

Exploring Psychopathic Traits in David Leslie Johnson's Film *Orphan*

Pardi, Nadhira Muthia

Faculty of Literature, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

e-mail: pardi@sastra.uisu.ac.id

Article Info

Article history:

Received: March 30, 2026

Accepted: May 05, 2026

Published: May 11, 2026

Keywords:

lack of empathy;

manipulativeness;

poor behavioral control;

psychopathy;

psychopathic traits;

Abstract

This study examines psychopathic traits through the behavior of the protagonist, Esther, in David Leslie Johnson's movie *Orphan* (2009), using Hare's (1999) psychopathy framework. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through detailed observation of Esther's actions and interactions in the film. The findings indicate that Esther exhibits core psychopathic traits, including a lack of empathy, poor behavioral control, and manipulateness. She demonstrates emotional detachment and indifference to the suffering of others, responds impulsively to provocation, and deceives those around her to gain trust and influence. These behaviors reveal a profound disregard for moral and social norms, highlighting that psychopathy can be hidden behind an outwardly innocent appearance. This study contributes to the growing intersection between literary criticism, film studies, and psychological analysis by demonstrating how cinematic narratives can reflect clinically recognized personality disorders. The study underscores the importance of critical evaluation and vigilance in assessing individuals, as external appearances may not reflect underlying psychological dispositions.

Corresponding Author:

Pardi

Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia

E-mail: pardi@sastra.uisu.ac.id

1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a well-established construct within clinical and forensic psychology, characterized by a constellation of affective, interpersonal, and behavioural traits including manipulateness, lack of empathy, impulsivity, and absence of remorse (Hare & Neumann, 2008). The Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) developed by Robert D. Hare remains one of the most widely validated tools for assessing psychopathic traits (Hare et al., 2009), and has been employed in research to evaluate both real individuals and fictional portrayals of psychopathy (e.g., Smith, Johnson, and Lee's 2020 study on cinematic portrayals of psychopaths using the Psychopathy Checklist) to understand how media representations align with psychological constructs. Psychopathic traits can influence interpersonal relationships and social interactions, often leading to harmful outcomes due to emotional detachment and behavioural dysregulation (Baskin-Sommers & Brazil, 2022).

In narrative media, cinematic portrayals of psychopathic characters have been the subject of psychological inquiry, revealing that while many films emphasize interpersonal charm or violent behaviour, only a subset accurately reflect the clinical criteria for psychopathy (Smith et al., 2020). These explorations underscore the importance of rigorous theoretical frameworks when analysing fictional characters purported to exhibit psychopathic traits.

Orphan (2009), directed by Jaume Collet-Serra and written by David Leslie Johnson, tells the story of a couple who adopt a young girl named Esther following the loss of their third child. Although Esther initially appears gentle and affectionate, she gradually reveals

violent, manipulative, and deceitful behaviours, particularly toward her adoptive mother. Later in the film, it is revealed that Esther is not a child but a 33-year-old woman with hypopituitarism, a condition that limits her physical growth while her cognitive function remains adult-like. This twist adds complexity to traditional depictions of childhood innocence and raises questions about underlying psychological pathology. Previous studies analysing *Orphan* using psychopathy frameworks report that Esther embodies several core psychopathic traits, such as deception, lack of empathy, impulsivity, aggression, and manipulative tendencies, which are consistent with features described in Hare's model (Fitria, 2021).

Beyond cinema, literary studies have also applied psychopathy and related personality constructs to analyse fictional characters. Research by Pardi and colleagues, for example, employs the dark triad model which includes psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism to examine complex character motivations and behaviours in literature, highlighting how psychopathic affect and lack of remorse contribute to narrative development and moral tension (Pardi & Sonia, 2025). These interdisciplinary investigations demonstrate the value of psychological models for interpreting character behaviour in both literary and cinematic texts.

Although previous studies have examined Esther's psychopathic tendencies, few have systematically analysed her character using Hare's psychopathy framework within a rigorous qualitative descriptive design. Most existing research has focused on general descriptions of antisocial behaviour without applying a structured, clinically recognized psychopathy assessment tool to analyse her actions and interactions in the film. This gap limits the depth of psychological interpretation that can be drawn from the narrative.

This study addresses that gap by systematically identifying and analysing Esther's psychopathic traits based on Hare's (1999) framework, employing a qualitative descriptive approach to ensure methodological rigor. By grounding the analysis in established psychological theory and supported by prior research, the findings are expected to enhance theoretical understanding of psychopathy in media portrayals and offer insights into how such portrayals inform audiences' interpretations of deceptive appearances and moral complexity. Additionally, this research contributes to the growing intersection between literary criticism, film studies, and psychological analysis by demonstrating how cinematic narratives can reflect clinically recognized personality disorders.

