

# **Marital Conflicts between The Main Characters and Parents-In-Law in The Novel *Gone Girl***

Muhammad Abirzaim Veraldy

Project Advisor: Prof. Dr. Nurdien H. K, M. A.

English Department, Faculty of Humanities

Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275

*Gone Girl* is a novel created by Gillian Flynn that is based on social problematique in the United States in the 21st century. The book depicts the marriage relationship that faces problems caused by the conflict that occurs their parents-in-law. The story refers to a theory from Serewicz which is In-Laws Relationship Theory. The writer uses this theory to analyze the story from sociological aspect. Library research is used to find important informations about in-laws relationship towards marriage. Qualitative research is used to analyze the novel deeper. The conclusion of the research is that there is a relation between in-laws relationship that can create a conflict in the marital which is sociologically examined.

Keywords: In-Laws, Marital, Conflict, Sociological.

## **1. Introduction**

*Gone Girl* has an intriguing story which mainly tells about the marriage conflicts of the characters and their family. The most specific example can be taken from the relationship between the main characters and their parents. It can be seen in the book that they have influenced their personalities. It leads to the change in the attitude of the characters. Moreover, parents' status may affect their children's status too, especially in financial status. If they are wealthy, so are their children. Parents can also act as supervisors as seen in the novel. They still look after each other even they live separately. That is why their parents always involve in every problem that the couple may face in order to help and support them, especially in the main female character's case. Her parents accompany their son-in-law in the case that it shows how this kind of relationship and internship can give a pressure to her husband as well.

*Gone Girl* mainly depicts about marital issue. As we know, marriage involves a strong bond between two individuals. It also both of their parents' relation which is pretty crucial for their marriage. The story is all about family and marital condition. The

headline will be the sociological conflict. It is because a family contributes that much in marital life. Parents will involve no matter how they are or where they are. They may produce a hereditary line of their characteristic to their children which will influence their current personality. This novel will be a good example as it is a family-based story.

In this paper, the writer uses library research in order to find the theory that will be useful for the analysis on literature and sociology in the novel. The references can be gathered and collected by looking and searching for it in the library. Reading the books will provide more useful information that can be used in the paper. The quotes and supporting arguments can be found in the books or articles that are written by the theorists. A qualitative research is also used because the novel needs to be analyzed primarily in the sociological aspect. It needs an individual research that has a deep analysis on the aspect. In the discussion part, sociological approach is used to explain and analyze main conflicts occur in the story by using characters that are introduced in the intrinsic aspect.

## **2. Issues on Literature and Sociology of Family**

### **2.1. Literature**

According to Wiehardt, "In a work of fiction, a character is depicted through both narrative and dialogue." (Wiehardt, 2017). Thus, characters become an important part of the story analysis in literary works. It is because "the study of a character requires an analysis of its relations with all of the other characters in the work." (Aston & Savona, 1991). There are one or more characters in the novel, but only the lead characters whose story is related to other characters that makes it important to be reviewed.

External conflict becomes the major conflict in the story. According to dictionary.com, external conflict is "struggle between a literary or dramatic character and an outside force such as nature or another character, which drives the dramatic action of the plot". The forces from another character are the main headline of the story.

### **2.2. Sociology of Family**

There are some theories about families. According to Klein and White (1996), the concept of family is:

“Family is more than a social organization; it is a social institution, because it includes all the beliefs and practices of and about all of the families on a particular society and geopolitical context, the ways it is connected with other families and other social institutions.” (Klein & White, 1996)

This concept is included in their theory that is called Family Theories. The theory analyzes how the family develops into a new stage that can influence the family itself. In addition, family also has functions in society. As stated by Tischler (2007):

“The family serves several important functions: regulating sexual behavior, patterning reproduction, organizing production and consumption, socializing children, providing care and protection, and providing social status.” (Tischler, 2007)

Tischler also added that the basic family unit served some of these functions in many societies.

In building a basic family, marriage is crucially needed. According to Tischler (2007), the definition of marriage is:

“Marriage, an institution found in all societies, is the socially recognized, legitimized, and supported union of individuals of opposite sexes.” (Tischler, 2007)

By having a marriage, it means an in-laws relationship is required as the basic concept. The theory from Serewicz headlines the in-laws concept as she said that the In-laws relationship can provide “the help and support given by parents (-in-law) and children (-in-law) tend to peak according to major life events.” (Serewicz, 2006). But, actually it can also bring effects to marriage, as she said:

“Research into the relationships of parents- and children-in-law illustrates the ways that the triadic, nonvoluntary relationship affects the lives of the in-laws, the child/spouse, and their extended families.” (Serewicz, 2006)

Moreover, according to Serewicz’ view, the In-laws relationship can lead into negativity, or even trouble.

