

**INTERPERSONAL BREAKDOWN IN NOVEL *LUCY BY THE SEA* (2022)
BY ELIZABETH STROUT**

THESIS

*Submitted as Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements to Obtain Strata One (S1)
Degree in English Department*



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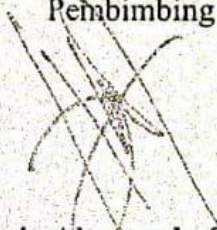
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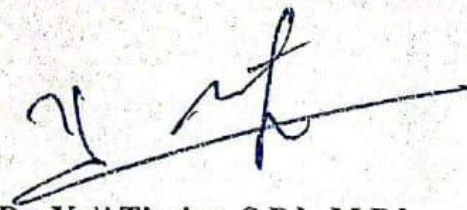
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ABSTRACT

Rahmayanti, Dhini. (2025). *Interpersonal Breakdown in Novel Lucy by the Sea (2022) by Elizabeth Strout*. Undergraduate Thesis. Padang: English Department. Faculty of Languages and Arts. Universitas Negeri Padang.

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An individual's psychological health can be affected by social interactions, but the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in modern life has made interpersonal interactions more difficult due to social isolation. The sudden emergence of COVID-19 has caused trauma to resurface and led to interpersonal breakdowns. This study analyzes the novel *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) by Elizabeth Strout, aiming to explore the types of trauma experienced by the characters and how trauma causes interpersonal breakdowns in their relationships. This study uses Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Judith Herman's trauma theory, and Harry Stack Sullivan's theory of interpersonal breakdown to understand how repressed trauma resurfaces from the unconscious, haunts individuals, and affects their interpersonal relationships. This study uses a descriptive-qualitative method. The findings of the study identify three types of trauma, loss trauma, childhood trauma, and relational trauma. These trauma causes effects such as emotional distance, trust issues, feelings of inadequacy, and social withdrawal, which ultimately leading to interpersonal breakdown.

Keywords: Trauma, Interpersonal Breakdown, Psychoanalysis, COVID-19, Social Isolation

ABSTRAK

Rahmayanti, Dhini. (2025). *Interpersonal Breakdown in Novel Lucy by the Sea (2022) by Elizabeth Strout*. Skripsi. Padang: Program Studi Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris. Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni. Universitas Negeri Padang.

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Kesehatan psikologis individu dapat dipengaruhi oleh interaksi sosial, namun kemunculan pandemi COVID-19 dalam kehidupan modern telah membuat interaksi antarindividu menjadi lebih sulit akibat isolasi sosial. Kemunculan mendadak COVID-19 telah menyebabkan trauma kembali muncul dan menyebabkan keretakan dalam hubungan antarindividu. Penelitian ini menganalisis novel *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) karya Elizabeth Strout, bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi jenis-jenis trauma yang dialami oleh karakter-karakter dalam novel tersebut dan bagaimana trauma menyebabkan keretakan hubungan interpersonal dalam hubungan mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori psikoanalisis dari Sigmund Freud, teori trauma dari Judith Herman, dan teori keretakan hubungan interpersonal dari Harry Stack Sullivan, untuk memahami bagaimana trauma yang terpendam muncul kembali dari alam bawah sadar, menghantui individu, dan mempengaruhi hubungan interpersonal mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif-kualitatif. Temuan dalam penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tiga jenis trauma yaitu trauma kehilangan, trauma masa kecil, dan trauma relasional. Trauma-trauma ini menyebabkan dampak seperti jarak emosional, masalah kepercayaan, perasaan tidak mampu, dan penarikan diri sosial, yang akhirnya menyebabkan kerusakan interpersonal.

