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**PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS ON BETH HARMON IN  
WALTER TEVIS’ *THE QUEEN’S GAMBIT* (1983)**

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**ABSTRAK**

*Penelitian ini membahas bagaimana faktor psikososial mempengaruhi kehidupan individu dengan menyoroti peran lingkungan dalam mendorong atau menghambat pertumbuhan kepribadian. Novel *The Queen’s Gambit* (1983) karya Walter Tevis menjadi objek kajian karena secara mendalam merefleksikan perjalanan kepribadian tokoh Beth Harmon. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori perkembangan psikososial Erik H. Erikson melalui pendekatan psikoanalisis dengan metode kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Beth berkembang melalui empat tahap perkembangan psikososial Erikson, yaitu usia bermain, usia sekolah, remaja, dan dewasa muda. Setiap tahap dipengaruhi secara signifikan oleh perubahan lingkungan Beth, seperti kehidupan rumah tangga yang tidak stabil pada masa bermainnya, pengasuhan institusional pada usia sekolah, dunia catur yang kompetitif pada masa remajanya, dan konflik internal serta ketidakseimbangan emosi pada tahap dewasa muda. Terlepas dari semua itu, Beth mencapai pertumbuhan kepribadian melalui empat tahap tersebut, yang menyoroti peran lingkungan yang kuat yang membuatnya mampu mengatasi tantangan psikososial.*

**Kata kunci:** *Perkembangan Psikososial, Pertumbuhan Kepribadian, Erik H. Erikson, Psikoanalisis, *The Queen’s Gambit**

**ABSTRACT**

This study discusses how psychosocial factors influence an individual’s life by highlighting the role of the environment in either encouraging or hindering personality growth. Walter Tevis’s novel *The Queen’s Gambit* (1983) is used as the object of analysis because it profoundly reflects the personality journey of the character Beth Harmon. This study applied Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development through a psychoanalytical approach using a qualitative methodology. The findings reveal that Beth progresses through four of Erikson’s psychosocial development stages: play age, school age, adolescence, and young adulthood. Each stage is significantly influenced by Beth’s shifting environments, such as her

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unstable home life during her play age, institutional upbringing during her school age, the competitive chess world during her adolescence, and internal conflict and emotional imbalance in her young adulthood stage. Despite these challenges, Beth achieves personality growth through the four stages, underscoring the powerful role of the environment in enabling her to overcome psychosocial challenges.

**Keywords:** Psychosocial Development, Personality Growth, Erik H. Erikson, Psychoanalysis, The Queen’s Gambit

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

Being human living in a society could face various environments as they grow. These environments play a crucial role in an individual’s personality development, as the environment serves as a foundation for their growth in stages of their life. As one grows older, the environment changes, and with each environment comes expectations for the individual that lives in it and making it a challenge for the individual’s growth in social behaviour and personality development. Erik H. Erikson’s psychosocial development theory (1998) explained that personality evolves through a sequence of psychosocial crises, each shaped by the dynamic interaction between the individual and their social environment. Successful resolution of these crises depends largely on the quality of environmental support and social expectations encountered at each stage. With these expectations comes a pressure that could possibly burden an individual, thus causing them to conclude each stage with their life either positively or negatively. When the environment does not support the individual’s growth, thus could result in juvenile delinquency. There are plenty of cases concerning juvenile delinquency, with most of them being linked to a number of factors such as a troublesome environment, which could poorly affect their personality development and lead to further psychological problems as they grow. Thus became the theory developed by Erik H. Erikson that takes inspiration from Sigmund Freud’s psychosexual development theory, a theory that amplifies the correlation of how the environment could affect an individual’s personality development and social behaviour. From a simplified statement from Madarita et al. (2019) the understanding that at some point in each stage of development, humans will experience events that is considered as their critical moments, and these moments are important to advance their next stage of psychosocial development. After understanding the concept of Erikson’s 8 stages of psychosocial development theory, the researchers attempted to implement this theory to analyze a character from literary work. Aras (2015) mentioned that literary works have reflected humanity in many fields of expertise. Literary work involves with human reactions that reflect the author’s life, from the ideology and psychological aspects slipped within the literary work. With that

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statement considered, the researchers chose a novel written by Walter Tevis with the title called *The Queen's Gambit* that was first published in 1983. It tells the story of Beth Harmon, a young girl being a chess prodigy who struggles with almost a lifelong substance dependency, alcoholism, and emotional imbalance, and faces gender-based biases in a male-dominated sport. Beth's struggles, which occur at several stages of her life, are seen by the researchers as an ideal case for applying Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development theory on a literary work character.

