

**The Portrayal of Antihero in Mario Puzo's  
*The Godfather* (1969)**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to discover how the antihero is portrayed by Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* (1969) novel by Mario Puzo. The data were in the forms of words, phrases, sentences, and dialogues between the characters in the novel, which were then categorized into four types of characterization according to Rimmon-Kenan (2003), namely act, appearance, speech, and environment. Furthermore, the data were framed by conflictual points while identifying certain events and narrations that are considered as the portrayal of an antihero using the theory of antihero by Wilson et al. (2013). The data were then analyzed through a descriptive qualitative method to obtain deeper explanation and understanding. The result shows that the novel portrays Michael Corleone as an antihero for having the identical characteristics of an antihero proposed by Wilson et al. (2013), namely empathy, humility, self-awareness, flexibility, and an ability to acknowledge the uncertainty. Therefore, it is found that the characteristics of an antihero are not entirely dominated by negative traits as argued by Pangestu (2017), Jati (2018), and Garcia (2013). An antihero may have some negative traits, but they also have some positive ones. The findings of this study also indicate that the original antihero is the antithesis of a hero because an antihero portrays human nature in general.

**Keywords:** *antihero, portrayal, characterization*

## INTRODUCTION

Character is one of the most important elements in literary works. In a story, the plot is steered by the main character. Normally, a character who has better traits or visualization than other characters often become the main character, and most literary works usually include the main character as a hero who has good personality traits. However, there can be a main character who lacks conventional heroic qualities and attributes such as idealism, courage, and morality; it is called antihero. “Historically, the term antihero was first used as early as 1714, emerged in works such as Rameau's *Nephew* in the 18th century: 1990–2000 and is also used more broadly to cover Byronic heroes as well” (Palfy, 2016, p.16).

The word hero derives from the Greek term for defender or protector and presented as a virtuous and flawless character (Campbell, 2004), while the antihero has the opposite characterization; besides he has good or positive characterization, he also has some negative characterization. For example, experts say that antihero

is weak and doubtful. On the other hand, antihero is an emphatic, flexible, and brave character (Rand, 2004.). As Jones (2012) states, “an antihero contradicts everything in Joseph’s Campbell’s theory about how all heroes acts or should, by virtue of being merely average” (page 58). Thus, the antihero characters have characterization that is similar to a real-world person. They are flexible either as a good or bad character.

The existence of antihero in the literary works introduces a new kind of character that is worth analyzing since antihero is neither a hero nor a villain (Maryani, 2017). There is also a trend of antihero in literary works which are indicated by the appearance of new kind of characters such as Forrest Gump, Deadpool, and Jack Sparrow. Apparently, this trend suggests that antihero characters’ moral complexity more closely reflects our own. They are still developing, making mistakes, growing, and sometimes they tend towards heroism.

Moreover, a number of studies have looked at and investigated antihero characterization in different literary

works. The research of antihero characterization in a novel has been done by Mikulaková (2009) which analyzed the antihero in *Clockwork Orange* written by Anthony Burgess (2000). His writing also contains two types of antihero characterization: one of them is the presentation of the character's asexuality that can be called an antihero for the absolute lack of masculinity and heroism. In that case, the important part of Alex's characterization is his free choice to be violent unlike others.

In addition, Fauzi (2018) explores the ambiguity of antihero in Mel Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016) movie to discover the layers of meaning or interpretation of ambiguity of the character. There are two main problems in this research; the first one is the characterization of main character in the movie, and the second one is the ambiguity that generates a provisional interpretation of antihero. Additionally, the research method is descriptive, which is conducted with descriptive qualitative analysis and objective criticism. The result of this research shows that the ambiguity of anti-hero

was shown clearly when the anti-hero character plays a role as a partner of the hero. Both of the studies analyzed the antihero using the same theory from new criticism perspective.

According to the previous studies above, the researchers discussed the traits of the antihero using the new criticism perspective. However, this research focuses on analyzing the portrayal of antihero of the main character named Michael Corleone that is framed by conflictual points. The analysis emphasizes the method of indirect characterization theory proposed by Rimmon-Kenan (2003) which describes a character through the character's actions, conversations, appearance, and environment. It is supported by the classification of antihero proposed by Wilson et al. (2013), which suggests that an antihero is not entirely dominated with negative traits.

