

Conference Paper

Juvenile Delinquency in Nicholas Sparks' Novel *The Last Song*

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ORCID:*Desy Rahmadhani*: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8213-4499>**Abstract**

The objective of this research was to identify the portrait of juvenile delinquency in the novel *The Last Song* by Nicholas Sparks. Some related theories in the form of juvenile delinquency were applied in this research, one of which was that proposed by Steinhart (1996), an expert lawyer in the juvenile justice system, stating that offenses status is behavior that is unlawful for children. This research was conducted using qualitative descriptive methods proposed by Kothari (2004) with the goal of a comprehensive summarization, in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals. The research results showed that there are three forms of juvenile delinquency: drug abuse, shoplifting and violence, and all are done by the major characters, namely Veronica Miller, Blaze and Marcus. They carry out acts of juvenile delinquency without reasons, but they are accustomed to doing so, mainly for their desires and satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

The Last Song, written by American novelist Nicholas Sparks, describes the juvenile delinquency because juvenile delinquency is a serious problem in the society nowadays and done by the main characters: Veronnica Miller, Marcus, and Megan Blakelee. It is a novel published in 2009.

According to Steinberg (1990), "Adolescence is a transitional period of development from childhood to adulthood with evident biological and emotional changes. These changes bring transformation and reorganization in family relationships." Gold and Petronio as quoted by Sarwono (2012) define juvenile delinquency as an action by an immature person who deliberately violates the law and he may be punished by the law officer.

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According to Durkheim (2002) juvenile delinquency is caused by the malfunction of one social organization which in this case is a family organization. From some of the definitions, above it can be deduced that juvenile delinquency is the act of some teenagers which is contrary to law, religion, and community norms so consequently can harm others, and disrupt general peace and also self-destructive.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Juvenile Delinquency

Juvenile delinquency is one of the most serious problems of modern society with multiple negative effects on health, educational, financial, vocational, and judicial systems. Over the past decade, trends have shown drastic increases in several countries. Gold and Petronio as quoted by Sarwono (2012) define juvenile delinquency as an action by an immature person who deliberately violates the law and he may be punished by the law officer. Blos (in Sarwono, 1991: 24 -25) adherents of psychoanalysis argues that development is essentially a business of self-adjustment (coping), which is to actively cope with stress and seek new solutions to problems.

Experts have different age limits in adolescence, because adolescence is not only seen from one aspect, but from several aspects at once. But it can be concluded that adolescence is a period when human being undergoes a transition, from childhood into adulthood. It starts at the age of 11, and ends in the beginning of college. At this time, there are significant changes to the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social adjustments. From some of the definitions above it can be deduced that juvenile delinquency is the act of some teenagers which is contrary to law, religion, and community norms so consequently can harm others, and disrupt general peace and also self-destructive.

2.2. Form of Juvenile Delinquency

Based on the theories proposed by Steinhart (1996), it can be inferred that there are many forms of juvenile delinquency: violence against people and violence against goods/property, they are: murder, rape, shoplifting, assault, robbery, arson, being engaged in alcohol and other drug abuses, sexual/physical abuse, hereditary factors, and exposure to violence at home. However, the writer will only focus on the dominant forms of juvenile delinquency found in the novel namely drugs abuse, shoplifting, and violence are forms of juvenile delinquency.

2.2.1. Drug Abuse

Drug abuse refers to frequency of use of the following drugs: alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, inhalants, heroin, stimulants, and hallucinogens. Arseneault et al., (2000) stated that subjects with drug abuse (alcohol and marijuana) were significantly more likely to commit violent crimes. Furthermore, 50% of all subjects meeting the criteria for a mental disorder had at least one other disorder. Possession and use of alcohol and other drugs are indeed illegal for all youth. Because substance abuse and delinquency are inextricably linked, arrest, adjudication, and intervention by the juvenile justice system are eventual consequences for many young people engaged in such behavior. Substance abuse and delinquency often share the common factors of school and family problems, negative peer groups, lack of neighborhood social controls, and a history of physical or sexual abuse. Substance abuse is also associated with violent and income generating crime by youth, which increases community residents' level of fear and the demand for juvenile and criminal justice services, thereby further increasing the burden on these resources. Gangs, drug trafficking, prostitution, and youth homicides are other related social and criminal justice problems often linked to adolescent substance abuse.

2.2.2. Shoplifting

Shoplifting defined as a theft from the selling floor while a store is open for business is one of the most prevalent crimes in our society. It has been estimated that 1 in every 12 shoppers shoplift, and that as many as 60% of consumers have shoplifted at some point in their lives. Among adolescents, 30 to 40% commit this crime repeatedly. Juvenile delinquency can be viewed as a reflection of the interplay between two major sets of countervailing factors: conditions favoring to committing crimes and conditions controlling the emergence of illegal behavior. Shoplifting behavior is definitely a sub-type of delinquency. It is common among adolescents and often begins in early ages due to a variety of factors (Buckle and Farrington, 1994).