As part of the guide for developing this research, the researchers formulated the following research question: “How does Beth Harmon's environment affect her psychosocial development in Walter Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit* (1983) novel?” The purpose of this study is to explore how Beth Harmon's environment influences her psychosocial development. This research is considered significant in two ways: first, it is hoped to serve as a helpful reference for future researchers who wish to apply Erikson's psychosocial development theory in literary analysis; and second, it may contribute to existing literary criticism by providing a psychological perspective on character development. Although psychosocial development theory has 8 stages, other researches does not cover all 8 stages upon their objects of research. Most studies only find up to one to five stages, yet the stages found and explained in sequence.

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Psychology of Literature

Birlik (2018) confirmed that literary works become a valid source of reflection to understand the different aspects of human psychology. Dar (2022) stated that psychology and literature are two interrelated aspects that support one another; psychology influences the presentation of characters, their behaviors, and emotions in literary works, while literature provides insights into human psychology through its portrayal of inner experiences and mental processes. In addition to psychology's influence on literature through the presentation of human characters, behaviors, and emotions, Yimer (2019) added that psychology is also useful in literature regarding character development, as the way characters express their moods can affect the readers' mood.

### 2. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson's psychosocial development theory is an advanced version of Freud's psychosexual development theory, which focuses on human growth through libido. In contrast, Erikson's psychosocial theory focuses on the relationship of how the social environment can affect the human psychological growth. While Freud's theory posits that growth is complete by adolescence, Erikson (1993, 1998) explained that human development can be seen in eight stages, starting from infancy

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to old age. According to McAdams (2001), life stories are not just descriptions of events; they are shaped by cultural, social, and psychological factors, making them a rich source for literary analysis. McAdams (2001) draws on Erikson's stages of psychosocial development to explain how individuals create coherent narratives about their lives. The theory works by analyzing how the character's social and cultural environment influences their life story and considers how societal expectations, relationships, and cultural norms shape the character according to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development theory. The character's narrative and life story reflect their resolution, or failure to resolve, the conflicts of each stage as taken from *Childhood and Society* (1993).

**a. Infancy (Trust vs Mistrust)**

Erikson (1993) described that infancy ranges from birth until they are around 1½ years old. Infants are dependent and rely on their guardians for their basic needs, like nourishment. This is how a sense of hope is developed within the infant, developing trust between the individual with their guardians. If the basic needs are not fulfilled or balanced enough, then the individual may feel hopeless or mistrust.

**b. Early Childhood (Autonomy vs Shame)**

Early childhood ranges from the age of 1½ until 3 years old. Erikson (1993) explained that this is the age where children learn how to walk, talk, potty training, and eat. They develop self-control, consciousness, willpower to do tasks, and a sense of independence when they do these tasks with the basic skills they have already learned. If the child fails at this stage, then they will feel shame or lose their confidence, which affects their growth in the upcoming stages.

**c. Play Age (Initiative vs Guilt)**

Children's play age ranges from the age of 3 to 6 years old. In this stage, Erikson (1993) asserted that children are in their most active period, where they start to explore and simply have fun and learn at the same time. This introduces to them that they have a purpose when doing anything. If they fail to take initiative in doing an activity, they can develop a sense of guilt, which can be expressed in denial in upcoming stages.

**d. School Age (Industry vs Inferiority)**

As the stage's name suggests, this is the stage where children ranging from 6 to 12 years old enter school for the first time. This is where they learn industrial skills, such as diligence to study and learn new skills. They are urged to participate in activities that help them improve and achieve competence in a social context. Erikson (1993) explained that a positive school and home environment reinforces a sense of industry through achievement, while failure or lack of encouragement cultivates feelings of inferiority.

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**e. Adolescence (Identity vs Confusion)**

Adolescence stage ranges from the age of 12 to 18 years old. In this stage, teenagers search for their identity or what makes them who they are. Erikson (1968) in *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* described that adolescence seeks an inspiring unification of tradition, ideas, and ideals due to their eagerness to be accepted by peers. They may battle social expectations or moral problems within society. If the environment does not support an individual's pursuit of identity and fail to find their identity at this stage, they might start to question their purpose and life, they can look back at their life in previous stages and question where did they go wrong and may fall into an identity crisis.