This research analyzes a novel entitled *The Godfather* written by Mario Puzo which was first published in 1969. Meanwhile, studies on *The Godfather* has been done by some researchers. In her writing, Yuaningtyas (2008) discusses family

loyalty of the Corleone family. In addition, Utami (2010) analyzes the major character and focuses on the struggle for a better life of Michael Corleone in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* through psychological approach developed by Alfred Adler. *The Godfather* novel details the story of a fictional mafia family based in New York City, headed by Vito Corleone. The mob war between the Corleone family and the other four of the Five Families of New York is the central issue. After Vito Corleone is shot by his rival, his son named Michael must run the family business. Michael, the young and idealistic son of Vito Corleone, becomes the head of the most powerful Mafia clan in New York.

The novel is chosen since the main character in the novel has certain criteria that are categorized as an antihero and believed to be able to provide the data of how the antihero is portrayed. Michael Corleone's character is researchable due to the fact that he becomes the new main character in the story and his role is changing from a good character to

become a villain which is considered as an antihero.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Since this research aims to discover how the main character of *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone, is portrayed as an antihero, a qualitative study is used. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative method to be able to reach a further understanding of the portrayal of antihero in literary works. More specifically, the study is in the form of textual analysis. Thus, the data in this study were used to elaborate on the concept and theories that have been explained in the previous chapter.

The data were collected from the novel written by Mario Puzo, entitled *The Godfather* (1969). Before collecting the data, the writer read the novel in English version twice. The data are in the forms of words, phrases, sentences, and dialogues between the characters in the novel. Furthermore, the data were framed by conflictual point while identifying certain events and narrations that are considered as the presentation of the antihero in the novel. The research is

limited to discuss and analyze how each sentence and dialogue show the presentation of antihero in the novel. Regarding the research question, questioning how the antihero is portrayed by the main character role, procedure for the analysis of the antihero portrayed in *The Godfather* was conducted in three steps. The first step is paying attention to methods of characterization of the main character in the story. The collected data are in the form of text and presented in the form of a table. The data are categorized into four aspects of the methods of indirect characterization from Rimmon-Kenan (2003). The second step is interpreting and analyzing some selected conflictual point and events. The analysis focuses on the presentation of the antihero in the main character. This step investigates the five characteristics of antihero that is presented in the novel that is suggested by Wilson et al. (2013). The last step, after the analysis is conducted, a conclusion is drawn to see how the antihero is addressed in the novel. Based on the analysis, it is found that the antihero characteristics inside

Michael Corleone are portrayed through four elements based on the indirect characterization theory proposed by Rimmon-Kenan (2003), which are: action, speech, external appearance, and environment. Michael Corleone is regarded as a powerful, calm, clever, and emphatic character. However, he also shows his antihero's characteristic inside him at the end of the novel. Other textual evidences show that Michael is a flawed hero. For instance, Michael is portrayed as a weak character at the beginning of the novel. He also is known as the weakest Corleone compared to the other family members. The findings and the elaboration are presented below.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Findings have shown that Michael Corleone is portrayed as an antihero in the novel *The Godfather* (1969) by Mario Puzo. To get a more specific characterization of Michael Corleone as an antihero, the data were analyzed using the theory of characterization by Rimmon-Kenan (2003), which includes act, appearance, speech, and environment. The result shows that

the novel portrays Michael Corleone as an antihero for having the identical characteristics of an antihero proposed by Wilson et al. (2013), namely empathy, humility, self-awareness, flexibility, and an ability to acknowledge the uncertainty.

At the beginning of the novel, Michael Corleone, the youngest son of Vito Corleone, does not want to be involved in his family's mafia business. He strives to live a normal life, not as a criminal in his own country. He joins the army and fights in World War II; also, he attends a public college and has a relationship with an ordinary American girl. His family thinks that he does not deserve to work in the mafia-related field. However, as time goes by and after several incidents that befall on his family, Michael becomes the head of the Corleone family as well as become the Don.