2.2.1.1 Classifications of Shoplifters

Moore (1984) extended five dimensions to determine patterns of shoplifting: (a) frequency; (b) primary precipitating factor(s); (c) attitude toward shoplifting as a crime; (d) use of stolen goods; and (e) reaction to detection, prosecution, and conviction. Moore delineated five types of shoplifters through the analysis of this material. The first type

described by Moore was the “impulse shoplifter,” comprising 15.4% of his sample. These individuals had limited shoplifting activity, often only once or twice. Their shoplifting had not been planned, and they typically took one inexpensive, yet tempting, item. When stopped by security personnel, their reaction was one of surprise, confusion, or shock. An intense emotional reaction of embarrassment, guilt, and shame followed. Feelings of guilt continued for several weeks after their apprehension as well. For this group of people, detection was found to be such a traumatic event that they were unlikely to shoplift again.

The second grouping was that of the “occasional shoplifter,” comprising 15% of his sample. They reported having taken items 3 to 10 times during the previous year. Economic motives were secondary to that of carrying out a challenging act or complying with peer pressures. When apprehended, they readily admitted to stealing, and tended to react either in an aloof fashion or with mild embarrassment. Although acknowledging that shoplifting was illegal and morally wrong, occasional shoplifters minimized the seriousness of the offense. The third type was that of the “episodic shoplifter,” comprising 1.7% of Moore’s sample. These individuals engaged in periodic episodes of shoplifting, at which time they stole specific goods as part of a bizarre personal ritual, the nature of which was to satisfy intense needs for self-punishment. Severe emotional and psychological problems were present in these individuals. The fourth and largest category, comprising 56.4% of the sample, was defined as “amateur shoplifters.” These individuals had developed a regular, often weekly, pattern of shoplifting, and found it profitable. They made conscious decisions to steal and were aware of its illegality. They tended to steal small items that were easy to conceal; shoplifting techniques were simple and carried out regularly based on realistic assessments of relative risks and benefits. When apprehended, they usually claimed only minimal involvement in prior shoplifting activity and would engage in various manipulative strategies to avoid punishment. Moore believed that various business and public awareness strategies could successfully deter shoplifting among this group, but that the majority would continue to steal goods until caught.

The remaining 11.7% of the subjects were identified as “semi-professional shoplifters.” Shoplifting had become a part of their life-style, and they engaged in this activity at least weekly. They employed more skilled techniques in their shoplifting. They were also the only group to engage in some reselling of merchandise. Financial benefit and compensation were considered the primary motivational factors for shoplifting in this group. It enabled them not only to obtain some personal luxuries, but also to save money for some other purpose.

2.3. Violence

Baumeister and Vohs (2004) propose that violence is utilized in four ways: (1) as a means to an end; (2) in response to threatened egotism; (3) in a misguided effort to do what is right; and (4) as a means for achieving sadistic pleasure (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In instrumentalism (a means to an end), the focus is on gratification of immediate needs, including resources, power, sex, or influence, with little concern for the long-term utility of such methods. Threatened egotism refers to a response to wounded pride or violated honor, in which the image of self is at risk. High and unstable self-esteem (rather than low self-esteem) is at the core of this idea. Idealism, as misguided attempts to “do good,” is sometimes perceived by the perpetrator as a moral imperative in which “the ends justify the means,” regardless of how evil or immoral the belief system or action appears to others.

Violence is indeed the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation. The rate of juvenile violence in United States particularly in the urban centers has increased tremendously in the last decade.

3. Research Method

This paper is a qualitative descriptive research which describes characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied (Kothari, 2004). It addresses the ‘what’ question and what are the characteristics used to describe the situation or population. They are usually some kinds of categorical schemes also known as descriptive categories. This study also used qualitative descriptive method whose objective is to describe, summarize various conditions and phenomena of social reality that exist in the society that becomes the object of research and this study is an attempt to draw the reality to the surface as a characteristic, character, nature, or model of certain situations or phenomena.

As this is a library research, most of the data were obtained from libraries. There are some ways to collect the research data. Based on the prescribed procedures, the following steps to collect the data were conducted: (1) reading the novel and trying to comprehend the whole story, (2) identifying some passages and dialogues related to the aspects of Juvenile Delinquency, (3) collecting the passages and dialogues related to the analysis, and (4) Observing Juvenile Delinquency in Novel *The Last Song* by

Nicholas Sparks. The analysis of the data was conducted by focusing on the forms of juvenile delinquency in the novel.

4. Result and Discussion

In this research, the analysis is focused on the data available in the novel *The Last Song* by Nicholas Sparks. The data taken from the novel are mostly about the juvenile delinquency discussed in this research: drug abuse, shoplifting, and violence.