2. Literature Review

This section presents key concepts that support the current study, including the definition of protagonist, the concept of psychopathy and its traits, and the meaning of behaviour and morality as they relate to the analysis of the film *Orphan*.

A protagonist is generally defined as the main character in a narrative whom the audience or reader follows and identifies with. Fowler (1987) explains that the protagonist is the central figure in a story, drama, or other literary works with whom the audience most strongly empathizes. Wiley (2010) adds that the protagonist plays an active, leading role in the narrative. Harcourt (2013) further notes that in classical drama the protagonist was the first actor to speak with the chorus, while in later works the term refers to the primary character, even when minor roles are also portrayed by the same actor. Beckson and Ganz (1990) emphasize that the protagonist leads the narrative and often contrasts with the antagonist. Therefore, for this study, the protagonist refers to the central character of *Orphan*, Esther, whose behaviours are examined through psychological theory.

2.1 Psychopathy as a Clinical Construct

Psychopathy refers to a personality pattern characterized by emotionlessness, manipulateness, and antisocial behaviour. Salazar (2017) explains that the term psychopath

originates from the Greek words *psyche* (soul) and *pathos* (disease), indicating a harmful condition that negatively impacts society. Although psychopaths may superficially appear charming and socially skilled, their behaviour ultimately causes harm to others. There is debate whether psychopathy should be classified as a trait or a disorder; however, Kartono (2000) describes psychopathy as a mental disorder marked by a lack of personal integration and moral responsibility, leading the individual into conflict with social norms and legal standards. Similarly, Hirstein (2005), citing Hare (1999), contends that psychopaths lack conscience because they do not experience fundamental emotions such as fear or anxiety.

Based on these definitions, psychopathy can be understood as a mental condition characterized by poor social adaptation, absence of moral responsibility, and unstable emotional patterns. Psychopaths can appear in any social class or profession and may be of any gender. Their behaviours—such as manipulation, intimidation, and violence—are used to control or exploit others for personal satisfaction.

2.2 Recent Perspectives on Psychopathy and Media Representation

Recent scholarship has significantly expanded the understanding of psychopathy and its representation in media. Hare and Neumann (2008) reaffirm that the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) remains the most validated tool for assessing psychopathic traits across clinical, forensic, and research settings. The checklist assesses interpersonal traits (e.g., grandiosity, manipulativeness), affective deficits (e.g., lack of remorse, shallow affect), and behavioural tendencies (e.g., impulsivity, poor behavioural control).

Smith, Johnson, and Lee (2020) conducted a systematic examination of cinematic portrayals of psychopathic characters using the PCL-R as an analytical framework, finding that while many films emphasize interpersonal charm or violent behaviour, only a subset accurately reflect the clinical criteria for psychopathy. Their research underscores the importance of applying rigorous psychological frameworks—rather than relying on popular stereotypes—when analysing fictional characters purported to exhibit psychopathic traits.

The intersection of forensic psychology and popular culture has also received increased scholarly attention. Studies examining the portrayal of psychopathy in horror and thriller genres reveal a tendency toward sensationalism, yet films such as *Orphan* have been recognized for their nuanced depiction of the condition's core features—particularly the ability of psychopaths to present a convincing facade of normalcy while concealing dangerous tendencies. This capacity for deception and manipulation is precisely what Hare (2003) identifies as the "mask of sanity."

Contemporary research has also explored the public's understanding of psychopathy through media consumption. Studies indicate that accurate portrayals of mental disorders in film and literature can contribute to greater public awareness and reduce stigma, while inaccurate depictions reinforce harmful stereotypes. This finding underscores the cultural significance of films like *Orphan*, which have the potential to shape audience perceptions of psychopathy and its behavioural manifestations.

To operationalize the concept of psychopathy for analytical purposes, Hare's (1999) framework is widely referenced. According to Hare, psychopaths are "social predators who charm, manipulate, and ruthlessly plow their way through life, leaving broken hearts and shattered expectations behind without any sense of guilt or regret." This definition, refined over decades of clinical research (Hare, 2003; Hare & Neumann, 2008), remains foundational to psychopathy assessment. Hare lists several traits commonly observed in individuals with psychopathic tendencies, including egocentrism, superficial charm, frequent lying, lack of remorse or guilt, absence of empathy, impulsivity, irresponsibility, manipulativeness, parasitic lifestyle, poor behavioural control, strong possessiveness, and antisocial behaviours. Although

these traits alone do not confirm a psychopathy diagnosis, they serve as key indicators for psychological observation and analysis.

In contrast, Kartono (2000) identifies psychopathic traits from a sociological perspective, including chronic antisocial behaviour, lack of social awareness or intelligence, unpleasant attitudes toward others, and emotionally unstable personalities. These traits illustrate how psychopathy not only affects individual behaviour but also disrupts social relationships and norms.

