



## CHARACTERIZATION OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE NOVEL LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY BY BONNIE GARMUS

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to describe the characterization of the main character, Elizabeth Zott, in the novel *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method with note-taking and close reading techniques, using Orson Scott Card's (2010) theory of characterization as the analytical framework. The data consist of narrative and dialogue excerpts reflecting the traits, attitudes, and actions of the main character. The findings show that the most dominant aspect of Elizabeth's characterization is her past, followed by motives, reputation, stereotypes, and social networks. Elizabeth is depicted as rational, independent, critical, and resilient. Her challenging past, reputation as a scientist, and struggles as a single mother reinforce her position as a symbol of a modern woman who refuses to submit to gender stereotypes. This study highlights the importance of characterization techniques in building a strong and inspiring protagonist in literary works.*

**Keywords:** *Characterization, Elizabeth Zott, novel, Lessons in Chemistry, Orson Scott Card (2010)*

### **Abstrak**

*Penelitian ini membahas karakterisasi tokoh utama, Elizabeth Zott, dalam novel *Lessons in Chemistry* karya Bonnie Garmus. Tujuan penelitian adalah mendeskripsikan teknik dan proses pembentukan karakter utama dalam novel tersebut. Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik simak dan catat, serta analisis berdasarkan teori karakterisasi Orson Scott Card (2010). Data berupa kutipan narasi dan dialog yang mencerminkan sifat, sikap, dan tindakan tokoh utama. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan karakterisasi Elizabeth paling dominan pada aspek masa lalu, diikuti motif, reputasi, stereotip, dan jaringan pertemanan. Elizabeth digambarkan sebagai sosok rasional, mandiri, kritis, dan penuh daya juang. Pengalaman masa lalunya, reputasi sebagai ilmuwan, serta perjuangannya sebagai ibu tunggal memperkuat posisinya sebagai simbol perempuan modern yang menolak tunduk pada stereotip gender. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya teknik karakterisasi dalam membangun citra tokoh utama yang kuat dan inspiratif dalam karya sastra.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Karakterisasi, Elizabeth Zott, novel, Lessons in Chemistry, Orson Scott Card (2010)*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Literature is a written work that serves as a tool or medium utilized by writers to convey any kind of information, whether it concerns themselves, their environment, social, political, or cultural matters Sari (2017). Readers of literature can interpret

literary texts according to their own experiences and insights (Daring, 2022).

Literature functions as a means of entertaining readers. It provides knowledge and general insights about humans and their social and cultural environments, presented in a distinctive and unique style. Literary works



are a reflection of the thoughts, experiences, and customs that may be experienced, observed, and felt by the author, and serve as a medium of expression capable of accommodating and conveying various personal expressions of the author (Paruk et al., 2023). In this context, literary works function as a medium for authors to channel and express various ideas and the results of contemplation on the meaning and definition of life as experienced. Thus, literature not only serves as entertainment but also as a medium that reflects social reality (Sitepu, 2020).

Literary works serve as educational tools and sources of enlightenment for their readers (Septiani, 2019). Through stories, characters, and symbols, literature is able to communicate moral messages, values of life, and diverse worldviews, thereby broadening and enriching the reader's perspective (Rahayu et al., 2023). Literature functions as a means of entertaining readers. It provides knowledge and general insights about humans and their social and cultural environments, presented in a distinctive and unique style (Wulandari, 2020). The interaction between readers and literary works can shape more critical and sensitive ways of thinking toward social issues (Jasmine, 2014). Thus, literature not only serves as mere entertainment but also

becomes a means of learning that touches the intellectual and emotional aspects of readers, helping them to understand the complexities of life from a deeper perspective.

Literary works come in various forms, one of which is the novel. As a form of long prose, the novel provides space for authors to develop characters, plot, and setting in depth (Pradanti et al., 2024). This allows the depiction of various aspects of life in a more complex manner, while also offering a unique way for authors to express their ideas and emotions (Sanudin; et al., 2023). In addition, the novel presents characters and a series of well-structured events, with storylines that can become life experiences and have the potential to educate readers (Nainggolan et al., 2022). Novels serve not only as a means of entertainment but also as a medium for conveying moral, social, or critical messages about the realities of life (Remy et al., 1993). Furthermore, the novel represents society and the complex events of the past, poured out through the author's creativity, imagination, and ideas, and is narrative in nature, with a complex plot for readers to enjoy (Sari, 2020).