Referring to his action, Michael is empathetic and calm. He has shown three types of the act, which are: the act of commission, the act of omission, and contemplated act. He often thinks twice before he does something, thus his act would not

give him trouble in the future. Furthermore, he stays calm even though he is faced with a difficult situation. After he becomes the head of the Corleone family, Michael's change of personality is apparent. He becomes more intimidating and dominant when he speaks. He becomes more powerful and makes many people respect him. His speech to others also shows his empathy. When he accuses Carlo of helping Barzini to kill Sonny, his approach to Carlo is distinctive compared to his other enemies. Since the beginning of their meeting, Michael talks in a soft voice. Instead of being angry because Carlo is dishonest, he becomes empathetic by saying things about Carlo's wife and children. As an emphatic, antiheroes are inherently sensitive to other people; it makes them able to build diverse relationships with other people and understand them better (Wilson et al., 2013).

Antiheroes might also show their humility since they are aware of the limitations of their knowledge and skills (Wilson et al., 2013). Since his father is retired, Michael becomes the

head of the Corleone family. He already makes a plan to move the entire family to Nevada, Las Vegas, sell the olive oil business and switch the family's business into gambling, casino, and hotel. He also makes his father his consigliere, while Tom Hagen becomes his lawyer. He delivers the plan confidently, and he is also doubtless that Moe Green would sell his casino and hotel business to the Corleone family. However, one of the family's caporegimes named Tessio is worried about his decision. He confronts Michael's idea to Vito. Then, Michael answers his concern. He then persuades and convinces Tessio that his idea will be suitable for everyone. It shows that Michael is good at controlling the situation through his words. He shows his humility in his words, hence Tessio would not feel degraded and humiliated by him.

Living in America since he was born does not make Michael forget his original culture, which is Sicilian. In fact, he recognizes and acknowledges his culture. He also has respect for his culture. When he is hiding in Sicily, Italy, he meets a beautiful woman.

Soon, he introduces himself to the father of his love interest, whose name is Vitelli. At first, Vitelli is angry at Michael because he feels disrespected by the way Michael's guard talks about his daughter. Michael then talks in a very respectful yet intimidating manner to him, so in the end, Vitelli agrees to arrange a meeting with his daughter. Michael's speech indicates that he is highly aware of the value and behavior of the Sicilian. In other words, his self-awareness helps him in this situation. Self-awareness is having a clear perception of the self's personality, including strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, beliefs, motivation, and emotions (Wilson et al., 2013). Michael's speeches show his awareness of his weakness. He says that the enemy of the Corleone's family never takes him seriously. He admits that he is known as a 'sissy' of the family.

Michael Corleone, as an antihero, also shows the characteristic of acknowledging the uncertainty (Wilson et al., 2013). Most of the time, he always prepares a good plan. After hiding for less than a year in

Sicily, he reunites with Kay, and they talk about marriage. Kay asks why Michael would marry her, who is an ordinary American woman. Michael then answers Kay's question with his plan and dream for their family. The answer is very detailed; it makes Kay amazed and convinced. However, he tells her some of the possibilities that are still uncertain; for instance, the possibility of Michael gets killed or jailed. Another evidence is when Michael plans to move the Corleone family to Las Vegas and sells the olive oil business. He also intends to buy the casino and hotel owned by Moe Greene. He already shares his idea to his father and also to Tom Hagen, and they all agree. Regarding the casino and hotel business, Michael is very confident that Moe Greene would sell them to the Corleone family. His proposed and detailed plan shows his ability to acknowledge uncertainty and manage it well. He knows the uncertainty that could occur anytime, so he devises a plan to prevent it or even mitigate it. The speeches from Michael in the novel show his antihero's traits; one of them is flexibility. Michael is a

flexible person; he adapts in a new situation rather quickly. Michael once explains to Kay why he is finally willing to help his father in managing the family business because previously, Michael shows no interest in it. He changes because he believes in his family and his father is already retired. It shows the essential behavior of antiheroes, which they adapt their leadership style according to circumstances; it makes them flexible (Wilson et al., 2013).

