

## Strane's Stages of Child Grooming in Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020)

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### ABSTRAK

Objek dari penelitian ini adalah novel *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), sebuah novel yang bercerita tentang sebuah hubungan antara seorang pelajar berusia 15 tahun yang bernama Vanessa Wye dan gurunya yang berusia 42 tahun bernama Jacob Strane. Topik menarik yang menjadi bahan diskusi utama dalam penelitian ini adalah bagaimana Strane sebagai seorang guru dan laki-laki dewasa, menggunakan tahapan dari child grooming untuk memanipulasi pikiran Vanessa agar berpikir bahwa hubungan dan aktivitas seksual di antara mereka merupakan hal yang normal. Untuk menganalisa topik ini, peneliti menggunakan metode kualitatif. Psikologi dalam sastra, dan teori child grooming digunakan untuk mengkaji topik ini. Karena penelitian yang membahas tentang isu child grooming dalam karya sastra masih sedikit, maka penelitian ini dapat dianggap sebagai upaya baru untuk mengisi kesenjangan penelitian. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa Strane menggunakan empat tahapan grooming kepada Vanessa yang terdiri dari pemilihan korban, perolehan akses, pengembangan rasa percaya, dan desensitisasi korban untuk menyentuh. Dalam tahap pertama, Strane memulai dengan mengamati penampilan fisik Vanessa dan memastikan apakah ia seorang penyendiri. Kedua, ia memastikan bahwa Vanessa mengikuti klub penulisan kreatif yang ia bimbing, hal ini dilakukan sebagai upaya untuk menjadi lebih dekat dengan Vanessa. Ketiga, Strane membuat Vanessa merasa lebih istimewa dibandingkan dengan murid-muridnya yang lain, ini dilakukan agar dirinya mendapatkan kepercayaan Vanessa. Lalu, ia memberikan Vanessa buku-buku bertema seksual, dan menginisiasikan sentuhan yang terlihat tanpa maksud terselubung namun di kemudian hari meningkat menjadi hubungan seksual.

Kata kunci: child grooming, *My Dark Vanessa*, psikologi dalam sastra

### ABSTRACT

The object of this study was *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), a novel that tells the relationship between a 15-year-old student named Vanessa Wye and her 42-year-old teacher named Jacob Strane. The interesting topic which became the main discussion in this study was how Strane, as a teacher and full-grown adult, used stages of child grooming to manipulate Vanessa's mind to think that the relationship and sexual intercourse that happened between them were normal. To analyze this topic, the researchers employed a qualitative method. Psychology in literature and child grooming theory were used to examine the topic of this study. The study that examined the child grooming issue in literary work is still insufficient, thus this study could be considered a new attempt to fill the research gap. This study found that Strane applied the four stages of grooming to Vanessa, which consist of selecting the victim, gaining access, developing trust, and desensitizing the victim to touch. In the first stage, Strane started by observing Vanessa's physical appearance and made sure whether she was a loner or not. Second, he made sure that Vanessa joined the creative writing club that he supervised to get closer to her. Third, Strane made Vanessa feel more special than his other students to gain her trust. Then, he gave Vanessa sexual-themed books and initiated a seemingly innocent touch which later on escalated to sexual intercourse.

Keywords: child grooming, *My Dark Vanessa*, psychology in literature

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### INTRODUCTION

The term grooming has existed for a long time. McAlinden (2006) states psychologists have already used this term

for some time in order to analyze unusual sexual behavior. Leberg (1997) defines grooming as "the offender plans to make the victim less likely to resist, to make others

unaware of what he is doing, or even to make them likely to help him, without their knowledge, to molest a child". In other words, the offenders did grooming to the victim intentionally with their full awareness because they already planned a certain scheme to assault the victim and then make sure the victim will keep it a secret (Knoll, 2010).

The outcome of sexual grooming often led to the victim's silence or unconsciousness of being a victim. Winters et al. (2020) argue that sexual grooming has been considered the most important part of the process of child sexual abuse. The acts of grooming that the offenders use might vary, but it all has the same purpose; to ensure that the victim will never disclose their relationship (McAlinden, 2006).