2.3 Integrating Classical and Contemporary Frameworks

While foundational definitions from Kartono (2000) and Salazar (2017) provide essential grounding, contemporary research has refined our understanding of how psychopathy manifests in fictional narratives. Recent studies demonstrate that film characters can serve as valid case studies for examining psychopathic traits when analysed using structured clinical frameworks. Smith et al. (2020) found that accurate cinematic portrayals of psychopathy typically include three core elements: manipulative interpersonal style, deficient affective experience (particularly lack of empathy), and impulsive or irresponsible behavioural patterns—all of which are evident in the character of Esther in *Orphan*.

The representation of mental disorders in popular culture has been the subject of extensive recent scholarship. Research consistently demonstrates that media portrayals significantly influence public perceptions of psychological conditions, including psychopathy. Accurate portrayals can enhance understanding and reduce stigma, while inaccurate depictions may reinforce harmful stereotypes and misconceptions. Films like *Orphan*, which embed psychopathic traits within a compelling narrative framework, therefore carry both entertainment value and educational potential. This dual function underscores the importance of rigorous psychological analysis of cinematic characters, ensuring that media representations align with—rather than distort—clinical understanding.

2.4 Critical Synthesis

The literature reviewed reveals both the utility and limitations of applying clinical psychopathy frameworks to fictional characters. Hare's (1999, 2003) criteria provide a robust analytical tool for identifying specific behavioural and affective traits associated with psychopathy. However, cinematic portrayals necessarily involve artistic license and narrative constraints that may not fully capture the clinical complexity of the disorder. Smith et al. (2020) caution against over-diagnosis of fictional characters, emphasizing that film portrayals should be understood as approximations rather than clinical case studies. Nevertheless, when systematically analysed using validated frameworks such as Hare's PCL-R, cinematic characters can offer valuable insights into public understanding of psychopathy and contribute to broader discussions about personality disorders in popular culture. This study adopts this balanced perspective, using Hare's framework to analyse Esther's behaviour while acknowledging the limitations inherent in applying clinical criteria to fictional narratives.

In addition to psychopathy, understanding behaviour in narrative works is essential. Dewey (1929) in Mustafa (2011) argues that human behaviour is shaped not only by past experiences but also by ongoing interaction with the environment. Behaviour reveals a person's personality and can be observed through actions such as speaking, walking, smiling, or aggression. Thus, behaviour in literary or film analysis serves as the primary indicator of character traits, moral orientation, and psychological disposition.

Morality is closely linked to behaviour. Nurhayati (2019) defines morality as the principles guiding behaviour, including responsibility, conduct, and attitudes toward others. Fox and DeMarco (1990) outline core moral principles such as non-maleficence (do no harm), beneficence (promote good), autonomy (respect for informed choice), justice (fair treatment),

utility (maximize benefits), fidelity (keep commitments), honesty (avoid deception), and privacy (respect confidentiality). These principles provide a framework for distinguishing good behaviour from immoral or harmful conduct.

Sari (2006) further highlights that morality is not innate but shaped by experience and social interaction. Individuals learn moral values through their environment and gradually internalize these values, affecting their decisions and actions. When individuals prioritize personal gain at the expense of others, they may display immoral behaviour, losing empathy and humane consideration.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study analyses the psychopathic traits exhibited by the protagonist of *Orphan* and evaluates her behaviour through behavioural and moral lenses. The theoretical framework supports the interpretation of Esther's actions and clarifies how psychopathy manifests in narrative contexts, contributing to both psychological understanding and moral analysis.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design, which focuses on describing and interpreting phenomena in their natural context using narrative data rather than numbers (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative descriptive research is suitable for analysing complex behaviours and psychological traits, particularly in literary or cinematic works, as it allows a detailed understanding of characters' actions and interactions (Pardi & Ardescy, 2022; Pardi & Hartika, 2025).

The film *Orphan* (2009) was selected as the primary data source using purposive sampling, based on its relevance to the research objectives. The selection was guided by three criteria: (a) the protagonist exhibits behaviours consistent with Hare's (1999) psychopathy framework, (b) the narrative provides sufficient screen time to observe her interactions, and (c) previous studies have identified psychopathic tendencies in the film (Fitria, 2021).

The primary data for this research is the film *Orphan* (2009), which provides observable behaviours and narrative events illustrating the protagonist's psychopathic traits. Secondary data were collected from scholarly books and peer-reviewed articles that discuss psychopathy, behaviour, and qualitative research methods.

Data collection was conducted through note-taking and quotation documentation. Note-taking records relevant observations of the protagonist's gestures, actions, and interactions, while quotation documentation selects direct excerpts of dialogue or narrative events that represent psychopathic behaviours. These techniques prioritize quality and relevance over quantity, consistent with qualitative research practices (Sutopo, 2015; Pardi & Sonia, 2025). To ensure data credibility, this study applies triangulation, comparing observations from the film with theoretical sources and previous studies to validate findings and reduce bias.