4.1. Drug Abuse

Adolescence is a period of experimentation, exploration, and curiosity. In the society, drug use has become one aspect of this natural process to the extent that a teenager is deviant (from a normative perspective) if he or she has not tried alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana by the completion of high school. The typical teenager who experiments with beer or shares a joint at a party is unlikely to be the one who will have severe problems with drugs later in life. Labeling this person as a “druggie,” sick, screwed up, or in need of treatment is liable to be more destructive than the use of the drug itself. In the novel, of the three main characters under the discussion named Veronnica “Ronnie” Miller, Blaze or Galadriel, and Marcus, two of them named Blaze and Marcus are addicted to drinking alcohol. Different from her friends, Ronnie is someone who does not like those things. They like to drink to get drunk, and also take drugs, as below:

“She wasn’t naive about drugs. Some of her friends smoke pot, a few did cocaine or ecstasy, and one even had a nasty meth habit. Everyone but her drank on the weekends. Every club and party she went to offered easy access to all of it.”(Sparks, 2010:35)

The quotation above shows that Ronnie’s friendship environment is bad because all her friends consume drugs that will surely have an impact on herself. Although she does not consume drugs such friends are not good friends to her because one day, she would be invited to do it. People who get into drugs get it from a friend’s friend, who also got it from his friend’s friend... and so on.

It is interesting that aside from the lethal toxicity of certain drugs such as crack, relatively little attention has been given to the two drugs with the most proven record of abuse in terms of the population affected and the magnitude of the consequences; these are, of course, alcohol and cigarettes. Although efforts are made, in schools,

for example, to provide a balanced picture, youngsters too often are provided with the mixed message that marijuana and cocaine are bad, destructive, and will rot their brains while seeing media idols holding a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

”Surprising her, Blaze was leaning against the side of the booth, smoking a cigarette.”. (Sparks, 2010:96)

Substance use and abuse during adolescence are strongly associated with other problem behaviors such as delinquency, precocious sexual behavior, deviant attitudes, or school dropout. Experimental use of tobacco products has the widest prevalence during preadolescence. A substantial portion of children at least experiment with puffing cigarettes by age nine, and in a new and disturbing trend, a small but significant portion (13% of third-grade boys in one Oklahoma survey) use smokeless tobacco. A child’s first drink lags somewhat; occurring typically around age 12 for boys and a bit later for girls.

The United States is a drug culture. Drugs are used commonly and acceptably to wake up in the morning (coffee or tea), get through the stresses of the day (cigarettes), and relax in the evening (alcohol). Adolescence is a period of experimentation, exploration, and curiosity. In this society, drug use has become one aspect of this natural process to the extent that a teenager is deviant (from a normative perspective) if he or she has not tried alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana by the completion of high school. Although it is important to delay the onset of regular drug use as long as possible, to allow time for the development of adaptive and effective personal and interpersonal skills, it may be less important to prevent the use of drugs than the abuse, misuse, and problem use of drugs (which place a tremendous burden on the individual and society).

“Besides, the party was going to be something. Booze and drugs and music. And girls. Drunk girls.” (Sparks, 2010:575)

Most children and teenagers will become drug users in their lives, whether limited to alcohol, caffeine, and cigarettes or extended to marijuana, cocaine, hard drugs, and prescription medications. The age at which initiation and, in particular, regular use occur is quite crucial. Childhood and adolescence are critical periods for the development of both personal and interpersonal competence, coping skills, and responsible decision making. Drug use is a manner of coping that can interfere with or preclude the necessary development of these other critical skills if it is engaged in regularly at a young age. For instance, if a young teenager learns to use alcohol as a way to reduce distress, he or she may never learn other coping skills to ameliorate distress. Thus, teenage drug use may truncate, interfere with, or circumvent essential maturational processes and development that typically occur during adolescence.

4.2. Shoplifting

Shoplifting, one of the most prevalent crimes in our society, and on the increase in recent years, has received relatively little attention in research literature. Shoplifting is considered as juvenile delinquency and in line with Steinhart (1996), claims that shoplifting is a form of juvenile delinquency. Shoplifting is a common of delinquent behavior that most children participate in at least once. For the majority of juveniles, it is merely an isolated incident. Shoplifting is a central part of a developing criminal lifestyle, and may continue to steal or commit other illegal activities as adults. Many of these delinquents will end up in jail or prison.