In line with the function of the novel, which serves not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of the complexity of society, it is important to understand how the elements within a novel, including character development, are constructed and conveyed



to the reader. One of the most crucial elements is characterization, which refers to the techniques used to depict and bring characters to life in a literary work, making them feel real, engaging, and believable. Characterization is a technique used to portray characters not only in literature but also in films, dramas, and other media. Orson Scott Card (2010) developed and analyzed characters so that they could captivate and be trusted by readers. Several variables include: Motive, Past, Reputation, Stereotype, Social Network, Habit and Pattern, Talent and Ability, Taste and Preference, and Body.

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative method employing note-taking and close reading techniques. The method is selected to align with the research objective: to describe and analyze the characterization of the main character in *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus (2022). The research is guided by the following problem formulation: How is the main character characterized in the novel *Lessons in Chemistry* based on Orson Scott Card's theory of characterization? The source of data is the novel itself, with research objects consisting of narrative and dialogue excerpts that reflect the traits, attitudes, speech, and actions of the main character. Data are collected through intensive reading and systematic note-taking of relevant textual evidence.

This study applies Orson Scott Card's theory of characterization, which provides a multidimensional framework encompassing a character's actions, speech, thoughts, background, social relationships, stereotypes, and other characters' perspectives. The analysis involves identifying and categorizing the collected excerpts according to Card's framework and interpreting how each aspect contributes to the development of the main character.

The expected contribution of this study is to offer insights into literary character construction using a detailed theoretical approach. The findings may benefit literary scholars, students, and educators by enriching their understanding of characterization in fiction, and serve as a useful reference for future research on character analysis.

## **II. METHOD**

The research method used in this study is a descriptive qualitative method with note-taking and close reading techniques. This method was chosen because it is in line with the research objective, namely to describe and analyze the process of characterizing the main character in the novel *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus (2022). The data source for this research is the novel *Lessons in Chemistry*, while the research object consists of excerpts in the form of both narration and dialogue that reflect the traits, attitudes,



speech, and actions of the main character. Data were collected through intensive reading and noting of relevant sections related to the character's development.

This study uses the theory of characterization proposed by Orson Scott Card. This theory explains that characters in fictional works can be analyzed through various aspects such as actions, speech, thoughts, past, social relationships, stereotypes, and the perspectives of other characters toward the main character. This theory was chosen because it provides a comprehensive approach to understanding characters in depth and detail. The steps of analysis begin with describing the collected excerpts, categorizing them according to the characterization techniques by Orson Scott Card, and then interpreting how these techniques shape the image of the main character throughout the story.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Result

##### Characterization Data Results

Orson Scott Card in Farhan (2022) creates and analyzes characters to be attractive and trusted by readers. Some of them are shown through various forms of characterization in the analyzed novels. These forms of characterization include motives, past, reputation, stereotypes, friendship networks, habits and patterns, talents and

abilities, tastes and preferences, and body. The following table shows the frequency of occurrence of each form of characterization in the novels that are the objects of research. Some of them:

**Tabel 4. 1 Characterization**

No	Bentuk	Frekuensi Kemunculan
1.	Motive	3
2.	Past	9
3.	Reputation	2
4.	Stereotype	1
5.	Social Network	2
6.	Habit and Pattern	2
7.	Talent and ability	2
8.	Taste and Preference	3
9.	Body	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>25</b>

From the table above, it can be concluded that the past aspect is the most dominant form of characterization that appears, namely nine times. This shows that the character's background has an important role in shaping the personality and direction of the story. While other forms of characterization, such as reputation, talents and abilities, and habits and patterns, also help strengthen the character's image. The diversity of these forms of characterization shows the author's efforts in creating complex and convincing characters for the reader.