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2013) procedures: data reduction, organizing raw notes into meaningful units; data classification, grouping reduced data into thematic categories such as lack of empathy, manipulation, and impulsivity (Pardi & Ardescy, 2022; Pardi & Hartika, 2025); and data interpretation, linking categorized data to theoretical frameworks of psychopathy.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study follows Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was established through multiple viewings of the film and triangulation of theoretical sources. Transferability was facilitated through thick description of Esther's behaviours and narrative context. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting all research stages. Confirmability was achieved through reflexivity and the use of a structured theoretical framework (Hare's psychopathy traits).

By integrating Creswell's analytic framework with rigorous qualitative procedures and Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria, this study ensures that its findings are methodologically robust and theoretically grounded (Pardi & Sonia, 2025; Pardi & Hartika, 2025).

4. Discussion

This study presents an analysis of Esther, the central character in the movie *Orphan*, as the story's protagonist. The discussion focuses on examining her behaviours and actions throughout the film, particularly those that reveal her complex psychological patterns. The analysis is conducted through the lens of Robert D. Hare's theory of psychopathic traits, which provides a structured framework for identifying and interpreting characteristics such as manipulation, lack of empathy, impulsivity, and moral disengagement. By applying this theoretical perspective, the study aims to uncover the underlying psychopathic tendencies that shape Esther's interactions with other characters, offering a deeper understanding of her personality and the motivations behind her behaviour.

4.1 Lack of Empathy

Psychopaths are generally characterized by a pronounced lack of empathy. As noted by Perri and Lichtenwald (2010), individuals with psychopathic tendencies often exhibit an absence of conscience and minimal concern for the feelings of others. Consequently, psychopaths act without regard for moral or social norms, pursuing their desires even when their actions cause harm to others. The following example (Data 1) illustrates this behaviour.

Data 1: Dialogue on 00:29:54 to 00:30:35

Figure 1

Esther hit a bird with stone.



Esther : "Did you kill it?"
Daniel : "It's just a paint balls, I don't think it would hurt"
Esther (take a stone and give to Daniel) "Put it out of a misery. It's in pain, and it's your responsibility."
Daniel : "It was just an accident."
Esther : "If you walk away now, it will starve to death. Is that what you want?"
Daniel : "I'm not doing it"
(Suddenly Esther killed the bird with a stone, Daniel and Max shocked)
Esther : "It's alright. It's in heaven now"
Daniel : "What's wrong with you?!" (He ran away from Esther and Max)

Esther demonstrates a clear lack of empathy, which is a core characteristic of psychopathic behaviour. Her disregard for the suffering of others is evident in her treatment of an injured animal. After Daniel accidentally shoots a bird with a paintball gun, leaving it in pain, Esther responds not with concern or compassion, but by intentionally striking the bird

with a stone to end its life. This deliberate action highlights her inability to recognize or respond appropriately to the distress of a living creature.

This scene serves as an early warning signal in the film's narrative structure. The bird incident foreshadows Esther's capacity for violence and her inability to feel compassion—traits that will later escalate to violence against humans. The placement of this scene early in the film establishes Esther's psychological abnormality before any major conflict with her adoptive family emerges.

The scene creates a sense of unease and suspicion in the viewer. Daniel's reaction—"What's wrong with you?!"—mirrors the audience's own growing discomfort. By aligning the audience with Daniel's perspective, the film positions viewers to recognize Esther's abnormality before the adoptive parents do, creating dramatic irony and tension.

From a clinical perspective, the scene accurately reflects the psychopathic trait of cruelty to animals, which is recognized in forensic psychology as a potential early indicator of antisocial personality development. Esther's ability to kill the bird without hesitation or visible distress aligns with Hare's (1999) description of psychopaths' deficient emotional response to suffering.

The film effectively demonstrates that psychopathy is not always expressed through grand, violent gestures but can manifest in seemingly small acts of cruelty. This representation challenges the stereotype that psychopaths are always overtly aggressive, showing instead that emotional detachment can be expressed in subtle yet deeply disturbing ways. Similarly, Esther's lack of empathy is further illustrated in Data 2, where her interactions with others reveal a consistent pattern of indifference to the pain or feelings of those around her.

Data 2: Dialogue on 00:55:03 to 00:56:20

Figure 2

Esther kills Sister Abigail with hammer



Saw Sister Abigail's car was coming.

Esther : (To Max with sign language) here she comes. Wave your hands and make her stop. Max, go!

Max refused and shook her head when asked by Esther. Then Esther pushed Max until fell to the road. Sister Abigail's car that was speeding almost crashed into Max. Sister Abigail got out of the car, and checking Max.

Sister Abigail: You alright? Max? Are you okay?