In-laws relationship leads into a marital conflict as stated by Gottman (1979):

“The most frequent topics of conflict in marital relationships include communication, finances, children, sex, housework, jealousy, and in-laws.” (Gottman, 1979)

And then, in the theory of In-laws relationship by Serewicz which headlines that In-laws can give bad effect to a marriage. She stated:

“As mentioned, gender of the parent (-in-law) and child (-in-law) plays a role in caregiving relationships, and socioeconomic class affects the kinds of support given.” (Serewicz, 2006)

And her view even extends to the state where the family of origin can give more comfortable feelings to the children than the in-laws, by stating:

“Furthermore, when married couples are involved with their extended families, it is generally expected that they will be closer with their own family of origin than with their in-laws.” (Serewicz, 2006)

Serewicz then concluded her theory by saying that in-law relationships were triadic and nonvoluntary, they could be difficult to manage.

### **3. Marital Conflicts Caused by In-Laws Relationship in Novel Gone Girl**

#### **3.1. Characters and Their Conflicts**

Nick Dunne is the main male character in the novel. He has a very strong role in the story. As a leading character, his point of view is indeed crucial. Nick is strongly related to the other characters as well, especially with his wife, his family, and parents-in-law. The relationships built between them are quite complicated.

Amy Elliot is the main female character in the novel who is also Nick’s wife. Being described as Amazing Amy in the story, her life is totally 180 degree in comparison. By getting married to Nick, her life is getting worse, eventhough it was fine in the very beginning.

Bill Dunne is Nick’s father who is disliked and disrespected by Nick. He is married to Maureen, but they get divorced later on. This is caused by his troublesomeness and bad attitudes towards his wife. Nick has mentioned it many times in the story.

Maureen Dunne is the mother of Nick. She is a very nice person that has been described pretty far by Nick. She is always being an angel to Nick. The mother who cares the people surround her. The mother who looks after her children and her daughter-in-law. The ex-wife who struggles for her life and her children.

Rand and Marybeth Elliot are Amy’s parents. Their marriage is really perfect compared to other marriages in the story. Rand and Marybeth are writers who have successfully produced many literary works.

#### **3.2. Conflicts between Main Characters and Parents-in-law**

In-laws relationship becomes a major turnover in the story. It can be seen in some events in the story. This kind of relationship is shown pretty intense by the main characters that centerly highlights the conflicts between them and their parents-in-law in sociological ways.

First conflict can be seen in the main male character, Nick Dunne. The conflict begins when Nick loses his job. He used to be a writer in New York. This condition is even getting worse when Amy also loses her job as a famous writer in New York that forces her to count on Nick as her husband. They used to live in New York, a metropolitan city, and have a good life there, but then they moved in Missouri, a non-metropolitan city. Living in Missouri has affected his social class. He has not met any pleasure in living in Missouri. Stating this as the opening of the story, Nick tends to tell us that he is carrying a burden of his family. But as a man, Nick must take care of the family he has been built for 5 years whatever it takes, as it is his obligation to the parents of his wife. And, this is just a foreshadow of what his marriage conflict is going to be.

And then, in the next event, Nick has to meet his worst case scenario when Amy is missing. The conflict rises as Nick feels all of the pressure goes to him as the person in charge who is relating to Amy in the time she is gone. There is also a statement from Nick when he randomly thinks about Amy at that time, "Since our move back to Missouri, the loss of her job, her life had revolved (devolved?) around the completion of endless tiny, inconsequential projects." (2012:42). This statement is hypothetically showing Nick's hesitancy of Amy in living far from her parents and hometown that may cause this situation. It indicates that something is not going right in Missouri.

Nick's problem even increases when Amy's parents come to Missouri to find their daughter. This is the real conflict that happens to Nick, a parents-in-law intervention. He also seems furious in their appearance in his hometown. His problem is also added when his parents-in-law give everything in order to find Amy, unlike Nick who cannot do nothing but letting them to do so, eventhough we actually notices that Amy is intendedly missing. Like their previous anniversary quizzes, Amy uses notes to give Nick clues. The Elliots do not know it. They continue the search by building a command center in The Days Inn. Nick feels more uncomfortable, it is too much for him to take. Moreover, at the time when media reaches the case, Nick mentions, "The media loved them." (2012:255)

to the Elliots, unlike Nick who is seen as a culprit of the missing Amy. We all know that the media does not know the real situation instead of just blaming Nick for the case. It is even getting worse when the Elliots keep mentioning good things about Amy by using magical *Amazing Amy* phrase, even though it is just fictional imagery of Amy Elliot that was created by her parents. Thus, it forces Nick to clear his name and image to the public and also his in-laws. He really hates this intervention.

