

## CHARACTER'S OBSESSION FOR PERFECTION IN *THE AVIATOR* MOVIE BY MARTIN SCORSESE: A PSYCHOANALYSIS

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### Abstract

Obsession for perfection is common behavior that may be suffered by people. Those who are so obsessed with something are easily sacrifice anything to chase the perfection that has already been created in their minds. It is possible that they will perhaps harm themselves. Therefore, this research aimed to analyze the obsession for perfection in *The Aviator* movie 2012 by Martin Scorsese by using Psychoanalytic theory. This research applied an in-depth qualitative narrative analysis method which examines the story elements from dialogue and picture collected in the form of screen-capture of the relevant scene. This research used psychoanalytic theory as the approach and divided the analysis into two sub discussions; they are the reflection of obsession for perfection and the effects of obsession for perfection. Based on the analysis, the data supports the findings that Howard suffers some conditions which includes Target Oriented; where people with ambitions like this have all-or-nothing thinking. The second finding is Highly Dependent on Result; it shows that Howard put his self-esteem depends on what is accomplished and how others respond to what he would achieve.

**Keywords:** *The Aviator* movie, Obsession, Obsession for Perfection, Psychoanalytic theory

### INTRODUCTION

Obsession for perfection is a common behavior that everyone has. People tend to do anything to chase the perfection that has already been created in their minds. It is possible for those who are so obsessed with something to easily sacrifice anything that is no less important in their lives so that it will perhaps harm themselves. Obsession for perfection is the right expression to describe the phenomenon in real life. We can learn the phenomenon from celebrities' live. The perfection that many celebrities highlight is physical appearance. In achieving perfection, many celebrities even do plastic surgery to improve their physique, they even go on a strict diet to balance the ideal body proportions to look perfect in front of the camera and in front of many people. Mel Schwartz in *Psychologytoday.com* says that the mindset of perfection can dominate humans to do anything. Ralph Ryback (2016) also clarified in *Psychological Today*, that the "examples of obsessive thoughts center on order, cleanliness, symmetry, security, doubting one's own thoughts and perceptions, and unwanted sexual aggression or ideas." Kristi Tackett (2019) said on her article that "personal standards are nothing more than a set of behaviors that are based on expectations people have of themselves in various situations." This line of thinking suggests that by having high standards, you are much more likely to achieve everything you want in life. Therefore, the writer offers something new about research in *The Aviator* movie. This movie had been analyzed by other researchers, such as Brown et al (2012), Chosak & Anne (2014), and also Srikandi & Novita (2018), but this research is aimed at revealing the signs of people who suffer obsession for perfectionism portrayed by the characters in the movie. Movie, considered as one of literary works, can be the sources to explores how characters are portrayed by the author, because movies are also considered a medium to reveal the author's ideology (Woro Kasih, 2018). Literary work, such as movie, often portrays real issues and events through the use of language, picture, plot, and other scene properties (Amelia, 2016; Rido, 2020). In fact, language serves as one of the media to distribute message among people in various context (Kuswoyo, 2016:257; Afrianto et. al, 2014:78; Samanik, 2018). Further, movies also can be the representation of the reality and social issues in real world and (Fithratullah, 2021; Yunara and Kardiatsyah, 2017). The writer sees that there is a possibility that Howard Hughes has a mental disorder due to trying to achieve perfection or in other words an obsession for perfection. The writer chose this topic because the

obsession for perfection is a problem that the writer believes happens to everyone in reality. It aims to convincing people that perfect is not always good. Maybe it is good but for only certain times and eventually will disappear. We as a human need to be grateful for what God has given to us.

This research is utilized psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysis is a branch of psychology that is specifically concerned with individual experiences (Milton et al, 2004). Freudian Psychoanalytic is usually used by the researcher to analyze the psychological problems of the character (Ryckman, 2008; Bernadro, 2015; Dintasari & Amelia, 2017). Freudian believes that human has three psychology elements which are Id, Ego, and Superego (Setri & Setiawan, 2020). Many psychology issues are found not only in real life but also in literary works such as movie, drama, and novel. Most psychologists believe that movie has deeper impact to the audience especially in shaping the opinion and the perception, because of the cognitive ability of human by capturing moving image in their minds (Kiranamita & Samanik, 2021). Referring to the relation between literature and psychology, the researcher proposes to describe the obsession for perfection of Howard Hughes in *The Aviator* movie based on 10 signs of people suffering from obsession for perfection that was coined by Newburg (2019), and also understanding cognitive theory of obsession by Salkovskis (1985). Moreover, the writer will also uncover some of the impacts of that obsession.