Max : (Crying)

Suddenly, Esther come from behind with a hammer and hit Sister Abigail's head few times. Sister Abigail fell down with blood everywhere.

Esther : (To Max) stop crying! Help me pull her feet, and get off of the road. Now!

Esther further demonstrates her profound lack of empathy through her actions toward Sister Abigail, the head of the orphanage. Sister Abigail visits the Coleman household to warn Kate and John about the troubling events that seem to follow Esther, unaware that Esther overhears the conversation. As Sister Abigail prepares to leave in her car, Esther deliberately pushes Max into the car's path, forcing Sister Abigail to swerve off the road to avoid hitting him. Rather than showing concern for the safety of others, Esther seizes the opportunity to commit a calculated and violent act, killing Sister Abigail with a hammer as she rushes to check on Max. This incident exemplifies Esther's complete disregard for human life and suffering.

This murder represents a turning point in the film. Until this moment, Esther's violence has been directed at animals or has been implied rather than shown. The brutal killing of Sister Abigail—a figure of authority and moral conscience—signals that Esther will stop at nothing to protect her secret. The scene also demonstrates Esther's tactical intelligence: she uses Max as bait, waits for the opportune moment, and disposes of the body methodically.

This scene shatters any remaining ambiguity about Esther's nature. The audience is forced to confront the reality of her violence directly, no longer able to attribute her behaviour to childhood mischief or trauma. The brutality of the murder—a hammer, multiple blows, blood—is deliberately shocking, ensuring that viewers fully recognize Esther as a threat. The scene also generates sympathy for Max, who is traumatized by witnessing the murder and then coerced into complicity.

The scene accurately depicts several psychopathic characteristics: the willingness to use violence to eliminate threats, the absence of emotional disturbance following violence, and the instrumental use of others (Max as bait) to achieve goals. Sister Abigail's death serves no emotional purpose for Esther; it is purely instrumental—a calculated removal of someone who knows too much.

The film challenges the assumption that psychopaths are easily identifiable through overt aggression. Esther's ability to mask her violence behind a facade of childhood innocence—and to commit murder while maintaining this facade—illustrates the "mask of sanity" concept (Hare, 2003). The film also raises disturbing questions about how easily psychopathic individuals can infiltrate trusting environments, an implication with significant real-world relevance for adoption and child protection systems.

All of the data presented above align with Hare's (1999) framework, as cited in Stover (2008), which identifies lack of empathy as a central psychopathic trait. This characteristic is reflected in an individual's indifference toward the rights, feelings, and well-being of others. Psychopaths demonstrate little to no concern for the harm they cause, and they rarely express remorse or guilt for their actions, even when their behaviour results in significant suffering.

4.2 Poor Behavior Control

Psychopaths are generally characterized by poor behavioural control and a tendency toward impulsive reactions. As Hare (1999) notes, cited in Pemayun (2017), individuals with psychopathic traits often respond to failure, criticism, or frustration with sudden and unpredictable actions. Consequently, a psychopath may appear calm or composed at first, yet can quickly behave in ways that are extreme or beyond what most people would consider normal, reflecting a pronounced inability to regulate their impulses.

Data 3: Dialogue on 00:33:46 to 00:34:20

Figure 3

Esther cannot control her behaviour.



At school

Brenda : Is it a bible?

Esther : (Nodded)

Brenda : (speak in loud voice and show the bible to all students) A freaky girl brings a bible to school today! All of the students: Hahahaha... Esther tried to retake the bible from Brenda. But Brenda didn't want to. Finally, the bible fell to the floor and scattered. Esther immediately re-arranged the bible, meanwhile Brenda,

Brenda : Wow look, you wear a necklace like a puppy? hahaha (try to pull the necklace)

Esther : (Panic, immediately dismissed Brenda's hand and shouted loudly) Aarrghh!!

Everyone was shocked seeing Esther shouted loudly.

Esther's poor behavioural control is illustrated during her first days at school. Initially, when introducing herself to her classmates, she is mocked by Brenda for wearing outdated clothes. Esther remains calm and does not respond, merely staring at her tormentor. However, the following day, Brenda continues to provoke her by attempting to take her Bible, causing it to fall and scatter on the floor, and by pulling on a ribbon around Esther's neck. In response to these repeated provocations, Esther suddenly raises her voice, attracting the attention of all students, and then pushes Brenda to the ground. This abrupt reaction demonstrates her inability to regulate her emotions and impulses.

This scene establishes the tension between Esther's controlled public persona and her underlying volatility. Her outburst occurs in a public setting (the classroom), marking the first time her abnormal behaviour is witnessed by outsiders. The scene also contrasts with her earlier ability to remain calm under provocation, suggesting that her behavioural control has limits and that sustained provocation will eventually trigger an explosive response.

