

GUILT IN JEFF ZENTNER'S NOVEL *GOODBYE DAYS*

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Abstract

This study presents a psychological analysis of guilt and the journey toward self-redemption as depicted in Jeff Zentner's novel, *Goodbye Days*. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research meticulously examines the psychological turmoil of the protagonist, Carver Briggs, who is consumed by guilt after a tragic accident claims the lives of his three best friends—an accident he believes he caused by sending a text message. The analysis is framed within Bruce Narramore's theoretical framework on guilt, exploring its objective and subjective categories, including fear of punishment, loss of self-esteem, and feelings of isolation. The findings reveal the profound manifestations of Carver's guilt, which materialize through somatic complaints such as panic attacks, a depressed mood, self-condemnation, and acts of self-punishment. The study concludes that Zentner's narrative portrays guilt not merely as a destructive force but as a complex and transformative psychological process. Ultimately, the novel illustrates that the path to recovery and self-forgiveness is arduous, requiring the individual to confront their pain and make peace with themselves before achieving redemption.

Keywords: *Guilt; Jeff Zentner; protagonist; psychology of literature; self-redemption*

1. Introduction

Goodbye Days is a novel by Jeff Zentner. This novel was first published in 2012, but for the translated version in Indonesian, it was only published in January 2019 by Spring Publishers. The novel is 435 pages long. Jeff Zentner is the author of the *New York Times* Notable Books, *The Serpent King* and *In the Wild Light*, as well as Rayne & Delilah's *Goodbye Days* and *Midnite Matinee*. Among several awards he has successfully received, he has won the William C. Award. Morris of ALA, Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award twice, Muriel Becker Award, International Literacy Association Award, and twice longlisted for the Carnegie Medal.

Jeff Zentner was twice a finalist for the Southern Book Prize and was a finalist for the Indie Choice Award. He was also selected as the publisher of *Weekly Flying Start* and *ePick Indie Introduce*. His books have been translated into fifteen languages. Before becoming a writer, Jeff Zentner was a musician who recorded with Iggy Pop, Nick Cave, and Debbie Harry. She became interested in writing a young adult genre book after volunteering at a Tennessee teen rock camp and a Southern girls' rock camp. As a child, his parents would take him to the library and drop him off, where he would read until closing time. He also worked in various bookstores through high school and college. One of his famous books is *Goodbye Days*.

Goodbye Days tells the story of Carver Briggs, who has to lose all three of his best friends at once—Blake Lloyd, Eli Bauer, and Thurgood Mars Edward, in an accident. Unfortunately, the accident happened to coincide with the time when Carver sent a message to one of his best friends, Mars, who was driving the car. The message is quite short. Namely: "Where are you? Reply to my message". Upon investigation, the accident was caused by Mars sitting behind the wheel and replying to Carver's message. Since then, Carver has always thought that he was the cause of three of his best friends' deaths. Losing three friends at once was the biggest blow to Carver, especially after he found out that the cause was because of the message he sent. Not only that, Carver had to face various other problems. People consider him a murderer, the twin sister of one of his best friends also hates him, and the father of one of his best friends, who is a judge, sues him. Not quite tormenting Carver to that point, Carver also has to face his last year in high school without the three friends he has known since 8th grade. The only person who supports her at school is the girlfriend of her late best friend Eli, Jesmyn Holder. Her day was pretty good after Jesmyn took her side and didn't blame her, but one day it all turns even more difficult for him when he has feelings for Jesmyn. This stacking problem is also what causes Carver to have panic attacks, because the panic attacks she experienced in several places and at different times made her family and sister very worried. Therefore, his brother suggested that he see a therapist with Doctor Mendez, which he also did with that doctor. Carver's problems were too much for him to go through, and he was only 17 years old. Not only was there mental pressure, but the problem also attacked him physically.

The reason the writer chose this title was because she was interested in the main character in the novel, who still tries to be strong to deal with the guilt she feels, and also because no other researchers have researched this novel. So the researcher took the topic of this novel to study.