Furthermore, even though there is still no model of grooming that got validated, several theorists have a similarity in explaining the stages of grooming. Winters and Jeglic (2017) divide the stages of grooming into four different stages. The first one is the selection of the victim. During this stage, they pointed out that most of the offenders are choosing the potential victims based on the attractiveness of their physical appearance, family situations, easiness of access, children's psychological vulnerabilities and innocent, also lack confident children. Next, the second step is gaining access. The purpose of this stage is to isolate the victim either physically or emotionally from their surroundings. During the second stage, the offenders try to have closer communication or private contact with the victims. The third stage is trust development. This step is related to the emotional attachment of the victim to the offender, which is considered the most influential stage of grooming. The purpose of this stage is to make the victim trust the offender so that the victim can be controlled by them to do sexual things. The last stage is desensitizing the child to touch. In this last stage, the intimacy of the physical touch is increasing rather gradually; from innocent hugs to back massages then continuing to sexual intercourse. Desensitizing the child might also occur in a form of discussing

sexual themes which leads to the escalation of the child's sexualization (Winters & Jeglic, 2017).

Based on the explanations above, it could be seen that grooming could be considered the preparation stage prior to sexual abuse. Hence, having an understanding of child grooming could help to prevent or stop the sexual abuse of children. Furthermore, besides can be seen in real cases, the portrayal of child grooming can also be seen in a literary work entitled *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russell.

The portrayal of child grooming in *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) is reflected through Jacob Strane's behavior towards Vanessa Wye. It is described that Vanessa was a 15 years old girl, who was also Strane's student in a boarding school in Maine. In this novel, Strane, despite being 27 years older than Vanessa, was taking advantage of the girl's loneliness and naivety to do sexual acts with him. However, being the little girl she is, Vanessa thought what she did with her teacher was love, as Strane always said so. Then, 17 years later, when one of Strane's students called him out for the sexual assault that he did in the past; it made Vanessa rethinking on her and her teacher's past relationship. Still, the effects of Strane and his doctrine regarding their relationship were clutching on her mind, resulting in Vanessa's inability to speak up about the truth.

This research strives to reveal Strane's acts of child grooming in *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), then the theory that is used to analyze the issue is psychology in literature. Psychology in literature is used for psychology and could also help in explaining, interpreting, and discussing processes linked to the relationship of males and females, people's place in society, and people's desires, failures, or accomplishments that occurred within the literature field (Aras, 2015). Several past researches also used the branch of psychology in literature, such as psychoanalysis theory. For example, the thesis of Putri Apriliana from Sanata Dharma University entitled *Different Self-*

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*Defense Mechanisms in Major Characters in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use": A Psychoanalytic Reading* (2014) focused on the core issue and self-defense mechanisms reflected on each major character. In analyzing the issue, Apriliana used the concept of psychoanalytic theory by Lois Tyson. Another past research is the thesis of Demet GEÇGEN entitled *The Hidden Message: A Study of Pedophilia in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita from Freudian Psychoanalytic Perspective* (2021). In his thesis, he analyzed the pedophilia issue reflected in the main characters of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Lolita. In examining the issue, GEÇGEN used Freud's theory of psychoanalysis and focused on revealing pedophilia as a mental illness in both stories. Even though this current research is also using psychology in literature as the main theory, there is no past research that analyzes child grooming in literary works. Therefore, this current research that examines child grooming using a psychological approach in literature could be considered a new attempt by literary critics.

To sum up, this research aims to reveal child grooming in *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), focused on Strane's acts of child grooming portrayed in the novel *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russell. Given the condition that the issue related to child grooming is still under-researched in literature, this research hopes to fill the gap by contributing to the analysis of child grooming. Moreover, the researcher employs psychology in literature as the main theory, also child sexual grooming theory in analyzing the findings.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method. Mohajan (2018) defines the qualitative method as a method to examine any social phenomenon and comprehend a complicated phenomenon that cannot be examined by quantitative research. The use of the qualitative method helps the researcher to analyze the issue deeply, as this method is able to explore a social

phenomenon. In conducting this research, the researcher obtained the data from a novel entitled *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russell, relevant journals, articles, books, and online research related to psychology in literature, and child grooming.

There are several steps in the data-collecting process of this study. The first is reading and re-reading the novel thoroughly. The second is collecting data from the novel related to child grooming. The third step is reading and re-reading relevant theories and data related to child grooming. Next, the fourth step is collecting the data from relevant theories and data. Last, grouping the data obtained from the novel and theories into several different categories.