**f. Young Adulthood (Intimacy vs Isolation)**

Young adulthood ranges from 18 to 40 years old. Erikson (1993, 1998) described that at this stage, humans began to look for connections in friendships or relationships, someone who makes them happy in general or someone they can share happiness with. If they do not manage to find love, they may force themselves into isolation and block any sort of intimate feelings from others.

**g. Middle Adulthood (Generativity vs Stagnation)**

Middle adulthood ranges from 40 to 65 years old. Erikson (1993, 1998) described that adults have this urge of generativity where they focus on building their life through careers, relations with people, communities, and contributions to society and younger generations. The opposite of generativity on this stage is stagnation, which is the feeling of not making a good change to society or the lack of productivity if the environment does not support an individual's actions.

**h. Old Age (Integrity vs Despair)**

Old age stage is for the elderly aging 65+ years old. When the elderly feel that they have fulfilled their role in previous stages and have a meaningful life, they will feel that sense of relief and integrity. Erikson (1993) asserted that this value can be seen from the accumulated wisdom they have received from their long experience in life, and usually, they will happily share this wisdom to the younger generations and feel satisfied with the life they have lived throughout their life. If they do not feel that way, they may fall into a sense of despair or regret every decision they have made throughout the course of their life and have a higher fear for death.

## **C. METHODS**

### **1. Research Design**

This research used a qualitative method. According to Miles et al. (2018), qualitative analysis presents data findings in the form of words instead of numbers

since data derived from novel mostly come in words and phrases. This research used a psychosocial approach to understand how the social settings and environment could affect the character's personality and social behaviour. This research was suitable to identify the social environment around Beth Harmon in Walter Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit* (1983) novel and how it affected her character in psychosocial development.

## 2. Data and Source of Data

The data of this research were collected from words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs from *The Queen's Gambit* novel by Walter Tevis, which was first published in 1983 by Rosetta Books, consisting of 332 pages. The data were drawn from narrative passages that depict how Beth Harmon's personality is affected by the environment, analyzed through Erikson's psychosocial development theory. The researcher chose *The Queen's Gambit* novel by Walter Tevis (1983) instead of *The Queen's Gambit* series directed by Scott Frank in 2020 as the object of the research because several scenes in the series do not appear in the book, and vice versa. The differences between the two objects were that it could lead to inconsistencies with the data and potentially affect the accuracy of the analysis regarding Beth Harmon's psychosocial development.

## 3. Research Instrument

The research instrument is a tool that helps to conduct the research. For this research, the primary instrument is the researchers. According to Silverman and Patterson (2021), the researcher is the main instrument that engages in critical thinking to interpret and analyze the data. The researchers were responsible for constructing this research paper from beginning to end.

## 4. Data Collection Technique

In the qualitative method, data collection refers to the process of gathering information from various sources to understand the research issue. Miles et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of understanding the context and the amount of data and the need for a systematic approach to data collection, which includes the use of research instruments to ensure consistency and reliability in the data collection process. For this research, the researchers collected the data by reading the novel several times, highlighting and filtering the relevant narrations, dialogues, events, and actions that reveal or relate to Beth Harmon's personality growth through psychosocial development analysis, and then sorted the data according to Erikson's psychosocial development theory.

## 5. Data Analysis

For this research's data analysis, after the data were collected, the researchers compared the data with books and journals related to psychosocial development theory. One of the techniques for data analysis in qualitative method is content analysis, a technique to interpret and analyze textual, visual, or verbal data by identifying patterns, themes, or meanings within narrative texts. Miles et al. (2018) mentioned that qualitative research has three steps to analyse and arrange research data. The first step was selecting the data as according to the research problem. The second step was displaying the data that was relevant to the information related to the theory by using Erikson's psychosocial development theory, where it would be displayed as according to the first stage to the eighth stage. The final step was drawing conclusion from the collection of the necessary data.

## D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. Play Age (Initiative vs Guilt)

During the play age, children began to explore, have fun while learning at the same time. In a supportive environment, it could ignite initiative and self-consciousness to do anything for the child. On the other hand, if they failed, they will develop a sense of guilt. Although the beginning of the story did not exactly began from this stage, and there were not many scenes that show Beth during her play age, there are only a few flashbacks that occur while she was in her school age. But from those flashbacks during her play age, it was hinted that Beth's parents were involved in domestic conflict as she witnessed it from a safe space.