Kata Kunci: Trauma, Keretakan Hubungan Antarpersonal, Psikoanalisis, COVID-19, Isolasi Sosial

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Humans are social beings who depend on others to interact, survive, develop, and feel emotionally healthy. This is referred to as interpersonal relationships, which are interactions between two or more people that play an important role in improving social relationships, mutual understanding, and mutual support. Interactions also affect an individual's psychological well-being. If an individual receives full emotional support from those around them, they will feel safe and be able to reduce the level of stress they experience. However, in modern life, which is influenced by social changes, technology, environmental issues, and global crises, interpersonal interactions have become more difficult. One of the causes of interpersonal breakdown is due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted various aspects of life, including interpersonal relationships and the global health system. In this context, pre-existing emotional and psychological problems have been exacerbated by the pandemic. As mentioned by the WHO (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global increase in anxiety and depression levels due to social isolation, loss of loved ones, and financial concerns. The pandemic has also created pressure that prompts individuals to re-evaluate the way they interact with friends, family and themselves.

The basis of interpersonal relationships are communication, trust, and shared experiences. Healthy interpersonal can make individuals feel valued, welcomed, and supported, which can improve their mental and physical well-being. However, there are a variety of problems that might interpersonal breakdown. “Interpersonal breakdown” is a situation in which an individual’s emotional attachment, communication, and trust are broken or disrupted. These breakdowns are often caused by internal or external conflicts. One of the most significant factors that can lead to interpersonal breakdown is trauma.

Trauma is the result of unexpected and unrecognized events (Caruth, 1996). Trauma can change how person views themselves and others, making it more difficult for them to build good relationships. As indicated by Jae (2024), there are several forms of trauma, namely acute, chronic, complex, and collective trauma. Acute trauma is the result of an extremely stressful or painful event that occurs suddenly and usually over a short period of time. Examples include natural disasters, accidents, loss of a loved one, or sudden death from a virus. Chronic trauma, on the other hand, is trauma that develops from long-term psychological distress during periods of isolation caused by repeated experiences, such as emotional neglect or conflicted relationships. Complex trauma is trauma that occurs as a result of several interrelated traumatic events, usually related to long-lasting interpersonal experiences, such as neglect during childhood. Lastly, collective trauma is trauma experienced collectively by a community, such as a natural disaster or a global pandemic like COVID-19.

Trauma is not only a psychological wound, but also an experience that cannot be fully processed at the time it occurs. It will come back to haunt the individual in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or repetitions. Therefore, the presence of COVID-19, which strikes unexpectedly and causes significant life changes such as social isolation, can cause re-traumatization. Brooks *et al.* (2020) statement that social isolation can exacerbate pre-existing psychological wounds and trigger traumatic reactions, including interpersonal problems, hypervigilance, and withdrawal symptoms. Interpersonal relationships can suffer as traumatized people tend to emotionally distance themselves, avoid conflict, or even become dependent on others. The idea of interpersonal breakdown during trauma is crucial to understanding how outside events, such as the pandemic, influence pre-existing emotional problems and reshape relationships.

This phenomenon is also portrayed in literary works. Literary works frequently reflect real-life circumstances by illustrating the complexity of human emotions and relationships during difficult times. This is the situation in *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) by Elizabeth Strout. The novel examines the complexity of human relationships in the face of individual and societal trauma by applying literary theory to examine the connection between trauma and interpersonal during difficult times. The interactions that Lucy Barton has with the world around her are crucial in *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) by Elizabeth Strout, which shows how the COVID-19 pandemic affects interpersonal relationships. This novel examines how interpersonal breakdown can result from the loss of emotional intimacy, trust, and communication due to trauma. The COVID-19 pandemic provides the novel's

setting, forcing Lucy and her ex-partner, William, to move to a home on the Maine coast. Despite their long history together, their relationship is marked by communication failures, a lack of empathy, and avoidance habits that are a result of Lucy's terrible childhood traumas. The story demonstrates how trauma may change the dynamics of relationships, resulting in emotional growth and conflict.

Lucy and William kept in touch with her relatives and neighbors in Maine. Lucy's social fears, which stem from her challenging and disadvantaged upbringing, are frequently highlighted by these encounters, Strout demonstrates via these interactions how hardship may promote introspection and emotional development even in the most trying circumstances. In this sense, the pandemic acts as a trigger, highlighting the fragility and resilience of interpersonal. The novel talks about how trauma may alter how people relate to one another.