The suddenness of Esther's outburst is designed to shock both the other characters and the audience. Until this moment, Esther has appeared quiet, composed, and perhaps socially awkward but not dangerous. The outburst reveals a crack in her facade, inviting viewers to question what else she might be capable of. The scene also elicits a complex response: Brenda is, after all, a bully, and Esther's anger might initially seem justified—but the intensity of her

reaction is disproportionate, unsettling viewers who might otherwise have sympathized with her.

Hare's (1999) framework identifies poor behavioural control as a core psychopathic trait, characterized by a low tolerance for frustration and a tendency toward explosive reactions when provoked. Esther's response—from calm to violent outburst without intermediate emotional gradation—is clinically consistent with this trait. Importantly, her outburst is not entirely irrational; it effectively intimidates Brenda and establishes that Esther is not an easy target. This instrumental aspect of her aggression—using violence to achieve social goals—further aligns with psychopathic patterns, distinguishing her behaviour from purely reactive aggression driven by emotional dysregulation alone.

The scene challenges the stereotype that psychopaths are incapable of controlling their behaviour. Esther clearly can control herself; she chooses not to when she perceives that violence will serve her purposes. This portrayal reflects clinical understanding that psychopathic behaviour is not compulsive but strategic. The scene also demonstrates how psychopaths exploit social situations: Esther, who appears as an outsider, uses Brenda's bullying as a justification for her outburst, potentially deflecting blame onto her tormentor.

4.3 Manipulative

According to Hare (1999), as cited in Stover (2008), psychopaths are highly skilled at manipulation, often deceiving their victims without being detected. They can persuade others by presenting themselves positively and telling lies about their intentions or qualities, thereby gaining complete trust and confidence from those around them.



Kate and Esther were seeing a flower that planted for Kate's death child, Jessica.

Esther : What happened to her? (Sad face)

Kate : She died when she was in my tummy. We were very sad to lose her. We decided to sprinkle her ashes on this plant. So, as long as this plant grows, there is a part of her too.

Esther : (Crying) she would be lucky. You are a great mom.

Kate : (hugging Esther) Thank you sweetheart.

Esther's manipulative behaviour is evident during her interaction with Kate. When Esther inquires about Jessica, Kate shares the story of her deceased child and points out the flower she planted in Jessica's memory. In response, Esther feigns emotional sensitivity by crying and complimenting Kate, saying that she is a "great mommy." This reaction demonstrates Esther's ability to manipulate the emotions of others to gain trust and create a favourable impression.

This scene is crucial for establishing Esther's successful integration into the Coleman family. Her performance of grief and empathy—crying on cue, offering emotional validation—convinces Kate that Esther is not only innocent but emotionally perceptive and caring. The scene also sharpens the dramatic irony for the audience, who, having witnessed

earlier acts of cruelty, recognize that Esther's tears are performative, while Kate remains unaware.

The scene is deeply unsettling because it mimics genuine emotional connection so convincingly. Viewers are forced to confront the reality that psychopaths can be extraordinarily skilled at emotional mimicry, making them difficult to detect even for well-meaning individuals. The scene also generates frustration: the audience knows Esther's true nature but cannot warn Kate, creating a sense of helplessness and anticipation of future harm.

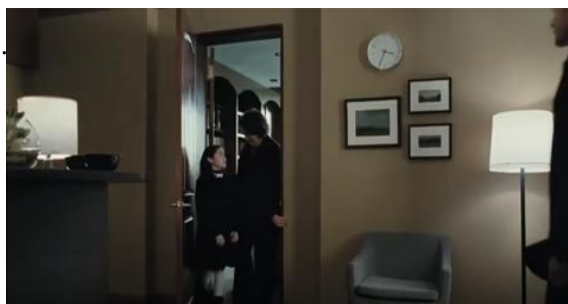
This scene accurately captures the concept of "emotional mimicry" sometimes observed in psychopathic individuals who lack genuine empathy but have learned to simulate it to achieve social goals. Hare (2003) describes this as the "mask of sanity"—the psychopath's ability to present a convincing facade of normal human emotion. Esther's ability to cry on demand and to identify exactly what Kate needs to hear ("You are a great mom") reflects the interpersonal manipulateness central to Hare's psychopathy construct.

The film challenges the stereotype that psychopaths are easily identifiable through social awkwardness or overt cruelty. Esther's manipulation is subtle, patient, and highly effective—she does not force her way into Kate's affections but waits for an emotionally vulnerable moment and skilfully inserts herself. This portrayal reflects clinical understanding that psychopathic manipulation often involves charm, emotional atonement, and strategic patience rather than crude coercion.

Data 5: Dialogue on 01:00:46 to 01:02:20

Figure 5

Kate and John take Esther to Psychiatrist



John and Kate brought Esther to a Psychiatrist.