According to Wahyuningtyas and Santosa (2011, p.3), "the main character is the character whose story is prioritized in the prose in question, he is the most widely told character, both in terms of the perpetrator of the incident and the subject of the incident itself". The protagonist is a figure who has a good character and is liked by the reader (Aminuddin, 2015, p.80).

Guilt can be defined as a feeling of sin, evil, wrong, and failure to do something (Narramore, 1981, p.105). Guilt is "the painful affect arising from the belief that one has hurt another. (O'Connor et al., 1997). Guilt is a painful emotion. (Mosher et al., 1980, p.35)

Guilt is an introspective emotion that is the result of self-reflection and negative events (Baumeister et al., 2007). This explains that there is a mismatch between self-behavior towards what has been done and creating an unwanted situation.

Based on some of the above notions, it can be concluded that guilt is a negative emotion that arises from self-awareness, self-reflection, and evaluation of an action that is not supposed to be taken and gives rise to negative events because of the discrepancy between the action and the values, norms, and morals that prevail in society and ultimately can encourage individuals to improve their behavior. This study aims to analyze how Jeff Zentner represents guilt and self-redemption in the protagonist of *Goodbye Days* using a psychological perspective.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Protagonist

A protagonist is the main character in a story. Usually, this character is the opponent of the antagonist. Usually the protagonist gets a lot of support and sympathy from the audience or readers. As stated by Beckson and Ganz (1990, p.217), the protagonist is the first actor who plays the main role. This opinion is in accordance with the opinion expressed by Baldick (2001, p.157). Initially, in ancient Greek theater, the protagonist was the main actor in the play, and this character played an important role in running the plot. This definition is in line with Cuddon's (2013, p.565) definition that the protagonist is the first actor in a play who is the main actor or character.

Nurgiyantoro (2002, p.178-181) states that the protagonist is the main character who supports the main idea in the story and usually has a specific plan and goal. The protagonist represents kindness and is commendable for being able to attract the sympathy of the reader. Nurgiyantoro (2010, p.176-177) also said that the protagonist is a character whose story takes precedence in the novel in question. He is the most prominent character, both as the perpetrator of the incident and as the one affected by it. He also added that the protagonist's character shows some things that are in line with our views. Abrams (1999, p.224) also says that the protagonist (or vice versa, the hero or heroine) is the head of the character in a plot, which is the center of our attention.

Based on some of the opinions above, the protagonist can be concluded to be the main character in a story where he greatly influences the plot of the story, which is commonly found in some literary works such as novels, dramas, films, or other literary works. The protagonist usually gets a lot of sympathy or support from readers or viewers. The protagonist is not always played by a man; a woman can also take on the role of the protagonist. This character is considered very important in the story.

2.2 Guilt

Guilt can be defined as a feeling of sin, evil, wrong, and failure in doing something (Narramore, 1981, p.105). Guilt is "the painful affect arising from the belief that one has hurt another" (O'Connor et al., 1997). Guilt is a painful emotion (Mosher et al., 1980, p.35). This opinion is in line with the opinion of O'Connor et al., 1997, p.74, who say that guilt is a painful influence. From some of these opinions, it is concluded that guilt is an act that, if done to others, we will also bear what that person feels.

Another opinion holds that guilt involves "regret for one's thoughts, feelings, or actions" (Klass, 1987, p.36). Where remorse for guilt will bring up a sense of responsibility for the actions that have been taken. Guilt involves a "desire to make amends" (Ferguson et al., 1991, p.829), in accordance with the following opinion, which says that guilt is something for which "one is responsible for oneself. Hoblitzelle (1987, p.209), in line with the opinion expressed by Caprara and his collaborators, who say that guilt includes "feelings associated with self-perceived responsibility (Caprara et al., 1992, p.519).