1.2 Brief Explanation of the Author's Biography

The Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist, Elizabeth Strout, is renowned for her complex and sympathetic portrayals of interpersonal interactions and everyday life. Strout was born on January 6, 1956, in Portland, Maine. Strout's work frequently takes place against the backdrop of the tiny towns in New Hampshire and Maine, where she was raised. Despite earning a law degree from Syracuse University, she later pursued her passion for writing by enrolling in writing seminars.

Strout is recognized psychologically as a writer who possesses a profound sense of empathy for her characters. She captures the subtleties of human emotions like loneliness, doubt, remorse, and resilience with an eerily sensitive

touch. As a reflection of Strout's knowledge of human psychology, many of the characters in her books go through tragedy or complicated emotional turmoil. Additionally, Strout has contemplative and introspective inclinations in both her literature and personal life. She frequently views the world quietly but perceptively, illustrating the various ways in which individuals deal with loss, grief, and love. Her understated and minimalist writing style also has melancholy inclinations, emphasizing feelings that are sensed in the quiet and little elements of daily life but are not overtly addressed. Strout is really interested in how people deal with their own trauma. The way she develops her characters in her novels reflects her belief that individuals carry their emotional past into their social relationships.

Elizabeth Strout is renowned for her ability to delicately and authentically capture the complexities of interpersonal interactions. In addition, she is excellent at incorporating profound psychological insights into her stories. Another well-known quality of Elizabeth Strout's work is its simplicity and complexity. Her characters' thoughts and feelings are conveyed through genuine dialogue and simple phrases. Family relationships, love, loss, and self-discovery are among the themes that recur often in her books, all of which include likeable and realistic characters. Her reputation as a master of character-driven narrative has been established by her earlier works, such as *Olive Kitteridge* (2008) and *My Name is Lucy Barton* (2016). Strout's 2008 novel, *Olive Kitteridge*, which won the Pulitzer for Fiction and served as the basis for an HBO miniseries that won an Emmy, brought her considerable praise.

Strout's Amgash series, which chronicles the adventures of Lucy Barton, a character originally introduced in *My Name Is Lucy Barton* (2016), is continued in *Lucy by the Sea* (2022). Strout provides a dramatic and personal depiction of a woman dealing with loneliness and introspection in *Lucy by the Sea*. Strout retains warmth and empathy while capturing the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic. The novel is a rich subject for literary analysis because of its examination of issues including grief, resiliency, family relationships, and the pursuit of meaning. Strout expertly illustrates how the pandemic severely impacted Lucy and William's capacity to relate to, communicate with, and support one another by bringing back old traumas in addition to causing new ones. Lucy's internal investigation, which prompts her to consider her life and her relationship with the social world, is reflected in the exterior isolation brought on by this epidemic.

1.3 Focus of the Problem

This thesis concentrate on how returning trauma leads to the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, as seen in novel *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) by Elizabeth Strout. This research investigates, through a psychoanalytic lens, how the characters' experiences of trauma, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, affect their interactions, communication patterns, and the dynamics of their families as a whole. By examining how the novel depicts the traumas experienced by the characters, this research also seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on how trauma shapes interpersonal breakdown.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the types of traumas depicted in *Lucy by the Sea* by Elizabeth Strout?
2. What are the effects of trauma in creating interpersonal breakdown in *Lucy by the Sea* by Elizabeth Strout?

1.5 Purpose of the Research

1. To find out what are the types of traumas depicted in *Lucy by the Sea* by Elizabeth Strout.
2. To find out what are the effects of trauma in creating interpersonal breakdown in *Lucy by the Sea* by Elizabeth Strout.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

Lucy by the Sea is a novel by Elizabeth Strout published in 2022. The novel explores the deep trauma experienced by its characters and the impact of trauma on interpersonal relationships. Lucy Barton, the narrator and main character of the novel, must leave her life in New York and live with her ex-husband, William, in a small coastal town in Maine during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 serves as the backdrop to explore the trauma experienced by the characters and how this trauma contributes to interpersonal breakdown.