And then, Nick starts remembering what his parents-in-law once said before when he was meeting them in a police station when Amy was found missing that indicates a disturbing memory about his in-law parents. It becomes a core relation to the in-laws relationship conflict of the story. Marybeth mentioned, "Because of the divorce. All those comfort foods, the desserts a family eats together, those are just bad memories for Nick." (2012:84). It shows that Nick hates how his parents-in-law try to satirize his social background, and also giving comment that discomforts him, especially about his divorced parents. Compared to Nick's parents, Rand and Marybeth Elliot's marriage is more harmonic. Cynically, Nick mentions even more and more about the Elliots that absolutely shows his jealousy towards Rand and Marybeth.

In the end, the quote from Nick, "I simply assumed I would bundle up my New York wife with her New York interests, her New York pride, and remove her from her New York parents..." (2012:7) has met a failure to fulfill as Nick suffers conflicts to Rand and Marybeth Elliot who are his parents-in-law that makes his marriage face external conflicts. The different socioeconomic status becomes the main factors that indeed are shown in the story based on the previous events.

Secondly, the conflict that comes from the next main character, Amy Elliot. Beside her missing becoming a main story, there is a reason behind this. As we know, Amy Elliott was born in New York. She stated, "A smart, pretty, nice girl like me, a girl with so many *interests* and *enthusiasms*, a cool job, a loving family." (2012:39), that means Amy really loves her status as a New Yorker and also her family. Her willingness to live in New York comforts her very much. It starts creating the conflict between Amy and Nick's parents.

Amy's background has become her source of conflicts towards Nick's family. It finally begins when the story depicted about the third anniversary of Nick and Amy marriage. This event becomes the reason how Amy stays in Missouri, following Nick's decision. This is also a major turnover of the story. Nick's mother, Maureen Dunne, has been infected by a deadly disease which is cancer. She has already reached stage four, which means that it is impossible to cure. After they move to Missouri, Amy starts to feel uncomfortable with her new sociological environment. She even talked about her introduction to the new neighborhood by Maureen Dunne as, "...introduces me to all her friends the same way you'd show off a slightly dangerous new pet..." (2012:164), that indicates her irritating level increases towards her parent-in-law. Maureen also added the part of "New York" in her Amy's introduction to her friends, Amy responded as, "Ultimately, everyone trails off into giggles and confesses they've never been to New York." (2012:164). Amy also added in her next statement, "Then I say something like: *You'd like it* or *It's definitely not for everyone* or *Mmm*, because I've run out of things to say." (2012:164), that made Nick considered her less friendly. This hurted Amy that also made her regret of staying in Missouri, after all she did to Nick's family, such as buying Nick and his sister The Bar by using the last of her money. Then, this event headlines the economic background as a problem to Amy that is created by Maureen and her friends.

After the economic background, social background also takes part in in-laws relationship of Amy Elliot. The example can be taken in the following event from the story. Amy Elliot's point of view is crucially related to this social issue happening to her and her parents-in-law. The conflict reaches its climax when Amy meets Nick's father, Bill Dunne. Nick's father got an Alzheimer that makes him hardly memorize something, even his daughter-in-law. Nick said "My father, out of his mind, had taken to flinging the word at any woman who even vaguely annoyed him: *bitch bitch bitch*." (2012:69). He also added "He just didn't like women." (2012:81). It massively affects Amy's social life. The event occurs right at the housewarming, which is after Amy's introduction. Bill Dunne visits the house with his daughter. Before Bill and Amy clash, Maureen quickly stated, "It's not easy, pairing yourself off with someone forever. It's an admirable thing ... there will be days you wish you'd never done it..." (2012:167). Amy does not expect it to come from Maureen. But then Maureen excuses as she is an old divorced lady. Her words become the beginning of Amy's turmoil. Bill Dunne reacts, "You're not supposed to be

here.” (2012:167). He says that directly to Amy, intimidating her so heavily. He has completely forgotten his daughter-in-law. This moment aggravates Amy. Bill even continuously says, “Why are you here? You’re not allowed here.” (2012:167). This is caused by his illness, but Amy cannot do anything at all. Amy just remembers his past that he liked her, but now is different. Even Nick, his own son, cannot remind him of Amy Elliot. After being pointed by an index finger, Amy is called a dumb bitch by her own father-in-law. Then, Amy leaves the house. The moment that Amy experiences this time gives an imagery of an abandoned daughter-in-law. Amy’s parents-in-law disgracefully treat Amy in front of their colleagues. They have left her behind. This is sociologically wrong as being a family.