Psychiatrist : My first instinct is, that there is no serious problem in Esther's past.

Kate : So, there is nothing wrong with her?

Psychiatrist : No. I think who should be examined is somebody in relationship with Esther. Especially with you, Kate. It seems she felt a pressure between both of you. She really did to make you pleasure, but you always prevent her efforts to knowing you.

Kate : That's not true. I've done everything, right?

Psychiatrist : There is something that made Esther felt this. Perhaps your fault because drinking or what has happened to Max, or maybe because you felt incapable to be a mother. That's influenced your relation with Esther.

Kate : What did she tell you?!

Psychiatrist : Esther is a shy little girl, introvert, sensitive, and she is going through a difficult time. She is smart, eloquent. She just needs a patient and understanding from her family.

In Data 5, following Sister Abigail's visit, Kate and John decide to take Esther to a psychiatrist, Dr. Browning, for evaluation. However, Esther skilfully manipulates the situation by providing false information about herself, concealing the truth about her past from both her adoptive parents and the orphanage staff. As a result, Dr. Browning is misled and begins to question Kate's behaviour as a mother rather than recognizing Esther as the source of the problem. This incident illustrates Esther's ability to control perceptions and deceive others to protect her secrets.

This scene represents the climax of Esther's manipulative campaign. She has successfully turned the psychiatrist—a figure of professional authority—against Kate. The scene also marks the point where Esther's manipulation becomes fully explicit; the audience sees her psychological skill laid bare. Her ability to fabricate a plausible narrative about her past, and to present herself as a victim of Kate's emotional neglect, demonstrates sophisticated social intelligence.

The scene is profoundly frustrating because it depicts institutional authority failing to recognize danger. The psychiatrist, who should be equipped to identify psychopathy, is thoroughly deceived. This generates a sense of helplessness and reinforces the film's commentary on how easily psychopaths can evade detection. The scene also heightens sympathy for Kate, who is genuinely trying to be a good mother but is being systematically undermined.

This scene reflects the clinical reality that psychopaths can be highly skilled at manipulating professionals, including mental health experts. Hare (2003) notes that psychopaths often present well in clinical interviews, appearing cooperative, articulate, and credible. Esther's tactics—deflecting attention onto Kate, presenting herself as a victim, providing a coherent (false) personal history—are consistent with documented patterns of psychopathic deception during psychological evaluation.

The scene raises profound questions about the limitations of mental health assessment in detecting psychopathy, particularly in individuals who present as charming and articulate. The film suggests that psychopathic deception can be so effective that even trained professionals are vulnerable—a sobering implication with real-world relevance for forensic psychology and child protection systems. This portrayal avoids simplistic "evil genius" stereotypes, instead showing that psychopathic manipulation often works not through exceptional intelligence but through exploiting the normal human tendency to trust and empathize.

4.4 Synthesis of Findings

The analysis of Esther's behaviour in *Orphan* reveals several key psychopathic traits as outlined in Hare's (1999) framework. First, Esther demonstrates a pronounced lack of empathy, which is evident in her treatment of both animals and humans. She intentionally kills a wounded bird and later murders Sister Abigail, showing indifference to the suffering and rights of others, consistent with Hare's assertion that psychopaths lack concern for the feelings and well-being of those around them. Second, Esther exhibits poor behavioural control, responding to provocation with sudden and extreme actions, such as shouting and physically attacking a classmate, reflecting her inability to regulate impulses under stress or criticism. Third, she displays manipulative behaviour, as seen in her interactions with Kate and Dr. Browning, where she feigns vulnerability and provides false information to influence others' perceptions and gain trust. Collectively, these behaviours illustrate the core psychopathic tendencies identified by Hare, including emotional detachment, impulsivity, and manipulateness, which allow Esther to pursue her desires without regard for moral or social norms and to exploit those around her effectively.

Collectively, these findings contribute to the growing intersection between literary criticism, film studies, and psychological analysis by demonstrating that *Orphan* offers a nuanced and clinically informed portrayal of psychopathy. The film avoids simplistic stereotypes, presenting Esther as a complex figure whose emotional detachment, strategic violence, and sophisticated manipulation reflect core features of Hare's (1999) framework. The analysis also reveals how narrative structure shapes audience perceptions of psychopathy, using dramatic irony, foreshadowing, and shifting sympathies to generate both unease and insight. For film studies, this analysis provides a model for applying clinical psychological frameworks to cinematic texts. For clinical psychology, the film serves as a case study of how psychopathic traits manifest in interpersonal contexts, reinforcing the importance of vigilance and critical evaluation in professional practice. This interdisciplinary approach underscores the value of analysing media representations of mental disorders, not only for academic understanding but also for public education about the complexities of psychopathy.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Esther's behaviour in the movie *Orphan*, it can be concluded that the protagonist exhibits prominent psychopathic traits as defined by Hare (1999). These traits include a marked lack of empathy, poor behavioural control, and manipulativeness, which are consistently demonstrated in her interactions with both humans and animals. Esther's inability to recognize the pain of others, her impulsive responses to provocation, and her deliberate deception to influence and control those around her illustrate a complete disregard for moral and social norms. This study highlights that psychopathy can be hidden behind an outwardly innocent or charming appearance, making it difficult for others to detect until harmful actions occur.