Based on psychoanalytic theory, the researcher found that Lucy's trauma stems from past experiences filled with emotional wounds. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the novel reinforces Lucy's memories of old wounds, causing her unconscious mind to recall the traumas experienced by Lucy and other characters.

Researcher found several types of trauma experienced by Lucy. The first is loss trauma. Lucy lost her second husband, who was her secure base and the person who provided emotional support during her difficult times. Additionally, Lucy lost her friends, who also had emotional bonds with her. This loss was due to the sudden spread of COVID-19. This trauma caused deep feelings of fear, longing, and loneliness that Lucy experienced. The second type is childhood trauma. The emotional neglect, physical and verbal abuse, indifference, loss of security, and lack of affection between Lucy and her mother caused deep trauma

for Lucy. Lucy's childhood trauma made it difficult for her to build close social relationships, caused her to feel isolated, and made her unable to clearly express her affection to the people she loved. Lastly, relationship trauma. The betrayal committed by William during his marriage to Lucy left a deep mark on Lucy's mind. This trauma caused changes in how she thinks and feels. Memories that should have been pleasant turned into painful ones for Lucy. The trauma of William's divorce led her to try to control relationships, but in the end, she still felt disconnected from the people around her. Additionally, this trauma caused trust issues toward others.

These traumas continue to haunt Lucy's relationships and perceptions of herself and others. The trauma experienced by the characters triggers anxious attachment and avoidant attachment. This is because those who experience trauma are more emotionally withdrawn, unable to build healthy relationships, and unable to accept support from others. Unresolved trauma has caused Lucy's relationships with others to become fragile, distant, and prone to breakdown.

In the novel *Lucy by the Sea*, the traumatic experiences of Lucy and other characters cause parataxic distortion, which is a distortion of perception towards others. This causes the character who experiences trauma to have emotional distance, trust issues, inadequacy, and withdrawal from social and emotional environments. These issues arise as a response to unresolved trauma carried into adulthood. The presence of emotional distance, trust issues, inadequacy, and withdrawal cause Lucy's relationships with others to break down. In this case, the character's Id, Ego and Superego work and clash with each other. The lack of

openness and mutual understanding prevents communication from functioning properly. Trauma makes it difficult for Lucy to fully trust and open up, even though she longs for closeness. Additionally, Lucy's relationship with her children is filled with feelings of inadequacy, and emotional distance creates tension. Lucy's tendency to withdrawal and difficulty opening up leaves her feeling isolated.

In the novel *Lucy by the Sea*, the sea can be interpreted as a symbol of isolation and a space for reflection for Lucy. The place of residence on a quiet coast during the pandemic amplifies Lucy's feelings of loneliness and alienation, while also being a setting that reflects her inner state of uncertainty between the desire to connect and the fear of opening up. This is due to the trauma she experienced. In addition, the sea is a metaphor for Lucy's emotional state. Just as the sea can be calming but also frightening, Lucy's experience reflects the same thing.

Overall, the results of this study provide an important contribution to the understanding that trauma is not merely an isolated individual experience but a critical factor influencing patterns of human relationships. The interpersonal breakdown observed indicates that human relationships are profoundly shaped by internal processes linked to traumatic experiences.

5.2 Suggestions

Based on the results of the analysis of trauma and its impact on interpersonal relationships in the novel *Lucy by the Sea*, it opens a deeper discussion on other themes that can be explored with different perceptions in this

novel. It also opens a deeper discussion on the process of healing trauma carried out by the character, the role of the social environment in psychology, or the influence of the pandemic on the character's psychology in more depth. In addition, it also opens a bigger discussion in using other theoretical approaches, such as feminist theory, social theory, or cultural theory, to gain a broader perspective on the characters and social contexts in the novel.

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