*“But deeper than that, she felt trapped, the same wretched, heart-stopping sensation she had felt when she was taken from home and put in this institution and made to sleep in a ward with twenty strangers and hear noises all night long that were, in a way, as bad as the shouting at home, when Daddy and Mother were there—the shouting from the brightly lit kitchen.”* (Tevis, 1983: 47)

In the data above, it was assumed Beth was still in her play age before she ended in the Methuen orphanage after her mother's death, perhaps between 3 to 6 years old. In Beth's case, she was helpless as she heard her parents arguing in the kitchen. The influence of the domestic conflict and the lack of parental attention made her incapable of initiating activity due to fear, as well as her avoidance of interacting with people, which enforced her solitude and emotional imbalance in later stages.

### 2. School Age (Industry vs Inferiority)

School age is when children develop their intellectual skills, such as diligence to study, discipline, and learn more skills. They are urged to participate in activities

that help them improve and achieve competence in a social context, while failure or lack of encouragement cultivates feelings of inferiority. The beginning of the story starts with Beth Harmon being taken to an orphanage that serves as part of the institution after her mother's death. During her school age, Beth's life in Methuen Orphanage significantly shaped her industry. Mentorship from Mr. Shaibel and support from Jolene encouraged her to develop chess skills and self-confidence despite institutional restrictions that often enforced feelings of inferiority.

*“Abruptly she saw herself as a small unimportant person—a plain, brown-haired orphan girl in dull institutional clothes. She was half the size of these easy, insolent students with their loud voices and bright sweaters. She felt powerless and silly. But then she looked at the boards again, with the pieces set in the familiar pattern, and the unpleasant feelings lessened. She might be out of place in this public high school, but she was not out of place with those twelve chessboards.” (Tevis, 1983: 40)*

Institution affected an individual's industry whether they help encourage or discourage the growth. When Beth was 9 years old and has her chess skill acknowledged by Mr. Shaibel, she was exhibited to Duncan High School to play against multiple students from the chess club. The data was a portrayal of her insecurity and insignificance, influenced by facing a bigger institution and a bigger group of people. But influenced by what Mr. Shaibel had taught her with chess, chess not only became Beth's industry, but also her comfort zone and the foundation of her identity.

### 3. Adolescence (Identity vs Confusion)

Adolescence seeks their identity by developing their passion due to their eagerness to be accepted by their peers. They may battle social expectations or moral problems within society. If the environment does not support an individual's pursuit of identity and fails to find their identity at this stage, they might start to question their purpose and life. From the age of 13 to 18 in her adolescent stage, Beth's chess career as a female chess prodigy grows as she continued to learn and participated in more tournaments across the states of America to be the best female chess player in not just in America, but in international class as well.

*“At eighteen, Beth Harmon has established herself as the queen of American chess. She may be the most gifted player since Morphy or Capablanca; no one knows just how gifted she is—how great a potential she holds in that young girl's body with its dazzling brain. To find out, to show the world if America has outgrown its inferior status in world chess, she*

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*will have to go where the big boys are. She will have to go to the Soviet Union.”* (Tevis, 1983: 236)

Beth's victories in chess tournaments provided validation for what she is capable of in chess. It helped strengthen her identity in a male-dominated sphere. However, societal bias, losses against stronger opponents, and media portrayal of her gender triggered episodes of identity confusion through it all. Still, her persistence in improving her skills and her recognition as “The Queen of American Chess” in America reflect a successful identity formation in her adolescent stage as she wanted to pursue more and challenge the Grandmaster of Chess by participating in tournaments in Soviet Union.

#### 4. Young Adulthood (Intimacy vs Isolation)

In young adulthood, individual seeks relations, whether it is platonic or romantic, to find intimacy in those relationships. If an individual fails to develop intimacy, then they might isolate themselves from other people, even broader society. Beth had a difficult time engaging in both due to her emotional imbalance, substance abuse, and alcoholism after her adoptive mother's death and losses in tournaments. The inner turmoil caused her to have difficulty reaching out for help, but eventually she overcame it and called her childhood best friend from the orphanage, Jolene. Jolene served as a support system that helped Beth to overcome her hardship and encouraged her to play chess to Russia.