### **Cognitive Theory of Obsessions**

Salkovskis (1985) proposed a cognitive-behavioral theory to explain the development and persistence of clinical obsessions. Some theory of obsession is heavily influenced by Salkovskis's cognitive-behavioral theory (Abramowitz & Houts, 2005). The model considers two cognitive processes central in the development of obsessions. First, people who tend to be obsessive attribute excessive personal responsibility to possibly hurting themselves or others in response to unwanted intrusive thoughts. Second, in an attempt to overcome the discomfort and sense of responsibility associated with intrusion, individuals develop overt or covert neutralization rituals that, in turn, increase the frequency and salience of intrusions. Salkovskis' model begins with the assertion that clinical obsessions represent the extreme end of the normal, unpleasant, unwanted, and disturbing cognition continuum. Rachman (1981) describes unwanted or unacceptable thoughts, images, and impulses as mental events that interfere with ongoing activity, are associated with internal origin, and are difficult to control. The concept of unwanted intrusive thoughts is defined and elaborated, with particular reference to obsessions (Rachman, 1981). Examples of unwanted intrusive thoughts reported by nonclinical subjects were thoughts of saying something rude or unacceptable to someone, of being poisoned with dirt or germs, of harming others, or of engaging in unacceptable sexual acts.

#### ***10 Signs People May Be Suffering from Obsession for Perfectionism (Newburg, 2019):***

1. Having an all-or-nothing mindset.  
A person who has "All-or-Nothing" thoughts refers to a tendency to evaluate one's own qualities in an extreme category. this type of thinking leaves small room for mistakes, no matter how small the trouble will have a major impact on the perfectionist's mentality.
2. Having constant self-doubt.  
A person with a perfectionist obsession can also experience enormous self-doubt, especially when it comes to their own performance. Even if they received overwhelming feedback, they would worry excessively. Since a perfectionist's sense of self-worth depends on the expectations of others, they will obsessively contemplate everything.
3. Self-esteem depends on what is accomplished and how others respond.  
Perfectionist bases their self-worth on what they have accomplished. They crave the approval of others and will regularly make the comparison because the perfection they achieve is based on how people perceive them. Those with this sufferer will constantly make comparisons with others to achieve perfection.
4. Fear of failure leads to project delays or abandonment.  
Perfectionists will worry that they don't live up to their own (or others) standards. The expectation of negative consequences causes anticipatory anxiety, which in turn leads to avoidance. Perfectionism and procrastination go hand in hand. Procrastinating on a difficult task or ignoring it makes it possible to avoid failure. Perfectionists may prefer not to take on jobs that are likely to lead to failure.
5. Unable to accept and celebrate any success

Perfectionists cannot calmly celebrate victory, even if they have completed their goals and achieved their perfectionist standards. They still believe that they can do more than what they have already accomplished. Perfectionists don't recognize their victories as far as feeling happy or satisfied with a job well done. Instead, they find every flaw in the way they run the project.

6. Avoid challenges that can expose weaknesses

Perfectionists like to persevere by avoiding making mistakes based on what they realized. When they are faced with new challenges, they fear not being able to learn something new. As a result, they avoid taking risks and end up inhibiting their creativity to stay within their own comfort zone. They worry that if their failures will reveal their weaknesses, they will not be able to achieve the perfection that they have been aiming for in themselves.

7. Always put up a front, insisting everything is perfect

Perfectionists have an outward need to emerge perfect and will avoid the opportunity to reveal imperfections, especially in public concerns. Driven by a deep-rooted fear of vulnerability, perfectionists hide their perceived imperfections as a way to gain the approval of others.

8. The word "Should" is part of everyday vocabulary

The word "should" is prominent in the daily internal dialogue of a perfectionist. Statements like, "must be the best at everything" or "no mistakes" will make them feel anxious or depressed and often lead to avoidant behavior.

9. Being defensive when receiving feedback

Perfectionists always carry out projects with great detail and have high standards and never allow the slightest mistakes. When they receive constructive feedback, they have a tendency to do mental screening and focus only on negative feedback. Mental screening can make them feel as if they were being verbally attacked, leading to feelings of defensiveness.

10. Frequently feel overwhelmed with stress

Perfectionism can be a huge contributor to personal stress, which can wreak havoc on the body. Chronic stress has been linked to insomnia, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and even cardiovascular disease.