Guilt is an introspective emotion that is the result of self-reflection and negative events (Baumeister et al., 2007). This explains that there is a mismatch between self-behavior towards what has been done and creating an unwanted situation. The opinion is similar to that expressed by Xu et al. (2011) that guilt is unwanted self-acceptance. Guilt is also a negative emotional state that arises when an individual's behavior is at odds with the standardization of his supposed behavior.

With values, norms, and morals that prevail in society and can ultimately encourage individuals to improve their behavior. Based on some of the above understanding, researchers conclude that guilt is a feeling of regret in a person about feelings, thoughts, or actions that he has taken, whether intentionally or not, that requires him to take responsibility and improve the situation as before.

2.2.1 Categories of Guilt

According to Bruce Narramore (2005), guilt exists in every psychological problem that every person faces. So that guilt is shared in two categories, namely:

A. Objective Guilt

Objective guilt is guilt that becomes a problem because there is a violation of the law, both written and not written. The objective of guilt is divided into four, namely:

1. Legal guilt is guilt that is a problem because of violations of laws in society, growth, theft, etc. Thus causing problems, although not everyone feels a sense of guilt.
2. Social guilt, which is guilt that becomes a problem because of a violation of an unwritten law in society. For example, insults and threats to each other may have no concrete evidence that could bring them to justice, there may not even be a written law against such things, but problems arise.
3. Personal guilt, namely guilt that becomes a problem because of a violation of "conscience" or awareness of the truth that is in the heart of the person concerned, For example, blame the student who left the prayer when he knew that was the sin he had committed.
4. Theological guilt, i.e., guilt that becomes a problem due to violation of laws, is when standards of human behavior are violated, either by thoughts or deeds, and problems arise even if the person concerned is innocent.

B. Subjective Guilt

Subjective guilt is guilt that causes feelings of guilt and regret in people who concerned. In terms of this, Narramore (1974) divides subjective guilt into three parts, namely:

1. Fear of Punishment
2. A loss in self-esteem
3. A feeling of loneliness, rejection, or isolation

2.2.2 Characteristics of Guilt

According to Narramore (1981, p.106), there are characteristics of guilt, including actual guilt and pseudo-guilt:

1. Exemplary Behaviour
The individual behaves more obediently and better in order to mask his true feelings of guilt.
2. Somatic (Bodily) Complaints
It is an emotional trait that shows itself in physiological reactions such as fatigue and headaches.
3. Feelings of Depression
The person who feels guilty constantly blames himself. This reaction pattern can be a major cause of depression.

4. **Further Indulgence**
This includes continuous indulgence in wrong actions that are the result of an attitude of defeat or actions that bring an added feeling of guilt, thus inflicting a form of punishment on oneself.
5. **Self-Condensation**
People constantly condemn or blame themselves for having done something wrong, shameful, or evil. It is associated with feelings of depression.
6. **Self-Punishment**
People punish themselves by denying themselves the need for food, clothing, or other materials.
7. **Expectation Disapproval (Rejection of the Environment)**
People anticipate rejection and condemnation from people about him and feel that the world will consider him worthless.
8. **Projection and Undue Criticism**
People are constantly looking for faults in others, and he himself finds little flaws in himself.
9. **Hostily (Hostility)**
People are generally hostile toward others because of their own feelings of guilt.
10. **Compensation (Compensation)**
It is an attempt to follow the individual's heart by doing good deeds, joining respected organizations, and giving in the form of charity.

2.2.3 Overcoming Guilt in Oneself

According to Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1996), psychological self-forgiveness is the desire to let go of self-loathing.

Practicing self-forgiveness will greatly help us manage the guilt that exists within us. Self-forgiveness also helps us bounce back from guilt to ultimately be happier and clearer in determining our goals, vision, and mission in life.

To be able to forgive yourself, here are some steps you can take:

1. Identify the circumstances and your behavior that you consider wrong.
2. Find out how you can fix it.
3. Accept the guilt that arises in you.
4. Apologize to those you hurt, including yourself.
5. Try to let go of any discomfort in your heart.