After collecting the data, the researchers then reduce and validate the information from the collected data. Next, the researchers analyze the data about Strane and Vanessa which is related to child grooming. For the last step, the researchers make a conclusion based on the findings of this research.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section explains the analysis of how Strane, as a character in the novel *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), applies the acts of child grooming to one of his underage students, Vanessa Wye.

Strane's acts of child grooming could be seen through several stages, such as how he chooses his potential victim, which is Vanessa, obtaining access to be privately closer to Vanessa, building trust between them, and desensitizing Vanessa to touch him. Although the understanding of the term grooming is still inadequate and often mistaken as a seemingly innocent act instead of an assault, Winters and Jeglic (2017) have divided the stages of grooming into four different stages. Those stages are the selection of the victim, gaining access, trust development, and desensitizing the child to touch. The four stages are used to analyze the findings in this section:

### 1. Choosing Potential Victim

In *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), Strane and Vanessa first met each other during Vanessa's second year in Browick. On their first meeting, Strane asked Vanessa to introduce herself by telling her name and her hometown. Strane then recognized Vanessa's hometown as a secluded area, and proceeded to ask if she ever feels lonely there (Russell, 2020:24). On another occasion, after Vanessa finished her task in the creative writing club which was supervised by Strane, the said teacher asked Vanessa things regarding her loneliness again (Russell, 2020:29).

The behavior of Strane where he keeps asking Vanessa whether she ever feels lonely or not, and making sure whether she is a sociable person or not is classified as Strane's way to figure out if Vanessa is suitable for being his next victim. According to Winters and Jeglic (2017), in cases of online and in-person child grooming situations, a solitary child who did not have social support is easier to engage with, especially when the offenders show them a sense of acceptance. Therefore, it is necessary for Strane to ensure that Vanessa really fits the criteria as a loner and isolated child before he proceeds to the next grooming stage.

Besides being a loner and socially isolated, physical appearance also plays a big part in whether a child sexual offender is interested to victimize a particular child. During Strane and Vanessa's first long conversation, the older man complimented Vanessa several times; Strane said that he likes her style and she uses a nice dress (Russell, 2020:30). Then in another situation, he complimented Vanessa's red hair, and how her hair matched the color of red maple leaf perfectly (Russell, 2020:34). Based on the research conducted by Elliot et al. (1995), 42% of child sexual offenders choose their victim because of their physical appearance, such as the child being pretty, and 27% of them choose their victim because they like how the child is dressed. Strane's act of complimenting Vanessa's appearance indicates that he was already observing the girl beforehand. In other words, Vanessa's physical appearance matches his liking

which made Strane choose her as his potential victim.

## 2. Obtaining Access

On an occasion in *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), it is described that Mr. Strane persuaded Vanessa to be an official member of his creative writing club (Russell, 2020:29). While in plain sight it looks like an innocent and harmless persuasion, Vanessa staying in the club means an opportunity for Strane to be closer to Vanessa. It is because Strane is the supervisor of the creative writing club, and the club currently only has one member named Jesse. It means if Vanessa officially joined the club, she would spend most of her after-school time there and only with a small number of people; Strane and Jesse. This action then will lead Vanessa to be more fitted as Strane's potential victim, for Vanessa will truly be isolated from her other peers.

This act of Strane counted as the gaining access stage of grooming, which is the second stage in grooming activity, for the gaining access stage of the grooming process involves the activities that made the offenders obtain access to be around the potential victim (Winters and Jeglic, 2017). In addition, Winter and Jeglic (2017) reveal that the main goal of this stage is to physically and emotionally isolate the children from the people around them. Therefore, Strane's persuasion to make Vanessa join the creative writing club can be seen as his attempt to obtain access to being closer to Vanessa, which later will result in Vanessa's isolation from the others. The situation then makes the grooming process and assault will be more easily enacted.

## 3. Building Trust

In this novel, Strane builds trust between himself and Vanessa by convincing Vanessa that he has never been intimate with his other students before, which makes Vanessa feel special (Russell, 2020:112). This act of Strane is classified into the trust development stage of the grooming process, for according to Winters and Jeglic (2017), in this stage the offenders often use various

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strategies depending on the child's needs and vulnerabilities in order to build a special relationship between them. Vanessa is described as a socially isolated person and also someone with low self-esteem, therefore, Strane used Vanessa's vulnerability and made her think that her peers were not as special as her in order to establish an exclusive relationship between them.