## **METHOD**

The research applies an in-depth qualitative narrative analysis method to gather the data (Kardiansyah, 2016). Qualitative method is different from quantitative method because the object and result are not focused on number (Sari & Pranoto, 2021; Pranoto & Yuwono, 2018). The data is in the form of dialogues, pictures, and scenes (Istiani & Puspita, 2020). Thus, the aim of the research will be in the form of explanation or statement to explain in detail about the phenomenon in the research rather than numerical data. Further, Litosseliti (2010:52) stated that qualitative research puts much attention mainly on textual description by implementing inductive and deductive processes (Suprayogi, and Pranoto, 2020; Rido et. al, 2020; Mandasari, and Aminatun, 2019) It is in the line with Crocker (2009:74) who defines qualitative research as analyzing the data in the form of textual data and analyze it in the way of interpretive analysis. By using descriptive qualitative method, the researcher focused on the content of analysis and the actions done by the characters (Aryangga & Nurmaily, 2017). The data are in the form of words and pictures which are obtained from the Movie entitled *The Aviator* (2004).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Salkovskis (1985, 1989) proposed a cognitive-behavioral theory to explain the development and persistence of clinical obsessions. Obsessions are thoughts, images, or impulses that you play over and over in your mind and can never let go of. Everyone experiences obsessions to some extent. Salkovskis's theory on obsessions helps us comprehend why they happen and how to prevent them. Based on Newburg (2019), there are 10 signs that people suffer from obsession for perfection.

## The Indicators of Obsession for Perfection

### *Target Oriented*

Howard has a big target orientation which makes it difficult to stop or change the steering wheel before hitting the target. Goal-oriented means having an individual willingness to achieve a goal set. This willingness encourages and orients the person to develop habits to reach the results expected for this specific goal. That behavior can be said that he has an all-or-nothing mindset, this type of thinking leaves small room for mistakes, no matter how small the trouble will have a major impact on the perfectionist's mentality (Newburg, 2019). Discussion plays the important part in a scientific article. This part answers the problems, interprets the research results and the findings into the already known knowledge, confirms and/or contrasts with the research of other researchers, constructs the new theory, and/or modifies the previous theory. Discussion may also contain the implications of both theoretical and implementation results. Results and Discussion should answer what, why and what else questions. The research findings must be stated explicitly. After stating the research findings, the research findings and the relevant theory or hypothesis must be discussed comprehensively. The discussion section also must explain the comparison of the research finding with the relevant results. Therefore, a notable citation must be found in the discussion section. In the last part, the implication of the research finding to sciences should be stated clearly.

Referring to the finding, Howard was very target oriented. It can be noticed from the way he made sure that the project would work by prioritizing the results in any way, even though it would have small percentage of success. He conceptualized in his mind that anything would be tried and achieved. Even when the man said that the angle was pretty hard to be shot and still needed 2 cameras to make it happened **"We're still short two cameras. We need to cut that sequence down"** (*The Aviator*, 00:02:40 - 00:02:44). He took it lightly that he could get the 2 cameras which were needed without having to cut the scene **"We're not cutting, I'll get those cameras. Set up for rehearsals"** (*The Aviator*, 00:02:44 - 00:02:47). Having a high desire for success makes Howard eager to cover the shortcomings that can worsen his work. He was willing to spend much money on a big project that he set out to produce **"What I do with that money may seem crazy to those sons of bitches in Houston. I'm sure it does, but it all makes good sense to me. You got that?"** (*The Aviator*, 00:03:11 - 00:03:15). This statement was uttered by Howard when he himself realized on how much many he would spend for the project. And was proven quite much as he was talking that those people from different industry would probably mock him.

### *Highly Dependent on Result*

Howard is highly dependent on the result of his ongoing work, Hell's Angel. He emphasizes that his reputation and his life is very rely on the success of the creation of Hell's Angels. Howard's remarks showed that his life and reputation depended heavily on the success of Hell's Angels, making him ambitious to fulfill anything for the success of his work. It shows that Howard put his self-esteem depends on what is accomplished and how others respond to what he would achieve. Perfectionist bases their self-worth on what they have accomplished. They crave the approval of others and will regularly make the comparison because the perfection they achieve is based on how people perceive them (Newburg, 2019).

### *Meticulous Behavior*

One of the highlighted indicators of someone who have obsession with perfection is being meticulous in every detail or insisting everything is perfect without the slightest gap. Because of his thoroughness, the shortcomings he saw in such project were sometimes not realized by most people. That was of course experienced by Howard Hughes. In minute 00:11:17 shows Howard's behavior that is not satisfied with the results of some of the scenes that were shot. Perfectionist always has lots of ideas, even the less detailed parts can be quickly noticed by him. **"Without something standing still behind the planes, we've got no idea of how fast we're moving. We got no sense of relative motion. Call UCLA. Get me the best meteorologist they got"** (*The Aviator*, 00:11:16 - 00:11:26). Howard unsparingly involved the best meteorologists from UCLA in producing the perfect film. The cost that he spent was not a significant problem for him. From the beginning of the movie played, showed Howard had been spending a large amount of money. **"What I do with that money may seem crazy to those sons of bitches in Houston. I'm sure it does, but it all makes good sense to me. You got that?"** (*The Aviator*, 00:03:11 - 00:03:15).