*“Behind the place where she used to sit to play was a kind of rough partition made of unplanned wooden boards nailed to two-by-fours. A calendar used to hang there, with scenes from Bavaria above the sheets for the months. Now the calendar was gone and the entire partition was covered with photographs and clippings and covers from Chess Review, each of them neatly taped to the wood and covered with clear plastic to keep it clean and free of dust—the only thing in this dingy basement that was. **They were pictures of her. There were printed games from Chess Review, and newspaper pieces from the Lexington Herald-Leader and the New York Times and from some magazines in German. The old Life piece was there, and next to it was the cover of Chess Review with her holding the U.S. Championship trophy. Filling in the smaller spaces were newspaper pictures, some of them duplicates. There must have been twenty photographs.**”* (Tevis, 1983: 265 - 266)

In young adulthood, Beth experienced tension between intimacy and isolation. Emotional instability and reliance on alcohol drove her into isolation, but reconnections with Jolene, support from Benny and other peers she met in the chess community when she is competing in Russia, and rediscovery of Mr. Shaibel's

influence after his death guided her toward intimacy with others and self-recovery from her addiction, allowing her to regain purpose.

In this research's findings, the researcher found that Beth had undergone four stages of psychosocial development, which began from play age, school age, adolescence, and finally young adulthood, that happened in sequence. The novel did not show scenes from Beth's infancy, early childhood, middle adulthood, and old age stage. Beth had a temporal portrayal of initiative that resolves into guilt due to the lack of parental role in her play age. At her school age, she developed industrial skills by playing chess despite the social inadequacy and strict institutional rules that temporarily made her inferior. Her adolescence stage reflects her journey as she battles against social expectations of the oddity of being a woman who plays chess and humility from her losses. Finally, her young adulthood portrays a temporal isolation due to her emotional imbalance, but she was later encouraged to heal as she reconnects with her friend and roots to rediscover her purpose as a form of intimacy. With that, the researcher only finds four psychosocial developments on the character Beth Harmon. From three previous studies for this research, it was discovered that psychosocial studies do not necessarily cover all eight stages of the stages in the object of research, but are still kept relevant about the study. In Rubianti et al. (2018), who wrote “Greg Gaine's Adolescence in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* Novel by Jesse Andrews,” only focused on analyzing Greg Gaine's adolescence stage. In Kosiaroh et al. (2017) who wrote “Jesse's Psychosocial Development in the Novel *My Sister Keeper* by Jodi Picoult (2004)” applied both Erikson's psychosocial theory and found five stages if Jesse's psychosocial development, which was early childhood, play age, school age, adolescence, and young adulthood, supported with Arnett's rebellion theory as a secondary theory. In “Peter's Psychosocial Development in *Prodigal Son* Novel by Danielle Steel” by Madarita et al. (2019), this study had used Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and only found three stages upon Peter's psychosocial development, which was school age, young adulthood, and middle adulthood. Each research that utilizes Erik H. Erikson's psychosocial development theory thus further engrave the theory for literary criticism.

## E. CONCLUSION

There is a very close relationship between literature and human psychology, including the process at the stage of human personality development from infancy to old age. Such studies were referred to as psychosocial studies developed by Erik H. Erikson. The theory applied to such studies elaborates on personality development in humans from stages that were actually influenced by interactions between individuals, starting from family, school, and wider community groups. This research chose the main character of a novel called *The Queen's Gambit* (1983) written by Walter Tevis, Beth Harmon was an example of a character from

a novel who had experienced the process of personality development affected by the shifting environment, starting from play age to young adulthood. Thus, the environment has shaped her psychosocial development.

Through this psychosocial study on Beth Harmon, it was concluded that a character's environment could shape their personality's growth by applying Erik H. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development on the character, starting from Beth's short yet troubled play age stage, her school age stage where she developed her interest in chess despite the strict institutional rules, her adolescence stage full of triumph and struggles with losses and internal conflict, and having emotionally imbalance during her young adulthood stage. Her story showed how both negative and positive environments affected a person's personality growth, and a positive relationship between individuals can overcome personal struggles. Erik H Erikson's psychosocial development theory has been implemented on literary works; it would be considerably for future researchers to apply this theory to other objects such as films and video games.

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