Michael is the son of Vito Corleone, the head of the mafia family in New York. His father is a notable person who also owns several successful businesses. It is portrayed that the Corleone family belongs to high economic status. The Corleone family once does not put a high expectation on Michael because Vito wants his youngest son to become a typical American. In other words, he depends on his first son, Sonny. However, Sonny is killed because of his own mistake. The family's only hope is now Michael as he is excellent in reading situation and has his perspective in seeing the world. As portrayed through his



characterization, these traits are in line with the theory of antihero proposed by Wilson et al. (2013). For instance, when Michael, Sonny, Tom, Clemenza, and Tessio hold a meeting to go against Sollozzo, Michael delivers his next move in a very detailed and well-planned manner. As a result, the other people in the room are amazed by his idea. Wilson et al. (2013) suggest that antihero sees the world from a different perspective that makes the antihero comes up with a more reliable solution to any conflict in the story.

In contrast, he is also portrayed as a weak person through his speech at the beginning of the novel. Brombert (1999) argues that antihero is often presented as a weak, ineffectual, and unhappy character. However, after becoming the head of the family, Michael's speech becomes different and shows his dominance. Next, his appearance adds the knowledge of his figure. Hence, it is useful to discover his antihero's characterization. Also, Michael is portrayed as a handsome man. His family even acknowledges him as the most good-looking man in Corleone's family. However, because

of his appearance, the Corleone family's enemy never takes him seriously. Cuddon (2013) argues that the antihero's traits are different from those of hero's; a hero is presented as a virtuous and flawless character.

As a comparison to the antihero in the novel *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo, an antihero in numerous literary works is characterized in various ways. For instance, the antihero character in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, Edward Kenway, is unable to complete the journey since he is an antihero who lacks some of the qualities of a traditional hero (Pangestu, 2017). Kenway is depicted as an antihero who has bad habits and questionable moral values. Even though his goal changes, his bad habits still reside within him. Besides, Jati (2018) states that an antihero could not be defined as bad or good just because there is a good or a bad action the character does or word the character says. He also argues that in the TV series entitled *Breaking Bad* by Vince Gilligan, the main character, Walter White, shifts in the rising action and is illustrated to have both characteristics of a traditional hero

and antihero. Garcia (2013) also finds that the characteristics of an antihero demonstrate how moral evaluation is influenced. She adds that the serial narrative ensures that people's allegiance to the antiheroes will always be "in spite of" their despicable acts because the spectators feel empathy not for the pain they cause, but for the pain they suffer. Therefore, it is found that the characteristics of an antihero are not entirely dominated with negative traits as argued by previous studies. An antihero may have some negative traits, but they also have some positive traits. The findings of this study also indicate that the original antihero is the antithesis of a hero because an antihero portrays human nature in general.

## CONCLUSION

This research aims to discover how the antihero is portrayed in *The Godfather* (1969) novel by Mario Puzo. The previous chapter shows that the antihero is portrayed through the characterization of the main character, namely action, speech, external appearance, and environment

using the theoretical framework proposed by Rimmon-Kenan (2003). Another theory used in this study is the theory of antihero proposed by Wilson et al. (2013). These theories are employed as the tools to explore the characteristics of antihero traits inside Michael Corleone.

The result of the findings and discussion show that Michael Corleone in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969) can be considered as an antihero. The characterization of Michael shows the similarities with the theory of antihero proposed by Wilson et al. (2013). Regarding the theory, Michael possesses all of the antihero's traits, namely: empathic, humble, and flexible; he also acknowledges the uncertainty. These traits help him in various situations; for instance, his empathy helps him understand other people thus he can build diverse relationships with them. They also help him to see the world from a different point of view that makes him come up with a more reliable solution to any conflict in the story. However, antihero's flaws, which are: complicated communications and slow decision

making, are not mentioned in the novel. In addition, Michael is a calm person in nature, and therefore he has no difficulties in his communications with other characters in the novel. On top of that, he is also quick in making decisions.

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