Pattern of shoplifting was described using five dimensions: (1) frequency; (2) primary precipitating factor(s); (3) attitude toward shoplifting as a crime; (4) use of stolen goods; and (5) reaction to detection, prosecution and conviction. Some teens shoplift occasionally to gain peer approval, either as a kind of game to relieve boredom or as part of a delinquency-prone lifestyle. Some college students stole school supplies or decorations for a social fraternity activity. 24 per cent had been drinking and were probably intoxicated when caught, e.g., picked up food and planned to hurry back to a party; stole food for a latenight snack on the way home from a bar. Many adult shoplifters appear to be somewhat immature and lonely people who add some excitement to an otherwise drab life by stealing. It is called as Occasional shoplifters. They reported stealing from three to ten times during the previous year. Most stolen items were inexpensive and used for personal benefit. Financial benefit was not the primary motive. These actions done by one of the main characters named Veronnica Miller.

“I used to shoplift,” she said, subdued. “A lot. Nothing big, just more for the thrill of doing it.” (Sparks, 2010:85).

When detected, occasional shoplifters readily admit stealing. They believe shoplifting is both morally wrong and illegal but typically do not regard the problem as being very serious. Initial reactions to detection are either a cavalier aloofness or moderate embarrassment. Prosecution and sentencing produce an intense emotional reaction, especially for embarrassment caused to the family. A short period of resentment occurs among some occasional shoplifters, such as a youth who was convicted of stealing a 35c candy bar and ended up with a criminal record. For some persons, the event serves to provide meaningful feedback that a life change is necessary. Most persons are so shocked by the experience that they are unlikely to shoplift again.

“And that’s all of it. As for the shoplifting I did back in New York, I don’t even know why I took that stuff. It wasn’t like I needed it. It was just something to do because my friends were doing it. When I went to court, I admitted everything because I knew I was wrong and that I wasn’t ever going to do it again.” (Sparks, 2010: 253).

Most shoplifting was premeditated, purposeful, habitual, and conscious goal-directed behavior. Also was committed by persons who are predisposed to behavior which tends to be self-serving, self-indulgent, manipulative, and oriented toward personal gain with little regard for the needs or rights of others.

4.3. Violence

Violent behavior is associated with destructive aggression and with regard to children and juveniles it is usually classified as social conduct disorder. For adult criminals, however the respective diagnosis would be antisocial personality disorder. Although according to classification criteria the diagnosis antisocial personality disorder should not be assigned before the age of 18, studies have reported overlapping characteristics between adolescent conduct disorder and adult antisocial personality disorder.

One of the most notable concerns for these offenders is their very high level of involvement in violent delinquency. The participants appear less involved in burglary/theft and minor property offenses, but if these two property offenses are combined about 42%. Correlations show that gang members were more likely to be adjudicated of minor property offenses than for other types of delinquency and that girls with prior records were more likely to have an adjudication for burglary/theft or public order offenses. Thus, indicators of more extensive involvement in delinquent activity, such as having a prior adjudication or being a gang member, are associated with property and public order offenses. These actions done by one of the main characters named Marcus.

“Three days later, Marcus set the boat on fire and watched it burn from behind the magnolia tree on the sixteenth green.” (Sparks, 2010: 115).

Arson is a crime with an enormous impact. Worldwide, it leads to major financial damage, serious injury, or even death. Juvenile fire setting is a community problem. All fires set by juveniles need to be taken seriously. The size of the fire and the amount of damage are not good indicators of risk. Very often, juveniles who set fires start with small insignificant fires, then graduate to bigger, more daring blazes as they acquire

confidence and experience. Fire investigators should address today's small fires as though they could become tomorrow's fatal, multiple alarm fires.

“He remembered setting fire to a barn when he was twelve and watching it for hours, thinking he'd never seen anything more incredible.” (Sparks, 2010: 575)

“The buildings he'd burned and the people he'd hurt meant absolutely nothing to him, but the thought of prison made him... sick.” (Sparks, 2010: 721)

The cause of fire setting among the study youth involved delinquent activity, usually carried out in groups in response to peer pressure and/or gang activity. While many of the dynamics involved in attention-seeking behavior are relevant to this group, very often the act of starting a fire is arbitrary. If incendiary materials are handy, they start a fire, and if a rock is handy, they throw it through a window. The motive may involve revenge. In some communities, territorial disputes between gangs over drug trafficking encourage fire setting behavior. There is no doubt that in the United States there is a crisis involving youth aggression and violence. Pressure is being placed on the juvenile justice system to respond to this problem, and to enlist resources from the community.

5. Conclusion

After the topic is analyzed, it can be inferred that juvenile delinquency of the main characters covers drug abuse, shoplifting, and violence. The main characters named Veronnica “Ronnie” Miller, Galadriel or Blaze, and Marcus conduct juvenile delinquency with no exact reasons but they are accustomed to doing their juvenile delinquency mainly for their desires and satisfaction. Juveniles spend more time with peers and less with families during their transition into adulthood; peers have the most important influence on their day-to-day behaviors. Both parents and peers, however, have been found to contribute to adolescent development but in different ways. Predominant peer's effects actually reflect earlier processes in childhood, and stress the importance of processes linking to different social organizations across time.

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