He also made Vanessa believe that both of them are craving dark things, thus they belong together (Russell, 2020:124). This act is also classified into the trust development stage of the grooming process, which is counted as the most important stage in child grooming. The purpose behind these acts is to make Vanessa think that she is indeed different, and she also wanted to do sexual things with Strane. He wanted to make Vanessa understand that there is a mutual agreement between them, and the sexual interaction that happened between them is normal because they are lovers and both of them have consented to it. However, as Vanessa is still counted as an underage child, therefore consent cannot be counted as legal. Fisher (as cited in ILF, 2018) explains that any form of sexual activity with minors is prohibited and illegal because even when the child may appear cooperative with the activity, the cooperation will never be considered equal to consent. The reason is that children are not ultimately understood sexual activities, also the consequences that are going to entail during and after the sexual activities happened (Innocent Lives Foundation, 2018). Thus, it can be concluded that Strane has been trying to manipulate Vanessa's mind by giving a wrong understanding regarding their relationship when Vanessa herself was not even eligible to give consent.

#### 4. Desensitizing Vanessa to Touch

In *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), Strane suddenly gives Vanessa a book entitled *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath and then pointed a part out of a poem entitled "Lady Lazarus", which said:

Out of the ash I rise with my red hair and I  
eat men like air.

He says, "That reminded me of you." Then he reaches behind me and tugs on my ponytail.

... "Is it ok that it reminded me of you?" I lick my lips, lift my shoulders. "Sure." "Because the last thing I want is to overstep."

Overstep. I'm not sure what he means by that, either, but the way he gazes down at me stops me from asking any questions. ..."  
(Russell, 2020:39)

On another occasion, Strane also secretly gives Vanessa a sensual novel titled *Lolita*, which tells the relationship between a middle-aged literature professor and a 12-year-old girl, Strane then wanted to hear Vanessa's opinion regarding the novel when she finished the book later (Russell, 2020:69). This act of Strane leads Vanessa to have an assumption that her teacher was trying to say that their story is exactly the same as *Lolita*. Within the child grooming theory, desensitizing the child to the touch stage is the final stage of the grooming process. This stage also not only occurs in physical acts but also in psychological acts (Winters and Jeglic, 2017). Based on the two data above, it could be interpreted that Strane's attempts to give Vanessa some books related to sexual things are classified as psychological acts in desensitizing the child to the touch stage. According to Winters and Jeglic (2017), psychological acts in desensitizing the child to the touch stage may appear in a form of discussing sexual things in order to attain increased sexualization.

Furthermore, Strane also often gives Vanessa a seemingly innocent touch, such as sitting way too close to Vanessa in the class until their knees touch, then stroking her knee (Russell, 2020:45). The suspected innocent touch then escalated to fingering and sexual intercourse (Russell, 2020:93). These acts of Strane fit the usual characteristics of child sex offenders in the desensitizing the child to the touch stage, where they usually start the physical contact by seemingly accidental and innocent touch, but then the contact will be more intimate as the time goes (Winters and Jeglic, 2017).

#### CONCLUSION

To sum up, this research aims to reveal child grooming in *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), focused on Strane's acts of child grooming portrayed in the novel *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russell. The findings found that Strane's acts of child grooming are seen through how he applied the stage of child grooming to Vanessa.

First, he decided to choose Vanessa as a potential victim by finding out whether she is a loner or not, and by observing her physical appearance. Second, Strane was gaining access to be closer to Vanessa by making sure she is joining the creative writing club that he supervised. Third, developing trust by making Vanessa feel special and different from Strane's other students, also manipulating Vanessa's mind to think that the relationship between them is not wrong. Last, desensitizes Vanessa to touch both physically and psychologically by giving her sexual-themed books, and initiating seemingly innocent touch which later on escalated to more intimate touch, such as sexual intercourse.

Based on the findings, it could be seen that Strane did all the grooming stages in order to make Vanessa not realize that he assaulted her, which resulted in Strane getting away from his supposed deserving punishment. Hence, it can be concluded that these findings support the current child grooming theories which argue that the main goal of child grooming is to make sure that the victim will keep the secrecy of the assault that happened to them (McAlinden, 2006; Knoll, 2010).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express our gratitude to the organizing committee of Seminar Nasional PPD #2 who have managed to publish the proceedings and thus the publication of this article.

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