly praised novel and has been included in lists of best books by among others *The New York Public Library*, *Amazon*, *Goop*, *Teen Vogue*, *BN Teen*, *Refinery29*, *EW.com*, and *Teen Reads* (Glasgow, “About”). Gwyneth Paltrow’s *Goop* has acclaimed *Girl in Pieces* as “one of the most affecting novels we have read in a while” (“*Girl in Pieces*”). As can be seen from the praise, this novel is a crucial read which is impactful and beneficial to many people.

Girl in Pieces follows the story of Charlotte Davis, who suffers from several mental disorders. The novel focuses on how she struggles to conquer them. Glasgow herself has suffered from depression and self-harm for a long time and this is why she was able to write not only a realistic and honest depiction of a girl who suffers from mental illnesses, but also an accurate representation of mental illnesses themselves in *Girl in Pieces*. In an interview, Glasgow stated that

she was going to be as honest as possible when writing about the depiction of mental illnesses because people deserved to know the truth (Zied).

Ned Vizzini, the author of *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, is also considered one of the most influential American authors in the twenty-first century. Vizzini himself was popular among contemporary authors because of his unique style of writing. As shown in his novels, he could bring out humorous aspects in heavy subjects, making them uplifting instead of gloomy and dismal. Alanna Okun, a senior editor of *BuzzFeed*, stated that she admired Vizzini's writing because he could "hold this deep, snarling pain in one fist and humor, even wonder, in the other" (Fitzgerald). His unique style of writing has attracted many people to read his works.

Vizzini is known as "a precocious and highly praised writer of popular young-adult novels that often dealt with themes of teenage anxiety and depression" (Yardley). His works, especially *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, has helped and saved many teenagers out there who suffer from mental illnesses. Starting his career as a writer at the age of 15 and ending it at the age of 32, Vizzini had made a very impactful contribution to the world of literature; consequently, even after his death, his works are still looked back on and keep giving their immense impact on the readers. This confirms that Ned Vizzini was an outstanding and eminent author.

Although Vizzini has written several other novels, *It's Kind of a Funny Story* is his masterpiece as this novel is the one that has made him really successful and popular. This novel has received much praise from influential critics. This novel has also been awarded as 2007 Best Book for Young Adults

from the American Library Association and has been adapted into a movie which was directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck and released on October 8, 2010.

It's Kind of a Funny Story follows the journey of Craig Gilner, who tries to deal with his depression that gets in the way of his life, in a psychiatric hospital. The representation of the protagonist who suffers from depression and the depiction of the depression itself in *It's Kind of a Funny Story* are captured realistically because they are based partially on the author's own experience in a psychiatric ward after attempting suicide as a teenager. Similar to Kathleen Glasgow, Ned Vizzini suffered from depression since he was a teenager. This is why he could write a very realistic depiction of mental illnesses, especially about depression.

Girl in Pieces and *It's Kind of a Funny Story* are worth reading and analyzing. Both authors want to convey important messages through the protagonists and also through the way they portray the protagonists. Furthermore, both novels are character-driven stories, which make the portrayals of the protagonists outstanding in these two novels. Portrayal refers to "the portrait (characterization) of individuals presented in literary selections" (Shaw 295) while protagonist is defined as "the central character or leading figure in poetry, narrative, novel or any other story" ("Protagonist"). I believe that the protagonists are the key in both novels. Their portrayals illuminate the purposes of the authors in making such protagonists. Therefore, the portrayal of the protagonists is the strongest and the most suitable element to be analyzed.

In order to analyze the portrayals of the protagonists in both novels, I use formalism. "In literary criticism, formalism refers to a style of inquiry that

focuses, almost exclusively, on features of the literary text itself, to the exclusion of biographical, historical, or intellectual contexts” (“Formalism”). All of the information that is needed to analyze the portrayals of the protagonists already exists in the novels; therefore, it is unnecessary to use any other sources than the literary works themselves. Thus, formalism is the most suitable approach to use in analyzing both Glasgow’s *Girl in Pieces* and Vizinni’s *It’s Kind of a Funny Story*.

Statement of the Problem

The problems I am going to discuss in this thesis are:

1. How are the protagonists portrayed in these two novels?
2. What are the purposes of the authors in creating such protagonists in these two novels?

Purpose of the Study

Based on the problems above, the purposes of this study are as follows:

1. To show how the protagonists are portrayed in these two novels;
2. To show the purposes of the authors in creating such protagonists in these two novels.

Method of Research

In writing this thesis, I begin by reading and understanding the primary texts which are Kathleen Glasgow’s *Girl in Pieces* and Ned Vizinni’s *It’s Kind of a Funny Story*. Next, I do some library and online research in order to gather some information and references to support my analysis. After that, I analyze the portrayals of the protagonists in the two novels and reveal the purposes of the

authors in writing such protagonists. Finally, I draw some conclusions from my analysis.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into four chapters, which are preceded by the Acknowledgements, the Table of Contents, and the Abstract. The first chapter is the Introduction, which consists of the Background of the Study, the Statement of the Problem, the Purpose of the Study, the Method of Research, and the Organization of the Thesis. The second chapter contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Kathleen Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces* whilst the third chapter contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. The last chapter, Chapter Four, contains the conclusion of what has been discussed in the previous chapters. This thesis ends with the Bibliography and the Appendices, which consist of the synopses of the two novels and the biographies of the authors.