## **B. Discussion**

### **Characterization**

Characterization is the depiction of a character in a literary work. Characteristics are a pattern of depicting a person's image that can be viewed from a physical, psychological, and sociological perspective (Miskat, 2018). In addition, character is the attitude of the characters depicted by the author in a literary work (Prastika, 2016). Characters are people who are featured in a narrative or drama work and are interpreted by readers as having certain moral qualities and tendencies as expressed in speech and what is done in action (Abraham dalam Lia, 2016). This character also appears in the novel *Lesson in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus.

### **Motive**

In literary works, there are various types of characterization, one of which is motive. Motive is a part of the formation of a character that provides moral values based on the actions taken by the character, regardless of whether the action is good or bad, which can cause various perceptions such as self-defeat, anger and hallucinations (Farhan, 2022). The Following is the data found:

*“Aku mengerti. Tetapi, aku sudah menunggu lebih dari tiga bulan. Aku sudah meminta bantuanmu empat kali, aku mengisi lima permintaan order, aku sudah membicarakannya dengan Dr. Donatti. Sejujurnya, aku tidak tahu apa lagi yang*

*harus dilakukan. Penelitianku bergantung pada perlengkapan ini. Lagi pula ini cuma gelas-gelas piala. (Garmus, 2022, P.19)”*

The quote is a statement from the main character Elizabeth Zott to the lab technician when Elizabeth tries to explain why she took the beaker for her research. In this quote, there is anxiety and frustration because her repeated efforts have not yielded results. This situation gives rise to the urge to defend herself (self-defense) and anger due to the systemic injustice that women often experience in a male-dominated scientific work environment.

Elizabeth felt compelled to explain her actions repeatedly because her position as a woman meant that she was not immediately trusted or considered competent. This reflects the psychological pressures and struggles of women in proving their intellectual abilities in a masculine public space.

### **Past**

The past can be an important part in the process of building a character, the process of revealing a character's past can create a condition so that readers are able to better understand the life that the character has gone through (Farhan, 2022).

Every action of a character in a novel is often influenced by their past life experiences. These experiences can shape the way a



character thinks, behaves, and makes decisions when facing certain situations. In *Lessons in Chemistry*, Elizabeth Zott's past experiences are one of the important backgrounds that influence her motives, especially when she is in a threatening situation. This can be seen through one of the following quotes.

*“Baiklah. Oregon, sebagian besar masa kecilku di sana. Kau? (Garmus, 2022, p.46).”*

In the quote above, it appears that the main character, Elizabeth Zott, slowly begins to open up about her past to her partner, Calvin Evans. Although her statement is brief, her confession about her childhood spent in Oregon provides an early glimpse into her background.

### **Reputation**

Reputation is one of the important aspects in shaping the character of a character in a literary work. Reputation can reflect how the character is viewed by those around him, either through direct or indirect assessment. Reputation is an individual's perception that arises because of the performance or quality of the individual or organization (Mitnick dalam Setiawan, 2019). In the novel *Lessons in Chemistry*, Elizabeth Zott's reputation is formed through the views of society, the work environment, and the mass media.

Assessments of her reputation are not always positive, but this is what shows the strength and uniqueness of Elizabeth's character as a female scientist amidst male dominance. Through reputation, readers can see how the social challenges she faces help strengthen her position and identity as the main character.

Elizabeth Zott's reputation as the main character in the novel *Lessons in Chemistry* is clearly depicted through media statements and public assessments of her. One of them is reflected in the quote: *“Acara disebut Supper at Six, dan Elizabeth Zott adalah bintang utamanya (Garmus, 2022, p.3)”*. This quote shows that Elizabeth is widely known by the public as a public figure who leads a popular cooking show. Her reputation as a host makes her the spotlight, even though her real background is a scientist.

This is emphasized in the sentence: *“Pernah menjadi ilmuwan kimia (Garmus,2022, p.5)”*, which shows that Elizabeth had left the world of science due to social pressure and gender discrimination, but her reputation as an intelligent woman remained. Her dual reputation as a television personality and former scientist shows the complexity of Elizabeth's character, who is not only known for her public appearance, but also for her strong intellectual capacity. Therefore, Elizabeth strengthens the impression as a figure who dares to break the



boundaries of women's roles in her time. This is in line with the theory of liberal feminism which states that liberal feminists encourage women to develop themselves in creative work in the public sphere (Wolf dalam Musahwi, 2022).