2.2.4 The Emotional Impact of Guilt

Guilt is basically not bad. Colleen Wenner, a licensed mental health counselor from Fort Walton Beach, Florida, says that guilt can motivate you to positively change your behavior so you don't feel guilty again.

He points out that guilt is often associated with emotional effects such as anger, sadness, fear, shame, embarrassment, disgust, disgrace, and an inferiority complex.

3. Research Method

Research design is a framework of research methods and techniques chosen by a researcher. This enables researchers to hone research methods suitable for the subject matter and set their studies up for success. According to Sekaran (2017, p.109): "Research design is the plan for data collection, measurement, and analysis, based on the research questions of the study."

In this study, the analysis employs a qualitative descriptive method focusing on textual interpretation. Passages depicting the protagonist's guilt and attempts at self-redemption were coded and analyzed using psychological literary concepts. According to Mukhtar (2013, p.10), qualitative descriptive research methods are a method used by researchers to find knowledge or theory about research at a certain time. According to Sukmadinata (2011, p.73), qualitative descriptive research aims to explain and describe existing phenomena, both natural and human engineering, and pays more attention to the nature, quality, and interrelationships between activities.

The data came from the primary text (novel) and secondary sources (psychological and literary theories). The data collection techniques used in this study were taken from several sources, including several journals, books, articles, and the novel *Goodbye Days*, both directly and from various other sources.

4. Discussion

4.1 Manifestations of Guilt in the Protagonist

According to Bruce Narramore (2005), guilt is divided into two categories: objective and subjective.

a. Objective guilt

Objective guilt is guilt that becomes a problem because there is an event of a violation of the law, whether written or unwritten. This objective guilt is divided into four parts: legal guilt, social guilt, personal guilt, and theological guilt.

b. Subjective guilt

Subjective guilt is guilt that generates feelings of guilt and remorse in the person concerned. In this novel, the feeling of guilt is experienced by the main character, or protagonist. Where the cause of guilt is due to an accident that claimed the lives of his three friends at the same time, which the protagonist believes occurred due to a short message he sent to one of his friends who was driving the car. So that the event made him feel guilty and afraid of the demands made by the father of one of her companions who was in the accident. Subjective guilt is divided into three categories:

1. A fear of punishment

The fear that the protagonist feels coincides with his mother asking him to watch a TV show featuring Judge Edwards, who is being interviewed about the accident and the investigation and prosecution of the events experienced by his son in the accident.

The adrenaline rush grabbed my chest. My stomach became a swirling vortex. This can't be good news. I jumped to my feet, hit my knees on the table, and ran with trembling legs. Mom, dad, and Georgia are already gathered around the television, standing (Zentner, 2012, p.54).

In the quote above, it is clear that Carver was very frightened even before the criminal charge was actually given to him by Judge Edwards, the father of Mars, his best friend, who interviewed the car in the event of the accident.

2. A loss in self-esteem

In the novel, the protagonist, Carver, feels a loss of self-esteem due to guilt after an accident that happened to his best friend, and he believes the cause is a message he

sent while his best friend, Mars, was driving. He lost his self-esteem after experiencing a panic attack and falling on the floor of the classroom, where the event was witnessed by all his classmates at school and coincided with the first day he entered school.

I'm too tired. I'm too – oh, my gosh, that shame. The shame begins now. My cheeks are burning. Like putting on ski boots to spread our weight and prevent us from drowning in the snow, loss of self-esteem should be shared among several people so that we drown. Now I'm alone (Zenter, 2012, p.127-128).

In this quote, the protagonist feels that he has lost his self-esteem. The feeling he felt after he experienced an event that felt very embarrassing, namely having a panic attack right on the first day of school and the incident took place in front of everyone in his classroom.

3. A feeling of Loneliness, rejection, or isolation.

Carver, or the protagonist in the novel, is described as feeling very lonely, also feeling isolated, with only his family and two other people who are now familiar with him after the events that killed the three members of the sauce crew, as his gang members are called, and his best friend.