After that, Amy continues to write in her diary that takes one year after her clash with Nick’s family. Amy’s relationship with Maureen still remains fine. It seems Amy still needs Maureen to adapt with her new environment. Sociologically, it is acceptable in in-laws relationship. It is due to the only reliable person in Nick’s family is only Maureen. Amy even wonders of her husband “...who uprooted me to be closer to his ailing parents, seems to have lost all interest in both me and said ailing parents.” (2012:189) that clarifies Nick’s attitude to her that has been declining due to a conflict they have so far, but, Amy still struggles for her condition. She even still looks after Maureen and take her to doctor’s appointments by car. It means that Amy’s respect towards Nick family totally depends on Maureen. As explained by Nick before, Maureen Dunne, Nick’s mother, is an angel to Nick. Nick really loves his mother. He said “It took another five years before my mother finally decided she was done.” (2012:82) in a way that highlights his parents’ breakup. This statement tells that Nick relieves to know his mother can get away from Bill Dunne, who is really evil to her. Nick seemed happy to live apart from his father. He said “So my father went away and my thin, pained mother got fat and happy...” (2012:82), to show his happiness that also being affected by his mother’s happiness. Those statements become a good reason to love and respect Maureen, besides sometimes her words are just too rough and unacceptable. In addition, Amy also gives a command of Maureen, “I admire Mo’s unconditional love, I do.” (2012:190). This statement reassures their relationship, but actually, Amy is hiding something about Nick to Maureen that it is a proposal *Double Lives: A Memoir of Ends and Beginnings* found in Nick’s computer (2012:191). We know that inside the proposal is an outpouring of Nick thoughts about

what is happening in his life after his marriage. Nick mentions about his troublesome father, his painful problem of being the head of a family and losing her loved mom. The last one is the most interesting one as he mentions his Manhattanite wife who is Amy Elliot. It bothers Amy as it touches on her background. But, Amy wants to keep it away from Maureen. Well, the secret remains a secret, Amy does not even have a time to say it directly to Maureen. Few months after that, Maureen Dunne dies.

October 21st, 2011 is the day when Amy mentions about Mama Mo's death. Thus, it becomes another major turning point of the marriage story between Nick and Amy. Both feels the heaviest lost. Nick loses his loved Mother while Amy loses her bonds to the place where she should stay at. Amy have tried to calm Nick down by doing what his Mother usually does, but it does not even work. And then, she says,"He is a mama's whose mama is dead." (2012:250), that clarifies Nick's mourning to his mother will affect him forever. Actually, Amy is right. Because it sociologically affects Nick's view towards a family that is left. And the figure of his mother is irreplaceable.

Therefore, Nick actually sees his recent family, which is a family he has been built with Amy starts falling over. It even gets worse because of his parents-in-law intervention in his marriage conflicts that leaves him in fury. And from Amy's point of view, her mother-in-law death creates dark atmosphere that surrounds her marriage with Nick. Moreover, Nick's father appearance in Amy's life as a ghost in Missouri still disturbs her position as Nick's wife. As Serewicz said, that in-laws take an important role in a marital. It is because in creating a basic family, in-laws relationship is inevitable. Everything about this relationship is important such as socioeconomic status and social relationship that leads to supporting each other. But, if this relationship is not going well, surely we believe that a conflict will come as well.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Gone Girl is a story of a married couple that also involves every marital conflict happening between them. People see this as a more psychological story than sociological. Actually, the novel has a sociological aspect which is in-laws relationship that connects to the main characters.

Gone Girl depicts two different families' background that affects to a marital conflict. The backgrounds are socioeconomic status and social relationship. By looking at them, we can understand that every main characters have their own status and relationship. More specifically, this leads into the in-laws as we analyze it sociologically. By using In-Laws Relationship theory that is based on sociological aspect, we can collect the value of a family that has been built by marriage can be affected by enormous sociological backgrounds. We can learn from the story to sociologically manage our family.

## **5. References**

- Aston, Elaine, and Savona, George. *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
- "External conflict." *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 17 Mar. 2017.
- Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl: A Novel*. New York: Crown, 2012. Print.
- Gottman, J.M. *Marital Interaction: Experimental Investigations*. New York: Academic Press. 1979.
- Klein, David M., and White, James M. *Family Theories: An Introduction*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996.
- Serewicz, Mary Claire Morr. "Getting along with the In-Laws: Relationships with Parents-In-Law." *Widening the Family Circle: New Research on Family Communication*. Eds. Kory Floyd and Mark Morman. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006. 101-116. SAGE Knowledge. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.
- Tischler, Henry L.. *Introduction to Sociology, Ninth Edition*. USA: Thomson Wadsworth. 2007. Print.
- Wiehardt, Ginny. *The Definition of Character in Fiction*. The Balance. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Mar. 2017.