### **Stereotype**

Stereotypes are beliefs about the nature or characteristics of a social group that is believed (Broverman et al., 2004). In addition, stereotypes are also a way of looking at a social group where this way of looking at it is used to influence someone in interpreting something (Hasanah, 2023). A character who has the same characteristic tendencies towards a group or group can make the reader inadvertently identify the character as similar to the group or group in question (Melvin, 2022). Orson Scott Card further classifies stereotypes that can occur in a fictional work, namely, occupation, gender, age, family role, race, or physical characteristics, and ethnicity (Orson, 2010). The following quotes show how gender stereotypes affect Elizabeth Zott's reputation as the main character. In the statement:

*“Kau memilih Evans, dia terkenal, dia lajang, mungkin dia bisa membantu kariermu, siapa yang bisa menyalahkanmu? Tetapi lihatlah sisi baiknya, kini kau bebas kembali. Dan ada banyak laki-laki baik, laki-laki tampan. Salah satu dari mereka akan melamarmu, (Garmus, 2022, p.145).”*

It is apparent that Elizabeth's relationship with Calvin Evans is judged not from an emotional or professional perspective, but rather from the assumption that she is exploiting men for her career. This reflects the stereotype of ambitious women who are seen as dependent on men to achieve success. Furthermore, the expectation that Elizabeth will remarry also shows the normative view that women must be “saved” through marriage. This stereotype is further reinforced by the quote, *“Kau memecatku atas dasar sedang mengandung dan tidak menikah. Bagaimana dengan laki-lakinya? (Garmus, 2022, p.155)”* which highlights the injustice and double standards faced by women. Elizabeth is punished for her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, while the man is not held accountable at all.

In line with this, stereotypes themselves are labels or markings of a particular group which are then applied or represented by humans through language and become the dominant meaning of society (Stuart Hall dalam Rachmayani, 2015). This shows how women's reputations are often associated with marital status and morality, while men are left free from the same social demands. Through this quote, Elizabeth is described as a figure who dares to sue injustice and refuses to submit to detrimental gender stereotypes.



### **Jaringan Pertemanan**

A character develops along with the social network that surrounds them. Social contact that occurs between one character and another can become a relationship in creating a pattern of characteristics of a character (Orson, 2010).

*“Seperti Elizabeth, dia bukan orang yang nyaman berada dikeramaian. Bahkan ia baru berhasil menjadil pertemanan dengan orang lain setelah menemukan aktivitas dayung (Garmus, 2022, p.63).”*

The quote shows that the character experiences character development along with the formation of new social relationships. Previously, the character was described as someone who tended to be withdrawn and uncomfortable in a crowd. However, through rowing activities, the character begins to form social connections with others. This activity becomes a medium that introduces the character to a new social environment, which then influences the way the character thinks and behaves. This is in line with the concept of characterization in social networks, where character development is inseparable from the social interactions that surround them. As explained earlier, a character can develop along with the social network that forms around them. A social network is a structure formed from individuals or organizations that are bound by one or more types of specific relationships such as values, visions, ideas,

friends, descendants, and so on (Melis, 2016). Thus, rowing activities are not only the background of the story, but also trigger the formation of new social relations.

### **Habit and Pattern**

Habits not only make characters more realistic, but also open up the possibility of building the character's story, changes in habit patterns can also influence the process of building a character's characteristics (Orson, 2010).

*“Bagun sebelum subuh setiap hari dan yakin akan suatu hal: hidupnya sudah berakhir (Garmus, 2022, p.1).”*

This quote illustrates a routine habit but shrouded in despair. Waking up before dawn shows a pattern of discipline that has been formed, but the belief that his life is “over” implies a gloomy mental state. Here, daily habits reflect the character's emotional state, and symbolize that even though his body continues to move according to routine, his soul is in emptiness. This pattern indicates a character who is trapped in a passive phase of life, but still maintains his daily pattern.