I can imagine how lonely this school year will be. Sauce crew used to be so close. It's like we have our own universe. Now, no one alive thinks to call me on a Saturday night.

Now, the hard part, the part when we can't focus on our grief when we're just alone (Zentner, 2012, p.26-27).

In the quote above, Carver felt very lonely after his three best friends were killed. He used to have a complete sauce crew member, but now lives alone. He used to communicate by phone with his best friend, but now there is silence. He felt very different and he continued to blame himself for the events of the accident.

4.2 Characteristics of Guilt

In the novel *Goodbye Days*, some traits or characteristics of guilt experienced by the protagonist are described. Among them as follows:

1. Somatic Complaints

It is an emotional trait that appears in physiological reactions. It is told in the novel that the protagonist experiences physical fatigue, he has a headache, and he also has a panic attack right after he does Black's farewell day with Nana Betsy, the grandmother of his friend Black, who has been killed. The protagonist experiences a panic attack at home, precisely in his room, after returning from Nana Betsy's house or Black's grandmother's house.

I can't breathe. My heart screams. This is not true. I'm not okay. My vision narrowed, as if I were standing deep inside a cave, staring out. freckle-shaped spots in front of my eyes. The ding wall squeezed me. I'm panting. I need air. my heart. A lonely, Gray fear enveloped me, like a cloud of smoke blocking the sun. no light or warmth at all. Darkness, as if palpable and moldy. I have a revelation: I will never feel happiness.

Air. I need air. I need air. I need air. I need it (Zentner, 2012, p. 42-43).

This quote describes the situation shortly before the protagonist experiences a panic attack for the first time after he performs a farewell for Black, one of his best friends who was killed in the accident. The panic attack occurred when he returned home and was already in his room. He couldn't breathe, as if there was no air in his room. She was so scared that she called her sister Georgia. After a few minutes, her brother came and took her to the hospital not just once. However, Carver also experienced another panic attack at a different time on the first day he entered school at Nashville Arts.

My head was spinning like I was on the deck of a ship. Then, I experienced the sensation of falling through the ice again. the feeling of seeing something heavy and fragile slipping off the shelf. Dark spots are gathering in my field of vision. I need air. I need air. not here. not now. not this. not in front of Jesmyn. not in front of everyone. not in front of anyone. but it was too late to return. The sensation awakens like a terrible orgasm; once it peaks, there is no turning back.

My blazer slipped out of my grasp. My backpack slid and hit the floor. My laptop's in it, but I'm more concerned with the little fact that I can't breathe. I'm buried alive. I need to breathe. I'm dying (Zentner, 2012, p.124).

Based on the above quote, the protagonist has a panic attack again for the second time after a while after having a panic attack before. This panic attack appeared again after he started his first day at Nashville Arts School. Events began when Carver and Jesmyn began to enter the classroom that had been crowded by students and classmates, who initially behaved like students usually talk to their fellow classmates in class. But the atmosphere changed when the two of them entered the room, instantly showing the students staring. The two of them looked at each other as if it meant that Carver was the one who was at fault in the accident that happened to his three friends, and they did not want to talk to him and be friends with him anymore. Carver also hears vague whispers from the class crowd talking about himself and Jesmyn, saying that they don't feel guilty about the accident and also want to take his dead best friend Eli's girlfriend, none other than Jessie. Coupled with the murmur of Adair, Eli's twin brother, he said it in a voice that clearly broke the murmurings and whispers of the class. "What a beautiful day to be alive, huh?" Thus the words that he uttered made it evident that he deeply hated and disliked that Carver was alive while not with his brother. after a while after that carver began to feel panic attacks.

2. Depressed Mood

Carver, the main character, begins to feel depressed, he constantly blames himself for the accident. This is the incident that caused all three of his friends to die at the same time. The message he sent at that time is assumed to be the cause. The feeling that the protagonist feels depressed and blames himself for the accident is described in the following excerpt:

I'm going to get another Isaac. My hands are shaking violently. I clenched it into a fist and continued on. "And Carver believes he caused the crash by sending a message to Mars, but he's not entirely sure. He just didn't mean to hurt them. never. never. Had he known what would happen, he would never have done it .And, he's very sorry. "I doubt it. "I'm so sorry." (Zentner, 2012, p.413).