The findings contribute to psychological literary criticism and enrich scholarly discussions concerning the representation of psychopathy in contemporary cinema. By applying Hare's (1999) framework to a cinematic protagonist, this study demonstrates that clinical psychological constructs can serve as effective analytical tools for interpreting fictional characters, bridging the gap between clinical psychology and film studies.

Practically, the study provides a structured framework for analysing psychopathic characters in cinema, offers educators a model for interdisciplinary pedagogy, and reinforces the importance of critical media literacy for general audiences. The difficulty that characters in the film face in detecting Esther's true nature mirrors real-world challenges in identifying individuals with psychopathic traits, highlighting the need for careful assessment and awareness.

This study is limited to a single film (*Orphan*). Future research may examine other cinematic portrayals of psychopathy, compare male and female psychopathic characters, or investigate how audiences interpret psychopathic representations across different cultural contexts.

References

- Baskin-Sommers, A., & Brazil, I. A. (2022). Psychopathy and emotional processing. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 18, 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-075401>
- Beckson, K., & Ganz, A. (1990). *Literary terms: A dictionary* (3rd ed.). Noonday Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Dewey, J. (1929). *Experience and nature*. Open Court Publishing.

- Fitria, N. (2021). Analisis sifat psikopat pada tokoh utama dalam film *Orphan*. *Journal of Indonesian Studies in Language and Literature*, 15(1), 88-102. <https://journal2.um.ac.id/index.php/jisllac/article/view/28851>
- Fowler, A. (1987). *A history of English literature*. Basil Blackwell.
- Fox, R. M., & DeMarco, J. P. (1990). *Moral reasoning: A philosophical approach to ethical issues*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hare, R. D. (1999). *Without conscience: The disturbing world of the psychopaths among us*. Guilford Press.
- Hare, R. D. (2003). *The psychopathy checklist—Revised* (2nd ed.). Multi-Health Systems.
- Hare, R. D., & Neumann, C. S. (2008). Psychopathy as a clinical and empirical construct. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 4, 217-246. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091452>
- Hare, R. D., Hart, S. D., & Harpur, T. J. (2009). *The Psychopathy Checklist--Revised* (2nd ed.). Multi-Health Systems.
- Harcourt, G. (2013). *The protagonist in classical drama*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hirstein, W. (2005). *Brain fiction: Self-deception and the riddle of confabulation*. MIT Press.
- Kartono, K. (2000). *Psikologi abnormal dan abnormalitas seksual*. Mandar Maju.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Mustafa, H. (2011). *Psikologi pendidikan*. Alfabeta.
- Nurhayati, E. (2019). *Etika dan moral dalam pendidikan*. Deepublish.
- Pardi, P., & Ardescy, D. (2022). The impacts of fake marriage in Tess Wakefield's *Purple Hearts*: A qualitative descriptive study. *Journal of Language*, 7(1), 101-110.
- Pardi, P., & Hartika, T. (2025). Psychological conflicts between key characters in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. *Journal of Language*, 7(2), 452-459.
- Pardi, P., & Sonia, T. (2025). Dark Triad personality in Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau*: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. *Journal of Language*, 7(2), 12109. <https://jurnal.uisu.ac.id/index.php/journaloflanguage/article/view/12109>
- Pardi, P., & Sonia, T. (2025). Manifestations of patience in Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump*: A literary psychological study. *Journal of Language*, 7(2), 444-451.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Pemayun, A. A. (2017). *Psikologi kepribadian dan perilaku menyimpang*. Pustaka Ekspresi.
- Perri, F. S., & Lichtenwald, T. G. (2010). The last frontier: Myths & the female psychopathic killer. *Forensic Examiner*, 19(2), 50-67.
- Salazar, M. (2017). *Psychopathy: A clinical guide*. Springer.
- Sari, D. P. (2006). *Moralitas dan perkembangan karakter dalam sastra*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Smith, J. A., Johnson, R., & Lee, M. (2020). Using the Psychopathy Checklist to examine cinematic portrayals of psychopaths. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 52, 101424. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101424>
- Stover, C. S. (2008). *The psychology of psychopathy: Forensic and clinical implications*. Springer.
- Sutopo, H. B. (2015). *Metodologi penelitian kualitatif: Dasar teori dan terapannya dalam penelitian*. UNS Press.
- Wiley, M. (2010). *The protagonist in modern narrative*. Routledge.