### **Talent and Ability**

The talents and abilities that a character has can become one of the characteristics of a character.



*“Aku bertekad untuk mempelajarinya, Dr. Donatti, (Garmus, 2022. P.99).”*

The quote is a statement from the main character, Elizabeth Zott, to her boss, Dr. Donatti, while they were discussing the basis of the hypothesis in the office. In this context, Elizabeth shows her determination and enthusiasm for learning, which are part of her intellectual abilities. This quote shows that Elizabeth has the potential and strong will to develop, even though she is doubted by her boss. This is reinforced by Dr. Donatti's statement that underestimates Elizabeth's abilities, namely, *“Kau tidak cukup pintar (Garmus, 2022, p.99).”*

The statement shows a derogatory view of women in academia. However, Elizabeth's firm stance shows that her talents and abilities are an important part of shaping her character as a strong and dedicated figure.

### **Taste and Preferences**

Everyone has their own preferences in viewing something, as do fictional characters in a story. By knowing the tastes of a character, the author can build readers' guesses about a story contained in the character's life (Orson, 2010). The character must have tastes and preferences, be it in food, hobbies, or other interests, so that they feel alive and enjoyable for the reader (Melvin, 2022).

*“Dia telah membeli tiket untuk menonton The Mikado, operet yang seharusnya jenaka. Meskipun sudah lama menanti-nanti,, saat cerita berjalan, dia menyadari ternyata pertunjukan itu tidak lucu sama sekali (Garmus, 2022, p.30).”*

The quote above is a form of depiction of the preferences or tastes of the main character Elizabeth Zott towards entertainment. The character in the quote has expectations and interests in a certain type of entertainment, namely humorous operettas, but the reality she finds is different from her expectations. This shows that the character's tastes not only play a role in describing what she likes, but also in showing how she responds to disappointment or reality that does not match her expectations.

### **Body**

The body shape of a character in a story is able to describe the characteristics of the character (Orson, 2010). One factor in depicting a person's character through attitude is detection through their body shape (Tutu, 2019). Character will be slightly visible in the curves and shapes of the body. From this factor, more or less understanding of character towards fellow humans (Muliati, 2019).

*“Elizabeth memiliki kulit mulus (Garmus, 2022, p.4).”*



The quote above is a form of physical description of the main character, Elizabeth Zott. The sentence describes that Elizabeth has an attractive and well-groomed physical appearance, which indirectly also reflects how she takes care of herself and shows the feminine side of her character. Descriptions of smooth skin are often associated with elegance, cleanliness, and attention to detail, which can describe perfectionist and neat traits (Kumala, 2020). In other words, Elizabeth's physical appearance also strengthens the characteristics of an intelligent, organized, and authoritative character in the story.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of the characterization analysis in Bonnie Garmus's novel *Lessons in Chemistry*, 25 characterization data were found on the main character, Elizabeth Zott. Of all the data, the most dominant characterization is in the past aspect, which is 9 data. This shows that Elizabeth's past experiences have a great influence in shaping her personality and actions in the present.

Elizabeth Zott is described as a rational, independent, critical, and fighting spirit. Challenging childhood experiences, such as the absence of parents, a close relationship with her brother, and pressure from the family

environment, shaped Elizabeth into a tough, independent, and studious person. Her reputation as a scientist, her struggles as a single mother, and her ability to face gender stereotypes further strengthen Elizabeth's character as a symbol of a modern woman who refuses to comply with social pressure and expectations.

In addition, Elizabeth's characterization is also built through motives for action based on the need to defend herself and maintain integrity, both in the domestic and public spheres. Stereotypes and societal judgments that often harm women, actually confront Elizabeth with a critical attitude and courage. The network of friends and social interactions she builds also influences her character development, from a closed person to a more open person. Overall, Elizabeth Zott's characterization in the novel *Lessons in Chemistry* successfully provides a complete picture of the journey, challenges, and growth of the main character. Elizabeth shows that women can be scientists, mothers, and free individuals at the same time, without having to submit to the gender boundaries that exist in society.

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