### ***Do not Allow Any Mistakes***

Perfectionists will avoid and insist on every shortcomings detail to look perfect. They are insisting that everything is perfect. To be at the forefront, he will try very hard to achieve perfection. It can be seen from the following scene and dialogue which proven the writer's argument. There was a scene where Howard asks the meteorologist to get a place with sufficient cloud capacity for the film sequence. But when the picture will be taken, the cloud has moved. Although not an accidental mistake. He remained furious and blamed the meteorologist for his inability to keep the clouds in place. Howard forced the meteorologist as soon as possible to find a place with lots of clouds. Howard's intolerance shows that he insisted on everything to look perfect.

### ***Being Defensive When Receiving Feedback***

Being defensive is the surest way to prevent someone from telling you their honest opinion in the future. The time we get defensive is when we permanently block the other person from giving us feedback again. When feedback triggers defensiveness, it's often because it elicits feelings of sadness, hurt, shame, anger, or being misunderstood. Defensiveness may emerge in response to what you said at the time, but it often has deep roots. Perfectionists never allow the slightest mistake. When they receive constructive feedback, they have a tendency to do mental screening and focus only on negative feedback. Mental screening can make them feel as though they are being verbally attacked, leading to feelings of defensiveness.

Howard gets advice from Mr. Mayer, who is a senior film producer, after being refused to lend a camera. **"If you continue making the movie the way you are there isn't gonna be a distributor. And you're not gonna have any more oil money"** (*The Aviator*, 00:07:06). Howard showed a defensive nature by ignoring the advice of the co-founder of MGM, then finding another camera loan. He does not need advice. He knows what he is doing and does not take little input from people. From Howard's perspective, what he said sounded insulting.

### ***Unable to Accept and Celebrate Any Success***

After finally completing the production process for Hell's Angels, it finally arrived at the premiere which was attended by a large audience and half a million souls waiting for Howard Hughes to create a traffic jam on Hollywood Boulevard. The filming of Hell's Angeles was declared the most expensive film produced outside a studio in the 1930s. In stark contrast to the grandiose celebrations of his success, Howard still couldn't accept his success. It was proven when from the scene spotted in the finding when he intended to cut some sequences that he felt were not too important to show even though it was already released and had been enjoyed by many people.

### ***The Effect of Obsession for Perfection***

Howard is known as an ambitious person to reach the pinnacle of success, even what he has managed to achieve is always lacking for him. Through some of the previous findings, some of the effects of the obsession for perfection will be described in several sub-chapters.

### ***Loosing Much Money***

3 years of making Hell's Angels cost an unimaginable amount. Especially with Howard's ambition to achieve the success of the Hell's Angels project. He did not take into account the numbers he had issued so that the making of Hell's Angels threatened to stop. The process of making Hell's Angels took more than 3 years. The fact that Howard was spending 25 million dollars a day made it the most expensive film of the era.

### ***Suffering Mental Disorder***

According to Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, Obsessive-compulsive disorder usually includes both obsessions and compulsions. Judging from the symptoms, it shows that Howard has OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). There are several scenes that express that opinion which is finally clearly depicted throughout the end of the scene. One of the scenes that obviously described Hughes suffers from OCD was when he checked the rivets of the new plane. He thinks that the rivets are not completely flush.

From a row of rivets on the fuselage to peas next to a piece of steak. The scene from 00:35:10 from the image above is that Howard is even reluctant to enjoy his meal after seeing the untidy pieces of peas. Hughes' OCD was seen when one of his colleagues took one of the peas off Howard's plat, making it messy. Then Hughes

pushed the plate away and lost his intention to eat the steak. It has clearly shown his disturbed habit of things that are not arranged. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Howard is suffering from OCD symptoms. Such as the habit of washing hands, protecting themselves or their belongings, and feeling anxious when people touch their belongings.

## CONCLUSION

Looking at the characteristics of Obsession for perfection based on Newburg, the data matches what Howard shows as a sufferer. These include; Target Oriented, where people with ambitions like this have all-or-nothing thinking, if you have decided on a goal, that goal must be able to be achieved. The second finding is Highly Dependent on Result. It shows that Howard put his self-esteem depends on what is accomplished and how others respond to what he would achieve. Perfectionist bases their self-worth on what they have accomplished. Having Meticulous Behavior is also one of the findings of the research that shows Howard suffers Obsession for Perfection. Being meticulous in every detail or insisting everything is perfect is also parts of the indicators. Being Defensive when Receiving Feedback makes it very clear that he not only rejects minor mistakes, but is also firm in his conviction that what he is doing is right, even though many parties think that the method he uses is very risky. Perfectionists are still people who are hungry for perfection. Based on finding, Howard is unable to accept and celebrate any success, even the success he has achieved has not satisfied him. He always finds a gap in the success that people think has been packaged so perfectly. Although in the end the project that Howard worked on resulted in a masterpiece, it is undeniable that there were some bad impacts caused. Some of the impacts that can be highlighted in the film are losing much money and suffering mental disorder.

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