When the protagonist narrates the story of the accident to his therapist, Dr. Mendez, he explains how Carver or himself felt very sorry for sending a message to his best friend, Mars, who was driving the car at the time. He never even meant to hurt his best friend, and Carver is very sorry and wishes he would never have done it if he knew what would happen to his best friend and cause him to lose his three friends forever. He admitted his regret was when he began to be able to tell the events before the accident happened to Doctor Mendez, his therapist, whom he had met several times for consultation.

3. Self-Condensation

Self-condemnation is a feeling of constant self-blame and self-punishment for mistakes that he intentionally or not made.

...but my masterpiece is a two-sentence message that ends three stories. I'm the only writer in the world who makes multiple stories disappear with a single piece of writing.

I will try not to kill anyone else with my writing (Zentner, 2012, p.136-137).

Based on this quote, Carver felt so guilty that he continued to blame himself for sending the text message to his friend, who had been in the accident. He felt that no one would want to make a mistake like he did by sending a short message but omitting some stories and leaving only his memories with his three best friends.

4. Self-Punishment

People who feel guilty will punish themselves by denying the need for food, clothing, or other materials.

The protagonist in the novel *Goodbye Days* feels that punishing himself by not meeting his physical needs can atone for the guilt or sin he is considered to have committed. like when he visited Black's grandmother's house to help her do some of the work that Black used to do with his grandmother, and now that Black is gone, that's why Carver wants to ignore him to do that task. Help him weed the grass in the yard.

I wanted to go into the kitchen, but I couldn't. I want to go out and keep sweating; want to keep punishing my body. I want to feel hungry and thirsty. I don't want Nana Betsy to give me comfort and something refreshing (Zentner, 2012, p.74).

In the above quote, Carver describes how he felt undeservedly given comfort by Nana Betsy, which he even felt reluctant to eat and drink at the time he was asked to quit his activities, which were weeding the lawn of his grandmother's House Black. He feels that punishing himself can help a little to get rid of the guilt he feels.

4.3 Emotional Consequences and Self-Punishment

Guilt has an effect on the individual who experiences or feels it. Certain effects of guilt will affect the emotional traits of a person. This guilt will affect anger, sadness, fear, shame, embarrassment, and so on.

I felt fear, anxiety, sadness, and guilt endlessly (Zentner, 2012, p.159).

In the quote above, it is explained that Carver gets several effects that affect him emotionally, such as feelings of fear, sadness, and anxiety and even continues to feel guilty endlessly. The effect of guilt was none other than what he got after he was so sure he would be prosecuted by the district attorney for negligence that is considered to be the cause of the accident that befell his three friends. and after that, his life will end in prison. Carver himself thought that grief might have been hurting after he followed the directions of a therapist whom he met to take medicine. But he was very afraid and felt that the guilt could not be removed. He will be punished for his sins.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that Jeff Zentner's *Goodbye Days* portrays guilt not merely as emotional suffering but as a transformative process leading to self-redemption. Through Carver Briggs's struggle between fear, remorse, and eventual acceptance, the novel reveals how self-forgiveness functions as psychological recovery. The findings highlight the significance of guilt as a moral and emotional mechanism in young adult fiction, reflecting universal human efforts to reconcile with personal responsibility. It will have an impact on the individual as well as his or her life. Guilt can appear at any time, even in unexpected ways that will affect our lives, affect emotions, damage self-confidence, eliminate self-esteem, and even be worse. The researcher also concluded that we need to consider and think about all the risks that we will face from the actions or deeds that we want to do. Eliminating guilt is not something that is easily eliminated in oneself, it is not easy to get forgiveness from others. Before trying to get forgiveness from others, we need to forgive and make peace with ourselves first to get rid of our guilt.

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